

THE BIBLE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Summary

This section explores the basis for human rights which we find in the biblical witness, from the foundational principles of the imago dei and the right to life there at the beginning; to the exemplary ministry of Jesus and his concern for the poor and the marginalized; to the biblical pictures of the future hope which includes restorative justice for all.

The Bible does not contain a fully elaborated, codified doctrine of human rights. We owe that development largely to the post-Enlightenment, Western secular tradition. But that tradition was built on a worldview and value system deeply conditioned by the Christian faith and by the biblical story in particular. Without the influence of that story, it is doubtful if human rights instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would ever have emerged¹.

This chapter explores aspects of the biblical story that have given rise to human rights as we encounter them today. This is not to deny that followers of other world faiths would find many points of agreement with the sacred scriptures of their own faiths. But it is indeed the biblical story of faith which has most nurtured the soil out of which contemporary human rights have grown, and it is this story which continues to inspire Christians to be fully committed to the establishment of human rights for all.

Creation

The creation stories of the book of Genesis assert right from the beginning the dignity and worth of the human person. In the first story human beings are seen as the 'pinnacle' of creation, made in the image of God, male and female, and given special responsibilities over the rest of creation.² This is confirmed by the writer of Psalm 8 who in wonder says of God's creation of humankind, 'You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour'³.

The second creation story puts human beings at the centre of creation and begins to establish the family as the basis of human society⁴. The story of sin entering into the world, followed by Cain's murder of Abel throws up the challenging and perennial

¹ Christopher D Marshall: *Crowned with Glory and Honour: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition*. Publ. Pandora Press USA, 2001 p.116

² Genesis 1: 26-27

³ Psalm 8

⁴ Genesis 2: 18-25

question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'⁵, with the intention of emphasising the sacredness of human life and our responsibility to ensure that it is not violated.

Human rights located in the nature of God

As James E. Wood writes, 'The creation of humankind in the image of God is, in fact, the foundation of all human rights, for human rights are located in the nature of God'⁶. Repeatedly in the Old Testament the ways of God with humankind are described as 'justice and mercy' and these qualities are then required of women and men made in the image of God. So the prophet Micah describes it thus, 'For what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God'⁷.

As Christopher Marshall expresses it, 'Rights are not reductions made on the basis of abstract notions of equality, freedom or justice. They are expressions of what God is like, as revealed in historical acts of deliverance. Rights represent the justice of God'⁸

Old Testament Society

It must be honestly stated that the Old Testament can appear ambiguous as a basis for human rights. Despite the dignity and worth of the human person being absolutely foundational to the Israelite faith, there are examples of what would appear to us today to be clear abuses of human rights: slavery, cruel behaviour in times of war, subjugation of women and the denial of religious freedom to idolaters. But the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, does not hesitate to describe the reality and consequences of sin in the world that often make the full realisation of human rights difficult or impossible. This is a universal reality, found in all societies since then, including those that would today consider themselves as having a Judeo-Christian foundation.

It is however, possible to see in the Old Testament certain foundational principles which, however inadequately worked out at the time, provide a positive basis for human rights. In particular the right to life is primary and emphasized in the Ten Commandments and in numerous other references. The rights of the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized are also highlighted and summed up in the command to 'love the stranger' and care for widows and orphans.⁹

Prophetic voices

In the writings of the prophets we encounter a denunciation of those who abuse human rights, even and especially in the name of religions (Amos). Instead, the plea of the prophets is for 'justice to flow down like waters, and righteousness like a never-failing stream'¹⁰.

In the prophecy of Second Isaiah we find the concern to create a just society where children do not die, where old people live in dignity and where those who work, are not treated falsely and receive a proper reward for their labours¹¹.

At the heart of this Old Testament concern is the concept of SHALOM, often translated as 'peace' but which carries connotations of wholeness, healing and justice for all.

The mission and ministry of Jesus

The 'Manifesto' of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, quoting the prophet Isaiah as having sent him to preach 'release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to

⁵ Genesis 4: 1-16

⁶ James E Wood: *Baptists and Human Rights* Baptist World Alliance 1997

⁷ Micah 6:8

⁸ Marshall op.cit. p. 118

⁹ e.g. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

¹⁰ Amos 5:24

¹¹ Isaiah 67: 17-25

let the oppressed go free'¹² can be seen as a restoration of full rights to those who were marginalized and even despised in contemporary society. Such restorative justice was seen as a foundation for what was the core message of Jesus, the announcing of the coming of the Kingdom of God. As Helmut Frenz expresses it, 'Our commitment to human rights is an unabandonable part of the mission Christianity received from Jesus'¹³.

In the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew¹⁴ we see the vision of the 'upside-down' Kingdom of God where the poor, the hungry, and the persecuted are among those especially blessed.

Jesus sets forth the foundation of faith as love of God and love of one's neighbour and in his parables explores the question 'Who is my neighbour?'¹⁵, and that the judgement of God is on those who have ignored the cries of the sick, the hungry and the poor.¹⁶ So that a denial of practical love for one's fellow human being, 'one of the least of these', is a denial of one's love for God.

The early Church

It must be remembered that the Church began as a persecuted minority of the Roman Empire with no pretensions to political power. Therefore before its 'Christendom' era, the Church had its own experience of living as a minority with a denial of human rights. In what is widely seen as a post-Christendom era in Europe today the Church begins once again to find itself on the margins; and perhaps it is from the margins that it can have a renewed concern for justice and human rights.

The letters of the Apostle Paul are often seen as restrictive on rights e.g. of women and an acceptance of slavery which was universal at that time. But when allowance is made for the context of his time it can be seen that Paul was also concerned to model in the church a 'new society', based on justice and equality, in which there would be 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but all one in Christ Jesus'.¹⁷ Paul and the early Church also proclaimed the freedom in Christ brought about by the resurrection and this gives rise to a magnificent vision that the whole of creation, including human beings, can be transformed and set free from its bondage.¹⁸

The Book of James majors on the impossibility of 'faith without works', contains a warning against those who deny the human rights of the poor, and defines 'the religion that God our Father accepts' as including looking 'after widows and orphans in their distress'.¹⁹

The future vision

Finally we must mention eschatology, the glimpses in both the Old and the New Testament of a future vision of the world as God would like it to be, when his Kingdom will find its fulfilment and consummation. We have already referred to some of the prophetic visions from the Old Testament. In the final section of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation, we find the vision of the New Jerusalem where there is no more 'mourning or crying or pain'²⁰ and this contrasts with images of 'Babylon' where oppression, injustice and evil predominate. These eschatological visions are certainly in the future and 'not

¹² Luke 4: 16-19

¹³ Helmut Frenz, 'Human Rights: A Christian Viewpoint', Christianity and Crisis 36 (June 1976) quoted in James E. Wood op.cit

¹⁴ Matthew 5: 1-11

¹⁵ Luke 10: 25-37

¹⁶ Matthew 25: 31-46

¹⁷ Galatians 3:28

¹⁸ Romans 8:18-25

¹⁹ James 1:27; 2:14-26; 5:1-6

²⁰ Revelation 21:1-8

yet' but they are also 'now' in the sense that Christians can strive towards their realisation by becoming involved in issues of justice and human rights in their contemporary context.

Conclusion

It is this rich biblical story that is foundational for Christians as they engage in the struggle for human rights, rather than the rights themselves. It is a vision founded on the inclusiveness of God's love for all humankind, 'all of whom are created equally in the divine image and are equally inviolable as persons'.²¹ And human rights are always balanced by human responsibilities and the notion that 'people's deepest human needs for love, joy, forgiveness, intimacy and comfort, cannot be demanded as rights but must be received as gifts'.²² These powerful biblical motifs impel Christians to join with others who may be motivated by a different vision, to take their responsibilities seriously and find common cause in defending the human rights and dignity of those who are least able to defend themselves.

²¹ James E. Wood op.cit. p11

²² Marshall op.cit. p118