

This paper is a discussion of *Biblical Israel : a people's history* by Jorge Pixley - rather than a book review as such. Part I of the paper is an outline of the book. Part II contains some responses and evaluative comments.

## I

Jorge Pixley introduces his account of the Old Testament people of God by identifying two interpretive keys. The Exodus provides the *theological* key. The Israelites identified as the true God the one who led them in liberation from the bondage of Egypt. An oppressive God was not Israel's God. A key *sociological* model is that of the "tributary" kingdom, with an absolute monarch who through a servant-class of priests, bureaucrats and soldiers ruled a largely village-based peasant population.

The origins of Israel from the thirteenth century BCE onwards are debated. A theory favoured by John Bright (1988) and others is that Israel had a common origin in a primitive racial unity. Yet elements of the population clearly did not descend from a common origin and they were linguistically similar to the Canaanites. "From the perspective of the poor", Pixley comments, "the apolitical nature of this theory raises suspicions." (p.19) This comment illustrates the *a priori* manner in which Pixley introduces and comments throughout the book from his perspective of a "people's history". In preference to this model or an alternative based on common economic origins of the Israelite people, Pixley sees the unity of the Israelites emerging in opposition to Canaanite kingship. However he acknowledges a lack of textual basis for this theory<sup>1</sup>.

The people of the Exodus were not solely Israelite, but "Hebrew" - that is rebels, people who had been oppressed. Thus God delivered the oppressed. Revolutionary fidelity and loyalty to Yahweh became identified with a rejection of kingship as seen in the neighbouring "tributary" states. Much of

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<sup>1</sup> Hence criticism by Lockwood (1993, p.129) of Pixley as "unquestioningly" accepting the peasants' revolt theory of Israelite origins is not entirely fair.

the history of Israel is thus one of tension between a revolutionary theocratic form of social cohesion and one based on a tributary kingship.

Monarchy was the only form of statehood known and Pixley continues the story with the incipient state under Saul. Samuel the prophet continued to have ultimate theocratic authority. The Kingdom was further consolidated under David, with Jerusalem as capital, reorganization of the priesthood under kingly authority, and a standing army. Tribute was exacted from a surrounding empire, minimizing taxation of the Israelite people. A "royal ideology" evolved, centred in a covenant not between God and people but between God and King (Psalm 89). This covenant did not forget the poor. The king chosen by God was to be a benefactor of the oppressed (Psalm 72)<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, from a nation born in revolution, David created a hierarchical state much like its neighbours, restrained only by the moral authority of the prophet. Solomon built the temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem, and institutionalized the worship of God. Under Solomon, the state became openly oppressive in the tributary model, employing taxes and forced labour to further aggrandize the kingly apparatus - the only exception being that the King remained notionally subject to the law of God. Referring to the interpretive key established at the beginning, Pixley finds Solomon's God not to be the God of Israel known to the people of the Exodus. Relying on von Rad and others, Pixley notes that the Biblical literature of the time - some of the earliest contents of the Bible - is a mixture of oral traditions of the people and sophisticated political apology.

Following the death of Solomon, the nation divided into two kingdoms. Pixley describes this in terms of resistance against an oppressive Davidic regime and a return in the northern kingdom to the traditions of the Exodus people. Under Jereboam, much of the power over modes of worship was returned to the people. Condemnations of Jereboam (I Kings 15:34; 16:26; 2 Kings 13:2, and so on), Pixley reads as "Jerusalemite judgement that does not reflect the faith of the people in Yahweh, the God of the Exodus." (p.51) The

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<sup>2</sup> Pixley notes (p.39) that this advocacy of the oppressed in the Psalms has been used in modern times against tyrants like General Somoza.

social structure was similar to that which had been under Saul. The power of the king relied on support as the leader of a fractious tribal army - not on a state apparatus. The prophets of Yahweh participated strongly in public life - often in opposition to the king. The *Elohists* sources in the Pentateuch emphasize the role of the prophets and may derive from the northern kingdom at this time.

In the face of foreign pressure, the Omrite dynasty (884-841 BCE) later adopted the cult of Baal to consolidate kingly authority against the prophets of Yahweh. Pixley depicts the opposition by Elijah and Elisha, and the bloody conflict which arose, as a revolutionary struggle to restore the liberties of the people who worshiped Yahweh.

Jehu overturned the Omrites and the dynasty which he founded (841-752 BCE) can again be depicted in terms of a struggle of kings seeking to appropriate the cult of Yahweh into the state apparatus *versus* populist (or at least independent) religion. Though tribal organisation continued to provide some defence to the peasants, there was much injustice and inequality. The prophetic was absent. Pixley suspects that, "things were not well for a vigorous tradition of Yahweh the Liberator". Against this background we find Amos arriving in Bethel in the reign of Jereboam II, and some years later Hosea. Both preach against wrongs and injustices in the civil order, proclaiming Yahweh as the saviour God who is passionate on behalf of the oppressed. For Hosea, the very monarchy itself was an affront.

Judah meanwhile remained a classic tributary state under the control of a king, with an inflated bureaucracy and a priestly class too large to be readily supported by the much diminished kingdom. Eventual reforms further centralized state functions - civil and religious - in the city of Jerusalem, supported by regional land holders.

After the fall of the kingdom of Israel, prophecy began to arise in Judah and it became the remaining place of resort for those seeking the worship of Yahweh. In response, Hezekiah (716-687 BCE) reformed and purified the religious practices of the Kingdom. This was a time of prolific literary work. Redactors from the time of Hezekiah have left us much of the existing

Pentateuch, book of Joshua and books of the Kings - all reflecting the political and religious tensions of Hezekiah's time.

Isaiah, Pixley argues, spoke at this time from a Davidic theology rather than the Exodus theology. The hope for Israel was the emergence of a good king, the anointed one, a Messiah. Micah, on the other hand, spoke from peasant origins. As he saw it, the city based rulers were devouring the people. The solution was peasant uprising. "My people rises as an enemy." (Micah 2:8, tr by Pixley, p.76) For Pixley, Micah is

the most radical people's prophet in the Bible because he understands that Yahweh will not work the liberation of the people without the organized action of the people themselves. (p.77)

The following centuries saw efforts towards renewal initiated by Josiah but prevented by Egyptian, Babylonian and Persian domination in turn. Through all this period, Pixley notes the voice of the prophets to be a voice of the people against their rulers. Jeremiah supported liberation through a policy of subjection to Babylon (see p.101f) and a distancing from the house of David - though Pixley questions that this could be responsive to the people's needs (p.102).

As his story progresses, Pixley continues to draw on class-based models. Thus the utopian writings of the exiles in Babylon he sees as:

... a well meaning effort to construct an honest and just project which nevertheless suffers from the inability of a member of the elite, in his dreams for the good society, to incorporate the toiling masses who feed us all. (p.110)

The period of Persian rule is characterised thus:

The contrast between Chronicles and the Deutero-Prophets is the religious expression of a class conflict, which during the time of the Persians put the humble folk of the countryside in conflict with the exiles who had returned and installed themselves in Jerusalem with the protection of the empire, claiming to be the sole legitimate heirs of the faith in Yahweh. It was an effort to steal the faith of the people, converting it to an instruments of their oppression. (p.123)

Space is insufficient to summarise in detail Pixley's account of the inter-testamental period. Again, however, we find tensions described between people of faith and the various political regimes. We see the withdrawal of sects from society for study and worship, awaiting the restoration of true

priesthood and true religion. In Pixley's view, the difficult question of the Hasmonean period [167-163 BCE], for example, was:

Who really represented the people's interests? Because the whole political debate was carried out as a debate about the correct interpretation of the texts, ... none tried to justify their position in terms of popular interests. (p.135)

The story of Biblical Israel does not end with the Old Testament. It continues in the New Testament and ends with the final crushing of Jewish resistance against Rome in the second century CE. The great burden of the people of Palestine in the New Testament period was taxation - by the Romans in many complex ways, and by the Temple authorities who exacted tithes and other payments. Citizenship and land ownership were restricted. Hellenistic cultural influences offended many Jews.

Pixley's hypothesis is that the many ultimately unsuccessful rebellions which took place in the years 6-135 CE were expressions of a popular movement which only found articulate leadership and direction in its last years, when the Roman legions were openly (and unsuccessfully) opposed. Pixley takes John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, and their respective followers to be part of this movement. Jesus saw the principal hindrances to the kingdom of God as the Jerusalem temple and its supporters the Pharisees. His assaults on the regime were philosophical and ideological. He portrayed God as king, and his kingdom as a new and perfect society. He sought to create a community of followers to characterize God's kingdom. This community survived his death and challenged the dominant society by its lifestyle.

Following the final Jewish rebellion in 135 CE, the Romans crushed what remained of the experiment which had been the people of Israel. Hellenism dominated and the cultural identity of the people of Yahweh was eliminated.

## II

*Biblical Israel: a people's history*, is a drama with three groups of players. On the one hand, there are the common people, and on the other, various rulers and those who serve them. And intervening from time to time, usually on the

side of the people<sup>3</sup>, are the prophets and poets. Righteousness is found in whomever identifies with Yahweh in his ceaseless advocacy and concern for the poor and the oppressed.

In reading scripture as a narrative of oppression and liberation, Pixley is consciously within the curriculum of liberation theology. The identification of the true God as the one who liberated the people from Egyptian bondage is a crucial theme and class conflict a typical model.

Pixley skillfully and interestingly traces these themes through the Old Testament, succinctly bringing to bear a great deal of biblical and other data. It is difficult for the novice to critique his hermeneutical method as the concise style of the work leads Pixley to propose conclusions and ideas without detailed background arguments and documentation. A striking case in point is when he identifies Jesus of Nazareth as an expression of a popular movement in Israel opposed to Roman overlordship and the Temple regime. (p.153ff)

Thus it is in his responses to the scriptural texts themselves that Pixley is most vulnerable to criticism. For example, Pixley unfavourably contrasts a Davidic theology supporting centralised worship in Jerusalem with a more populist grass-roots worship religion of Yahweh in the northern Kingdom under Jereboam. The Jerusalem system supported and was controlled by the monarchical state apparatus and is therefore taken to be oppressive. Does this then negate as expressions of the word of God any writings originating in Jerusalem during this period?

It is both a strength and a weakness of Pixley's book that it is a "people's history" and not a "God history". Nor is it a theological argument. The book gives the reader little sense of any progressive revelation or involvement of God in history. Rather, the attitude of Yahweh as advocate of the oppressed is a given, established at the Exodus and maintained consistently throughout the work. Despite Pixley's discussion of the words and actions of

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<sup>3</sup> However, as Huey (1993) notes in his review, the prophets were on occasion trenchant in their criticisms of the whole people (for example Hosea 4:; Jeremiah 5:1-5; Isaiah 64:6-7) - a point that Pixley fails to note.

the prophets, one gains from the book no sense of a conversation between the people (or their rulers) and their God. The ongoing involvement of God in history is very much in the background.

The book is a highly engaging read. Pixley covers a vast canvas in a straightforward style. The themes of oppression and liberation draw the reader on through the narrative to a tragic ending in the extinction by Rome of "the experiment Israel".

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### **References**

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