

BONHOEFFER'S ENGLISH BIBLE *)

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BONHOEFFER AND THE BIBLE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer dated his becoming a Christian to a period during 1932 when he truly discovered the Bible, a discovery which liberated him from personal ambition for the service of Jesus Christ and his church¹⁾. In August that year he declared in a lecture at an ecumenical conference in Gland:

"Has it not become terrifyingly clear again and again, in everything that we have said here to one another, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We are more fond of our own thoughts than of the thoughts of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it against ourselves, but for ourselves."²⁾

This existential encounter with Scripture was timely and decisive, for within months Hitler was in power and the struggle for the soul of the German Evangelical Church had begun, with Bonhoeffer fulfilling a crucial and unique role. During the *Kirchenkampf* he concentrated on exegetical studies³⁾ and though his theological interpretation of the Bible was severely criticized⁴⁾, all his writings of this period and until his death in 1945 bear the imprint of systematic meditation and reflection on the Bible.

This is also true of his sermons. When silenced by the Nazi authorities, his great wish was to teach theology and to preach often, and we know from his *Lectures on Homiletics* given at Finkenwalde that this meant intensive involvement with Scripture. "The pastor", he told his students, "encounters the Bible in three situations: in the pulpit, in his study, and in the place of prayer. In all three places he must be careful to use it properly. But he has to struggle to do so. The Bible is so grossly neglected with pastors. 'Forgive us our trespasses' in this, too! To win this battle for the proper use of the Scripture is the

*) This article first appeared in *Dialog* 17 No 3 (1978) and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.

best possible theology."⁵⁾

We know that he followed his own advice. His German Bible (Luther's translation) is full of his notes and markings. This is also true of his Greek New Testament (Nestle), and is further confirmed by a consideration of his English Bible (KJV) which is the subject of this essay⁶⁾.

During October 1933 to March 1935, Bonhoeffer was the pastor of two German-speaking congregations in London⁷⁾. Sometime during 1934 he obtained a copy of the Authorized Version of the Bible⁸⁾. The fact that he later gave an English Bible to Franz Hildebrandt, his close friend of this period who had joined him for a time in London, suggests that Bonhoeffer regarded it as important for a pastor in England, albeit in a German-speaking congregation, to possess and use one. But for what purpose? Surely not simply to help improve his English (through the archaisms of the KJV?), which, so it was rumoured, showed traces of an American accent⁹⁾!

There is a twofold clue, the first of which is provided by the markings in his English Bible. These clearly indicate that he used it for two of the purposes mentioned in his lectures on homiletics, preaching and meditation. It is equally evident that he did not use it for a systematic study, the markings are too random and ragged for that and there are no comments; in any case his German and Greek texts were always at hand for that purpose.

Second, we know that throughout this period (1934-5) Bonhoeffer in London and Hildebrandt in Germany were in constant communication about the Church struggle in Germany, and that they shared pertinent discoveries which they were making in their study of Scripture. Perhaps Bonhoeffer gave Hildebrandt an English Bible partly for this purpose, for some of the verses mentioned in their letters to each other are also marked in Bonhoeffer's Bible.

That Bonhoeffer used it for preaching and meditation will become clear as we proceed, but that in itself would not be a very important discovery. This essay attempts to go further and show that the markings in Bonhoeffer's English Bible not only confirm what Hildebrandt has called his "sane and firm grounding in the Bible", but also substan=

tiate what he goes on to claim, "the power of specific texts for his life"¹⁰⁾. These are texts which he or Hildebrandt discovered in meditation, shared in correspondence, and used in preaching, and which helped shape the course of Bonhoeffer's life and later thought.

There are markings of seven Old Testament books (*Exodus* 33:12-16; *Judges* 6:14-16; 7:2-4, 6-7, 19-22; 8:22-23; *Psalms* 119:5, 13, 19, 27, 33; *Isaiah* 2:7-13; 9:2-7; 11:1-2; 65:17-19, 24; *Jeremiah* 9:23-24; *Daniel* 10:7-8, 16-19; *Zachariah* 2:8), and from twelve New Testament books (*Matthew* 2:1-12; 5:43-48; 10:6-23; 21:1-9; *Luke* 1:53; 23:24; *John* 8:31-36; *Acts* 24:20; *Romans* 8:18-21; *I Corinthians* 1:10-17, 25-29; 13:8-12; 15:12-20, 42-44, 53-58; *II Corinthians* 4:7, 12-18; 12:9; *Galatians* 3:16-21; *Colossians* 1:24; *Hebrews* 7:22-24; *I John* 2:6-8, 12, 15-17; *Revelation* 2:10). Apart from the fact that some of these texts were probably marked during Advent and Christmas (the first three from Isaiah, and Matthew 2:1-12), and those from 1 Corinthians 15 during Easter, it would appear that the rest are largely texts which did mean a great deal to Bonhoeffer, occurring as they do in his sermons and writings of this period. At the risk of making an arbitrary distinction between them, we shall consider them under three inter-related headings.

CHURCH AND NATION

On 26th February 1933, the first Sunday after Hitler seized power, Bonhoeffer preached on "Gideon" in the 'Dreifaltigkeitskirche' in Berlin¹¹⁾. His texts on that occasion were almost exactly the same as those heavily underlined in his English Bible. It is the same Gideon who later during the following year inspired Bonhoeffer's powerful plea for peace at the crucial Ecumenical Conference in Fanø, to which he had gone from London. In his address to the Conference, entitled "The Church and the Peoples of the World", Bonhoeffer urges the ecumenical Church to take a strong and definite stand against war¹²⁾. Only the church as a community bridging the nations can take "the weapons from the hands of (its) sons", and prevent disaster from again overtaking Europe.

While the English text of this address has no reference to Gideon, the influence of the passage from Judges can be seen in the German text where Bonhoeffer includes the following comment at the centre of his argument: "Gideon ... the people with you are too many ... God will himself accomplish the disarmament here!" It may be ironical that Gideon the warrior

inspired Bonhoeffer at a time when he was most clearly inclined towards pacifism¹³⁾, but this illustrates how Bonhoeffer's existential hermeneutic enabled Scripture to speak directly to his situation. It also suggests that Bonhoeffer never saw pacifism as a way of withdrawal but as a costly struggle against considerable odds, a struggle in which God himself takes the initiative as he did in Christ crucified. It could be that in meditating on these verses in Judges, possibly in his English Bible at Fanø or in preparation for the Conference, and especially on verse 3 which calls on the "fearful and afraid" to leave the ranks of those about to enter the battle, Bonhoeffer heard the summons to return physically to the fray in Germany, as he subsequently did.

On 4th February 1934, Bonhoeffer's birthday, he received a letter from Franz Hildebrandt in Germany¹⁴⁾. The letter was written about the time that Hitler tried to force the Aryan Clause, as well as the leadership of the Nazi sympathizer, bishop Ludwig Müller, on the Church. Both Bonhoeffer and his friend were deeply apprehensive about what was happening to their Church and their nation, and the ominous meeting of Church leaders, including Martin Niemöller, with Hitler in Berlin on 25th January, added to their fears¹⁵⁾. Bonhoeffer was especially concerned about the safety of Hildebrandt, who was partly Jewish; but both agonized together over the future of the Church. Hildebrandt quotes Colossians 1:24 in his letter, a verse marked in Bonhoeffer's English Bible, and one which, given the context of the time, takes on significant meaning: "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church".

Given Bonhoeffer's existential involvement in the interpretation of Scripture, it is possible to discern ponderings about his own personal role and future in relation to the *Kirchenkampf* in some of the markings in his Bible. For example, Exodus 33:12-16 refers to Moses' relationship to his nation as God's spokesman: "Shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people". (v 13). Daniel 10:7-8, 16-19 refers to Daniel, all alone and weak, but one who had seen the vision of God's purpose for his people. Both Moses and Daniel stand in need of reassurance and strength in order to fulfill their demanding voca-

tions in the hour of national crisis. Bonhoeffer would certainly not have confused Church and Nation, especially not at that moment in the history of Germany, but at the same time he had a great love for Germany and its culture, a love so great that he found it impossible to remain an exile in London and later in New York. Moreover, his concern for the Church was a concern for the German Evangelical Church, the Church of the nation. He was not in favor, at least during the *Kirchenkampf* if not in his final reflections on the Church in prison, of the formation of a Free Church. The Confessing Church was the German Evangelical Church.

What then, of his role within this Church and this Nation? Did he see himself in a position similar to Moses and Daniel? It is highly unlikely that he would have had such a lofty opinion of his own calling and role. And yet, like those Old Testament prophets he was burdened with a message for the people he loved, and like them felt weak, inadequate and increasingly isolated even within the Confessing Church. He was certainly tempted to run away, as both the London and New York (1939) episodes demonstrate. Perhaps the answer came to him in the words of Paul, words which are marked in his Bible: "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). Which leads us directly to the second theme we may discern in the markings of his English Bible.

THEOLOGIA CRUCIS

It was the custom of one of Bonhoeffer's London congregations (St Paul's) to hold an English service once a month on a Sunday evening¹⁶⁾. Of the few sermons which we have from those occasions one is based on II Corinthians 12:9, particularly the words "my strength is made perfect in weakness", the very words underlined in his English Bible. This suggests that at least on one occasion Bonhoeffer used this Bible for preaching. He had, of course, preached on this verse twice before, on both occasions in a foreign place: once in Barcelona (9th September 1928) during his vicariat there, and then in Havana (21st December 1930) when he used the text not as his point of departure but as the link between Moses and Paul, a link which takes on significance for us in the light of our comments above¹⁷⁾. In fact, it becomes even more significant if we are prepared to relate the development of Bonhoeffer's Christology to his own autobiographical journey as has recently been argued so

cogently and convincingly by Clifford Green¹⁸⁾. This in turn may help us resolve the problem of Bonhoeffer's self-understanding: how did he in fact see himself in relation to his Old Testament heroes Moses, Gideon and Daniel?

Green argues that Bonhoeffer's early life until his conversion in 1932 is one in which he is continually attempting to assert himself. He wanted to prove that in spite of his youth and chosen vocation he was every bit, if not more so, as intelligent and able as his older brothers who had made their mark as soldiers and scientists. This was a period of ego-assertion, and he succeeded splendidly! However, when he became a "servant of Christ and his Church", Bonhoeffer, according to Green, attempted "to suppress and deny his own independence and ego strength"¹⁹⁾, and he only really resolved the problem of personal power when he finally discovered in prison that the death of the "self" (*Nachfolge*) did not mean the denial of "the *strength* of the strong, healthy, mature ego", but rather its liberation for the service of others²⁰⁾. Bonhoeffer could be a latter-day Moses or Gideon without fear of being self-assertive, for their power was exercised on behalf of others, it was a gift of God given in their weakness. In the London episode of his ministry Bonhoeffer had not yet resolved the problem, but as the markings of his Bible indicate, he was struggling with it and moving in the right direction, the direction of the *theologia crucis* of Luther and Paul before him. It is significant in this regard that he had marked the words of the Apostle: "the weakness of God is stronger than men ... and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:25ff).

As we have already indicated, Bonhoeffer's Christology is integrally related to his personal struggle. To quote Clifford Green: "In the Christology, then, there is a conflict. It is between a form of *theologia crucis* which understands the strength or power of Christ in the dialectical manner of I Corinthians 1:25, and a Christ with dominating, authoritarian power often expressed with considerable violence. The latter is predominant in *Nachfolge*; the former comes to fruition in the prison letters"²¹⁾. But the *theologia crucis* was not absent from this period during which Bonhoeffer began to write his *Nachfolge*. That there are not two Christologies in Bonhoeffer's theology²²⁾, is confirmed by the markings in the English Bible. All

three of the verses referred to by Green in this connection are marked: I Corinthians 1:26-31; I Corinthians 15:43; II Corinthians 12:9²³⁾. The sermon which Bonhoeffer preached on II Corinthians 12:9 in London confirms this even more, and it does so in words that not only show a profound understanding of the power of the weakness of the Cross but also have a very contemporary ring about them:

"Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its plea for the weak. I feel that Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much. Christendom adjusted itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give much more offence, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favour of the weak rather than consider the possible right of the strong."²⁴⁾

He goes on to remind us that God is a suffering God, that suffering forms man into the image of God, and that God glorifies himself in the weak as he glorified himself on the Cross. And then, in case his hearers should mistake the *theologia crucis* as a way of mystic escape or pietism, he challenges us and himself to face reality as it is and obey the Gospel: "There is a certain inclination in human nature to keep away from problems that might make us feel uncomfortable But God does not want us to put our heads into the sand like ostriches, he commands us to face reality as it is and to make an honest and definite decision". He heeded his own words remarkably.

FAITHFUL TO THE END

In March 1935 Bonhoeffer spent a week at the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield²⁵⁾. We may safely assume that his English Bible went with him, not simply because that seems obvious, but because of the markings in it. Bethge tells us that during that week at Mirfield, Psalm 119 was recited every day! While Bonhoeffer would have used a Book of Common Prayer for that purpose, it is interesting to note that Psalm 119 is the only Psalm marked in his English Bible. Presumably he used it for meditation. Those familiar with Bonhoeffer's writings will recall that from about this period on this Psalm is frequently referred to and quoted; it is certainly heavily marked in his German Bible²⁶⁾. Moreover, Bonhoeffer eventually attempted a complete *Meditationen über Psalm 119* in 1939/40²⁷⁾. Franz Hildebrandt clearly recalls discussions with Bonhoeffer on this Psalm, and on the 3rd January 1938 we find Hildebrandt, now in England, sending Bonhoeffer at his request in Germany a copy of

Father Richard Benson's "The Way of Holiness" which Bonhoeffer wanted for his exposition of the Psalm²⁸⁾.

It is interesting to note that Father Benson was the founder of the Society of St John the Evangelist (the Cowley Fathers), an Anglo-Catholic order not unlike the Community of the Resurrection which Bonhoeffer had experienced at Mirfield. Did he first come across Benson's book during that week he spent reciting Psalm 119? It seems likely, for where else would he have encountered it and so readily related it to his favourite Psalm three years later in Germany? Far more important, however, is Bonhoeffer's continued interest in the theme of his *Nachfolge* which he had now completed, for Psalm 119 interpreted Christologically speaks of the demand of the Gospel, the call to obedience as the priority of true faith²⁹⁾. Marked in his Bible are the words: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end" (v 33). Also marked are the words from I John concerning "a new commandment" which is the old commandment come to fresh life in Christ (2:7ff). Christ transforms the law of the Psalmist so that it becomes a joy to meditate upon it, whether at Mirfield in English or at Sigurdshof in German³⁰⁾.

Within the whole of the Revelation of St John we find only one sentence underlined, a sentence reminiscent of Psalm 119:33. It reads "be thou faithful unto death" (2:10). It is not only underlined, it is also placed in square brackets. If the underlining had continued it would have included the promise of a crown, but Bonhoeffer stopped short of reward-seeking, he did not look beyond faithful obedience. Does this add substance, then, to the contention of psychiatrists Paul Pruyser and Tjeu van den Berk that a "death wish" was a determining factor in Bonhoeffer's life³¹⁾? On the contrary, Bonhoeffer's life and eventual martyrdom are only properly understood in terms of his response to his Lord amidst the historical and demonic realities of his time³²⁾. His death was related to the fact that, in the words of his lecture at Gland, he "read the Bible seriously", that is existentially, and discovered, as he later wrote in the *Cost of Discipleship*, that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die". He went on to say that this call to death was also the call to life³³⁾!

FOOTNOTES

- 1 cf E Bethge *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (E T Collins, London, 1970) pp 153ff
- 2 "The Church is Dead", in *No Rusty Swords* (Collins, London, 1970) p 185.
- 3 cf W Harrelson "Bonhoeffer and the Bible" in *The Place of Bonhoeffer* (Association Press, N Y 1962), and C Green *Bonhoeffer: The Sociality of Christ and Humanity*, (Scholars Press, Montana, 1975) p 201f.
- 4 For Bonhoeffer's own description of his method, see the Introduction to *Creation and Fall* (S C M, London, 1959). It is critically considered by R Grunow, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Schriftauslegung" in *Mundige Welt* 1 ed E Bethge (München, Chr Kaiser, 1959), pp 62ff, J A Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World* (Collins, London 1967) pp 84ff, and Harrelson, *op cit*.
- 5 E T in C E Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Nelson, Nashville, 1975) p 142. Cf E Bethge's preface to *Gesammelte Schriften IV* (München, Chr Kaiser, 1961).
- 6 His German Bible and Greek New Testament are in Bethge's possession. The English Bible is in the possession of the author of this article.
- 7 cf E Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, chapter 8.
- 8 Bonhoeffer's characteristic signature is on the fly-leaf together with the date "1934".
- 9 The personal information about Dr Franz Hildebrandt was conveyed to the author in a letter dated 17th June 1976. The rumor about Bonhoeffer's "American accent" was one which Hildebrandt heard, but as he never heard Bonhoeffer speak English he could not confirm it.
- 10 Letter of 17th June 1976. Most of the markings in the Bible appear to have been made with the same pencil with which Bonhoeffer signed his name on the fly-leaf. There are also a few passages marked with a ball-point pen (Exodus 20:2-4, 7, 8, 12; Philippians 3:12-14). As the ball-point pen is a post-war invention, these markings are clearly not Bonhoeffer's. They are probably Bethge's, however, for although he does not recall having marked the Bible he did obtain it very early on, probably during the War. It was certainly used by him, when he in turn was a pastor in London during the 1950's, and was in his possession until given to the author in 1973. cf Letter to the author, 14th July 1973.
- 11 *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p 109f.
- 12 *Ibid.* I (1958) p 218. The English text appears on p 448f.
- 13 cf Dale W Brown "Bonhoeffer and Pacifism", an unpublished paper presented at the Bonhoeffer Consultation, St Louis, 1976, p 5.
- 14 *Ibid*, VI (1974) p 291f.
- 15 cf *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p 389f.
- 16 cf *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p 174, n 1
- 17 *Ibid*, V (1972) p 458, 486.
- 18 *op cit*, pp 193ff.
- 19 *Ibid*, p 199.
- 20 *Ibid*.
- 21 *Ibid*, p 196.

- 22 As suggested by J A Phillips, *op cit.* For a recent discussion of the development of Bonhoeffer's Christology, see E Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (München, Chr Kaiser, 1971). Teil II, and especially on Phillips, p 214, n 3.
- 23 *op cit.*, p 232, n 182.
- 24 *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p 180f. Bonhoeffer also marked Luke 1:53.
- 25 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp 474ff.
- 26 Bethge to the author, 1st June 1976.
- 27 The *Meditationen* are in *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, pp 505ff. The MSS after verse 21 is lost so it is difficult to say how far Bonhoeffer actually got. On the place of Psalm 119 in Bonhoeffer's life, cf *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p 750, and his own comments in his tract *Das Gebetbuch der Bibel* (1940) in *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p 555.
- 28 *Ibid*, VI, p 19.
- 29 *Ibid*, IV, pp 506ff.
- 30 *Ibid*, II, p 563. A letter to his parents of 23rd February 1940 from Sigurdshof indicates that he was writing his meditation on Psalm 119, and enjoying the peace of Sigurdshof which enabled him to work on it.
- 31 cf. T van den Berk, "Bonhoeffer en de dood" in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* (Holland), vol 15, No 2, 1975, and the correspondence of Paul Pruyser to van den Berk of June 3rd 1974 which prompted his article. See also, van den Berk's *Bonhoeffer, boeiend en geboeid* Boom, Meppel, 1974.
- 32 This is certainly the opinion of Franz Hildebrandt and Eberhard Bethge, as expressed to the author. But see also the critique of van den Berk's hypothesis by H D van Hoogstraten, "Het precaire relatie van theologie en psychoanalyse" in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 16, 2 (April-June 1976).
- 33 *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM, London, 1959) p 79.