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# BULLETIN

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the concept of "systemic evil" was consistent with the Wesleyan tradition with its emphasis on personal holiness. He admitted some tension but argued that Wesleyan thought had resources that could be brought to bear on the question: a view of cosmic salvation that included redemption of the social order, the understanding of "social holiness" and the history of social concern in the Wesleyan tradition, and related anthropological and soteriological themes.

Wesleyan David Thompson, who recently left an Old Testament position at Asbury Theological Seminary to return to the pastorate, brought the discussions down to earth with a charming and well received presidential address on "reflections for over-serious theologians" that spoke to recent controversies in the society. Thompson appropriated from the history of science the idea of a "paradigm shift" and argued that the society had been experiencing such in recent controversies about how to articulate the distinctively Wesleyan doctrine of "entire sanctification." He used the analogy to suggest why it is difficult to communicate in the midst of shifts and to assure the various parties of the good intentions of their critics.

Business was more extensive than has been usual at the meetings. There had been continuing discussions about how the Society should be related to other theological currents and movements. The society had been independently founded but accepted a decade or so ago "commission status" and formal relationship with the Christian Holiness Association (CHA), the interdenominational co-ordinating body that serves Wesleyan churches in a way that the National Association of Evangelicals serves the more evangelically-oriented churches and groups. At issue was whether the work of the society should be limited to this arena or whether a broader agenda was intended.

These questions were not resolved. A step toward greater interaction with the larger Methodist bodies was symbolized by the acceptance of an invitation from Emory University to meet next year in Atlanta for a joint celebration of the bicentennial of American Methodism and the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Wesleyan Theological Society. Along the same line, an executive committee recommendation was passed without floor discussion to send a liaison representative to the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ. A recommendation to adopt the CHA article of faith to bring the two organizations under a common statement, however, failed, but largely over editorial reasons. Concern for more long range program planning led to proposals to elect the president and program chairman two years in advance. This will be worked out concretely next year. Larry Shelton of Seattle Pacific University is the new president-elect.

## Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas

by Mark Lau Branson

From the start, TSF has taken as a given that the church in any particular country does not exist in isolation from the churches of other peoples. While too often North American Christians still operate under the assumption that churches in other (non-European) nations are "mission churches," we must learn new ways to support and learn from the indigenous churches which God has built elsewhere. Understanding must flow both ways.

Early in the life of *TSF Bulletin* the editors decided that, in light of limitations, we should concentrate on one other major group of nations—Latin America, our closest neighbors. We have therefore featured articles on theology, ministry and the cultural context in those nations. As a sideline, we have also looked at issues affecting Hispanic Americans in the North. Several articles have been provided by members of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, a professional society of evangelical theologians from many nations who are concerned with issues facing Hispanic churches in the Americas. The LATF has held over 200 conferences and seminars

during the 10 years of its existence. They publish journals in Spanish, Portuguese and English. They work toward improving theological education in Latin America. In light of these concerns, it seemed appropriate for TSF to explore cooperative activities. During Urbana '81, the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship Missions Convention, TSF's seminars on the church in Latin America included a major presentation by Dr. Pedro Savage, the Coordinator of LATF ("Doing Theology in a Latin American Context," *TSF Bulletin*, March/April, 1982). Our conversations at that time paved the way for a co-sponsored conference on biblical hermeneutics.

How does a church's cultural context affect its interpreting of the Bible? What impact does this have on basic theological concepts like christology, soteriology and ecclesiology? How can such culturally-conditioned insights be a strength not only for that church, but also for churches in other contexts? What dangers exist in contextual hermeneutics? What checks can be helpful? These and many other issues set the stage for a five-day working conference called "Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas," held near Cuernavaca, Mexico during November. Papers on major theological issues were provided by Samuel Escobar, Gerald Sheppard, Clark Pinnoch, Rene Padilla and David Lowes Watson. Respondents included Linda Mercadante, George Cummings, Emilio Nunez, John Howard Yoder, Orlando Costas, J. Deotis Roberts, John Stam and Douglas Webster. The thirty participants were also active in one of five Bible study groups, working with passages in Exodus, Isaiah, Luke (the Magnificat), I Corinthians and Galatians. In addition to the times for presentations and discussions, singing often helped us worship together, and a Sunday was spent in churches throughout Mexico City. J. Deotis Roberts provided a closing sermon.

As the sessions progressed, it became obvious that the larger issues could not receive definitive treatment prior to further clarification of cultural issues. We needed to work for a better understanding of our own cultural baggage. And because the conference was a multi-, rather than a bi-cultural event, the process was at once more complicated and more profound. The normal process of this understanding, of self-definition, involves explaining oneself "over against" another group. With numerous groups represented (Black, Hispanic, Amerindian, Asian-American, pentecostal, women, mainline evangelical, etc.), numerous distinctions were necessary. Each of these contexts offers a different perspective on the world and on the gospel. But, in order to make those distinctions, one had to acquire a sufficient understanding of one's own culture and that of the others. Stereotypes fell rapidly as several facts became obvious: there are more than two cultures in the Americas; none of the cultures has a monopoly on either radical or conservative politics/economics; women, while under-represented in the North, were unrepresented from the South; theologians attending the conference were all middle-class (and now that is common knowledge); "evangelicals" from the North are not necessarily involved in the mainstream of American Evangelicalism; liberation theologies vary depending on roots (e.g., Europe, Africa, South America, North America) and occupation of the theologian (e.g., pastor, academic theologian, bureaucrat); power struggles within American Evangelicalism affect hermeneutics; paternalism from earlier missionary relationships is still present in many church and para-church structures.

As preconceptions gave way to new information concerning Latin American realities, TSF delegates also gained a new respect for their Latin colleagues. Many of them are active as both pastors and professors. They, more than the majority of the U.S. and Canada participants, are ministering in situations immersed in poverty and tried by the frustrations of revolutionary situations. Their theological abilities have been strengthened by years of corroborating, arguing, writing, responding, worshipping, praying and fellowshiping. Their differences are sharp at times, but their unity is also remarkable.

As discussions explored papers and cultural issues, it became clear that we would not issue a consensus document on hermeneutics. We were only beginning to grasp relevant concerns, and could not hope to offer much in the way of guidelines for others. Instead, under the leadership of Rene Padilla, we spent the closing days focusing on those topics which seemed most crucial in light of our discoveries. When the conversation turned to practical needs, a unique

camaraderie developed as we discussed problems regarding the lack of dialogue partners, funding for research, and willing publishers. Everyone present could understand these professional needs. The work of doing theology is difficult, and the lack of such resources too often discourages the best efforts. The evaluations from participants almost universally called for further similar consultations,

both within the North American context as well as with Latin American nations. Several professors commented on how this experience will help them as they prepare students for pastoring and teaching. That was the goal of TSF—perhaps, at least partially, realized.

## Review Essay

*The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (NICOT)*  
by F. Charles Fensham (Eerdmans, 1983,  
288 pp., \$12.95). Reviewed by Dewey M. Beegle,  
Professor of Old Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary.

In the "Introduction" (pp. 1–37) Fensham sets forth his understanding of Jewish history from the Edict of Cyrus (558 B.C.) to the end of Nehemiah's ministry (ca. 430 B.C.). He discusses issues, problems, and pertinent data under eight topics: original unity, authorship, sources, historical background, theology, text, language, and personal and family names. Closing the chapter is an "Analysis of Contents" and then a "Select Bibliography." The bulk of the book consists of Fensham's translation and commentary (pp. 41–268). The value of the book is enhanced by nine indexes (pp. 269–288): subjects, authors, persons, places, scripture references, nonbiblical texts, Hebrew words, Aramaic words, and words of other languages. The accuracy of the text is quite good, considering its complexity, but some errors slipped through.

Fensham expresses admiration for William F. Albright and acknowledges the "profound influence" which his teacher had on him (p. vii). This influence is evident in Fensham's careful use of linguistic and archaeological data to support the accuracy of the narrative. Moreover, he is sensitive to the theological meaning of the story for our time. In matters critical, however, Albright's influence is very slight.

One of the first issues in Ezra is the relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. The Hebrew text is not explicit at this point. A number of scholars claim that Zerubbabel came later, but Fensham accepts the theory that both came at the same time "because it eliminates most of the problems" (p. 49). The question is, "Whose problems?" In the difficult, sometimes insolvable, issues in Ezra–Nehemiah there are no *absolutely* convincing theories. Accordingly, two basic approaches arise: (1) harmonistic theories which attempt to defend the text as it is; and (2) critical revisions which reconstruct the text on the basis of *both internal and external* data. Fensham shies away from critical reconstructions and tends to opt for harmonization theories, even though he admits that they too are reconstructions. As an older student of Albright I share Fensham's feelings about our teacher, but I am convinced that some of the critical views have merit and should be set forth as alternatives with genuine probability of being true.

A prime example involves the disappearance of Zerubbabel. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah spurred Zerubbabel and Joshua to complete the building of the temple. Zechariah notes that Zerubbabel, whom he calls "the Branch" (3:8), has laid the foundation of the temple and predicts that "his hands shall also complete it" (4:9). Although Zerubbabel is not named, the same ideas are expressed in 6:12, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD." Then Zechariah comments that Zerubbabel "shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne. And there shall be a priest by his throne, and peaceful understanding

shall be between them both" (6:13). The unit 6:11–13 seems to predict that Zerubbabel and Joshua will rule as a secular-religious diarchy, but only the name of Joshua has survived. This messianic hope is even more explicit in Haggai's final oracle: "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. . . . On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant . . . and make you like a signet ring. . . ." (2:21–23). Jeremiah had used the removal of "the signet ring" (22:24) as a symbol of Yahweh's punishment of Jehoiachin. Then he predicted, "None of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling in Judah" (22:30). Apparently Haggai reversed Jeremiah's oracles by predicting that Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jehoiachin, would be "like a signet ring," i.e., ruling as a king in Judah.

Fensham recognizes that some of Zechariah's oracles have "clear messianic overtones" (p. 78), but he rejects the theory of Rudolf Kittel that they resulted in a revolt against the Persians. "All that we can say," he claims, "is that Zerubbabel disappeared. He could have died from natural causes" (pp. 78–79). As his rebuttal Fensham states, "Haggai's reference to Zerubbabel as governor of Judah, i.e., as a high official of the Persian empire and not as king (as we would expect if he was regarded as the Son of David, the Messiah), testifies against the surmise of Kittel" (p. 79). I would concur with Fensham that the biblical data do *not* support the theory of a revolution, but *discounting Kittel does not validate the traditional claim.*

Haggai's last oracle occurred in 520 B.C. when it appeared that Darius I and the Persian empire would be overthrown. The depressed Jews probably understood the oracle as a prediction that soon Zerubbabel would be promoted from governor to king. Such a hope, which must have had the Jews singing and dancing with joy, could not be kept a secret for long because Jewish enemies were watching for chances to report them to the Persian authorities. It is clear from the Behistun Inscription and other Persian records that Darius survived and reorganized the empire with an extensive spy system to pick up any warnings of new revolts. It is doubtful that Zerubbabel was killed, but the greater possibility is that he, as the object of the seemingly seditious oracles, was removed from Judah. Be that as it may, one thing is certain: *Zerubbabel never became king.* The last time we hear of him is Zech. 6:13 (Feb. 519 B.C.), and Ezra 6:14 notes, as Fensham admits (p. 92), that "the elders of the Jews," *not* Zerubbabel, completed the temple. In fact, then, *Jeremiah was correct after all!*

With respect to the implications of the oracles of Haggai and Zechariah, Fensham comments, "From their prophecies it is clear that the rebuilding of the temple was regarded as the only priority for the Jews" (p. 78). "These prophecies," he claims, "made no direct pronouncement against the Persian

authorities. Their prophecies are mainly of a religious nature, emphasizing a change of heart in the Jewish community (cf. Zech. 1:3–6)" (p. 79).

The question is whether Fensham's claims have the support of all the biblical evidence pertaining to this period. For Ezekiel, the reconstructed temple, served by Zadokite priests (44:15), was to be the center of Jerusalem (45:1, 3) after the return from exile. Also he predicted that David, Yahweh's servant, would rule over a reunited Israel as prince and king (34:23–24; 37:24). It seems highly probable that Haggai and Zechariah understood Joshua, high priest from the Zadokite line, and Zerubbabel, the legitimate heir to the throne of David, as fulfillments of Ezekiel's predictions.

The theology of the Davidic covenant, which dominated the religious understanding of pre-exilic Jerusalem and Judah, *combined temple and state.* This was just as true after the exile; therefore, a correct interpretation of the Haggai-Zechariah oracles involves a religious-civil combination. Fensham is one-eyed when he highlights only the "religious" and "a change of heart." Haggai's oracle (2:23), a direct result of Davidic theology, was *hardly intended* as a direct attack on the Persian authorities, but in the context of Darius' struggle to retain power the prediction *would be understood* as an act of treachery.

For Haggai, the completion of the temples was the *precondition* for Yahweh's dwelling among them (1:8), blessing them (1:9–10), and restoring the kingdom of David under Zerubbabel (2:23). The same is true in Zechariah (2:11–12; 4:6–9; 6:13; 8:12). John Bright, an even older Albright student, is on target when he declares, "It is clear that Haggai and Zechariah affirmed the fulfillment of hopes inherent in the official theology of the pre-exilic state, based upon Yahweh's choice of Zion and the Davidic dynasty. They regarded the little community as the true remnant of Israel . . . spoken of by Isaiah, and Zerubbabel as the awaited Davidide who would rule over it" (*A History of Israel*, 3rd edition, p. 371).

The crux of the issue is the *accuracy* of the predictions made by Haggai and Zechariah. While Fensham attempts to solve the problem by a "religious" interpretation, most conservatives have considered the prophecies as eschatological; that is, still to be fulfilled. But *scriptural data* point to *historical realities* around 520 B.C. In Zech. 6:11–13 the prophet discusses the dual reign of Joshua and Zerubbabel with the instructions to make "crowns" (according to the Hebrew text), implying that there was to be a double coronation, one as priest and the other as king. Because only the name of Joshua appears in these verses, most translations read "crown," following the Septuagint, to make sense.

Because some scribes and translators were inclined to clarify difficult texts and words, it is helpful in such cases to see if the original text can be restored. In this process one rule of thumb is, "The harder reading is to be preferred." Another criterion