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**Kim Ian Parker, *The Biblical Politics of John Locke*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 207. CDN\$65.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-88920-450-0.**

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That the Bible is a major source of Locke's discourse in *Two Treatises of Government* is beyond dispute. The central issue of this work is whether political sovereignty rightly resides in the person of a king whose will is absolute, or in a human community by whose consent alone establishes legitimate governments. An exegetical question is raised as to whether Adam was, by special divine appointment (Gen. 1: 28), a king with absolute sovereignty over all creation or if this appointment applied only to a right in common over terrestrial creatures, one that Adam shared with Eve and with all mankind, so that the origin of political power must be sought elsewhere. In Locke's mind, this is an issue to be decided by appeals to Scripture and reason. The question remains, however, whether the Bible was also a source of Locke's considered political opinions, or better still, whether Locke's political theory was formed through biblical interpretation, and so may properly be styled a "biblical politics."

Parker answers this question affirmatively and for the most part successfully, but not as convincingly as he might have done. What is needed at the outset, but is not provided, is a precise account of the question, one that identifies the crux of the matter, so that the reader may more closely assess the adequacy of Parker's analysis. Parker would agree that to count as biblical politics, a theory need not be grounded wholly in biblical revelation, for unless this were so, Locke's theory would not qualify. Yet, it must contain some identifiable biblical principles that combine with principles of mere reason. Divine sovereignty is surely a biblical principle operative in Locke's political theory: God's right as creator is to have absolute dominion over his creation. Human equality is an instance of a merely rational truth. Thus in II/4,<sup>1</sup> Locke derives this principle of sovereignty from the self-evident proposition that "Creatures of the same species" are "equal . . . amongst another without Subordination or Subjection." From this same principle he derives human equality or freedom from domination which is a key to his principle of government by consent.

Locke also remarks that all humankind is bound to obey the law of nature which he equates with reason (II/6). So far mere reason prevails. Although free and apparently self-regulating, however, all human beings are subject to the absolute will of their creator. Hence, while every human being has the right to his or her property — that is, life, liberty, and estate — none can commit suicide, for all are God's property and God alone decides whether anyone lives or dies. The power to enforce the law of nature is a donation by God to all human beings who are "sent into the world" as bearers of the divine law. In a state of nature, every human being is by divine right an enforcer of this law and in this capacity may punish transgressors of it even by death. This power is what finally empowers civil government.

The expression “sent into the world” was employed elsewhere by Locke as a messianic term; it is not surprising that in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*,<sup>2</sup> Locke lists the restoration of the law of nature among Jesus the Messiah’s achievements. In Locke’s rigorous account, Jesus is the “second Adam” who restores what Adam lost, namely immortality and bliss, and in his risen and ascended state, he exemplifies a condition that his followers may hope to attain in the world to come. In Locke’s political theory, principles of pure reason seem to be intertwined with biblical ones, and they are arguably the stronger threads that bind the whole. As a result, one may easily agree with the claim that Locke’s political theory is biblical. But to show this decisively requires a thorough exposition of *Two Treatises*. Parker has supplied something of this in chapters four and five, which are devoted to the *First* and *Second Treatises* respectively, but without clarity about what is at issue. The significance of these valuable interpretations of Locke’s principal political work remain unfocused and, consequently, may go unappreciated. This would be unfortunate, for I believe that these chapters have much that is nonetheless fresh, solid, and useful along the lines discussed above.

The first three chapters of Parker’s book are intended to provide intellectual biographical background and context for the interpretation of *Two Treatises*. The first chapter attempts to demonstrate Locke’s religious, if not orthodox, lifelong interest in the Bible. Parker’s narrative is too general and vague. We know that Locke mastered biblical languages in his youth and that his notebooks and especially his interleaved Bible and Testaments contain copious notes taken from the works of leading biblical scholars. Along with his own signed comments, these materials not only demonstrate the seriousness and virtuosity of Locke’s engagement in biblical scholarship but they represent a biblical view of the world and its history to which Locke subscribed. We are certain of this because this worldview and sacred history are principal themes of his major theological writings: *The Reasonableness* and *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*.<sup>3</sup> As well, they can be detected elsewhere in his writings. An account of this worldview would have been an invaluable context in which to consider Locke’s biblical politics but it is not provided here. I should add that this worldview is political in theme and cosmic in scope, for one becomes a Christian by voluntarily submitting to the Messiah’s absolute rule which, paradoxically, is supposed to preserve individual liberty.

Parker’s second chapter is the most problematic. It is a confusion of themes that never come together: reason and revelation, hermeneutics, epistemology, and human nature after the Fall. Since Locke’s biblical politics combines reason and biblical revelation, I am surprised that Parker ignores Locke’s declaration in *Essay IV. xix. 4*: “Reason is natural Revelation . . . Revelation is natural Reason enlarged . . . which Reason vouches the Truth of . . .”. Arguably, biblical politics was in Locke’s mind an instance of this relationship. This leads to the question of hermeneutics. Reason not only vouchsafes the truth of revelation “by the Testimony and Proofs that it gives” but it also acts as interpreter. Parker seems doubtful about the adequacy of Locke’s theory of language and ideas (his constructivism) to provide a basis of reliable interpretation of Scripture.

This, I think, is a red herring. Locke, after all, was, epistemologically, a theistic reliabilist. Although he was very much aware that conflicting interpretations of Scripture were bound to occur, he most often attributed them to self-serving pursuits of power and influence. He was always confident that impartial reason and honest endeavour would establish truth. We have stunning examples of Locke’s exegetical method in the *Reasonableness* and *A Paraphrase and Notes*, and a lucid account of method in his preface to the latter work where he claims the human capacity of entering the mind of St Paul and discovering the meaning of all he wrote. This was to be achieved by a careful reading of the texts, attending to St Paul’s peculiar idiom (a Hebraised Greek), his choice of genre, the varieties of rhetorical style and their instrumentality, the occasion and motivation of the particular letters, and finally, concepts and arguments. Locke’s aim was to show that St Paul, despite the volatility of his mind and the

spontaneity of his expression, was not an enthusiast. A similar method was employed in the *Reasonableness* to characterize the mind of Christ. Parker seems unaware of this.

Parker's third chapter is intended to provide the historical context of *Two Treatises*. He accepts the standard view that Locke wrote his work originally to refute Robert Filmer's theory of sovereignty. During the Exclusion Crisis, advocates of divine right absolutism republished Filmer's writings. His *Patriarcha*<sup>4</sup> appeared in 1680, which is about the time Locke began to write *Two Treatises*. Parker maintains that the institution of patriarchy dominated seventeenth-century English society, which was well disposed to patriarchalism, a theory of political absolutism grounded in biblical revelation. Locke's biblical politics was designed to refute Filmer on his own ground. The trouble with this account is that it works just as well for anyone who contends that Locke's use of the Bible was merely strategic, which Parker denies. He understands the conflict between Locke and Filmer as primarily one between two forms of biblical politics: one absolutist, the other contractualist; one conservative and static, the other liberal and progressive. Not surprisingly, he sides with Locke, but as a consequence, he tends to make Locke appear as a forward-looking innovator with respect to politics and biblical scholarship.

Chapters four and five offer a careful reading to the *Two Treatises* although they are more diffuse than their titles, "John Locke's Adam" and "*Treatises*" respectively may indicate. To revert to an earlier remark, Locke's Adam, to use the name in a generic rather than a patriarchal sense, is a type of Christ, one sent into a world to reveal and enforce the divine law of nature. His rationalism is therefore grounded in his Christology. This important biblical theme serves to distinguish Locke not only from Filmer but from Hobbes, especially with respect to the state of nature.

The book includes a bibliography of sources, including manuscript material which is identified by library call numbers but without titles or brief descriptions. The length of the copious notes, numbered consecutively by chapter, warrants placing them at the end. No indication is given, however, by way of a page heading, to guide the reader easily from text to note. The index is well done. Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the book, *The Biblical Politics of John Locke* is important in its endeavour to show the formative role of biblical themes in Locke's political thought and warrants careful study.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For convenience, I will cite *The Two Treatises* by treatise and section number. Quotations are from Peter Laslett's student's edition, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity: With a Discourse of Miracles, and Part of a Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. I.T. Ramsay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2: Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians*, ed. Arthur W. Wainwright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Available at: Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha, or, the Natural Power of Kings* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, reprint 1980).