Vernard Eller
How Jacques Ellul Reads the Bible
Keeping the balance between the forest and trees
1966

Retrieved on April 19, 2025 from
http://www.hccentral.com/eller1/cc112972.html
This article was originally published by The Christian Century Foundation, Chicago, IL, in *The Christian Century*, on December 14, 1966. It is reproduced here with their kind permission.

How Jacques Ellul Reads the Bible

Keeping the balance between the forest and trees

Vernard Eller

1966

Contents

ment of Jonah, The Politics of God and the Politics of Man. Taste and see!

of Jonah; Ellul evaluates its performance as Christian Scripture. And he knows that not everything finds in the performance was necessarily present in the script. Yet certainly each type of criticism is valid — so long as it is clear which is being done. Each has its own particular norms and controls. And, indeed "performance criticism" can and should include a certain amount of "script criticism."

V. Conclusion

We have called Ellul's "continuous" reading fresh and new. That is true, but we don't want to overstate the point. After all, his approach is not so different from that of the great exegetes of the of the past whose work was able to move the church through the life and power of the Bible — men like Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. Of course, the hermeneutical techniques that permit the identification of the different strands of biblical thought had not been invented in their day so it was virtually by default that they worked under the assumption that the Bible was a unity (but a simple rather than a complex one). But in modern times, under the excitement of the discovery of scientific methods of biblical analysis, the mistaken conclusion seems to have been drawn that the new hermeneutic had to displace the old one entirely.

It is plain now, however, that Ellul has no desire to make that mistake in reverse and displace current microscopic-precision studies with wide-angle viewings. Certainly the Bible will be most free to speak clearly and meaningfully if the two hermeneutics are allowed to operate side by side — indeed in concert. Working so, we should be able to do even better than did our forefathers who lacked the advantages of the scientific method.

Yet, like pudding, the proof of a hermeneutic is in the eating. Ellul's efforts are on the table: The Meaning of the City, The Judg-

Voices in our midst are calling for some sort of new biblical hermeneutic. Most insistent among them, perhaps, are those of Brevard S. Childs (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*) and James D. Smart (*The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*). The primary complaint seems to be that regnant methods of interpretation simply are not communicating biblical truth in a way that is moving or meaningful to most believers.

The one who has come closest to meeting the challenge is, I think, Jacques Ellul, the noted French sociologist-theologian. He has not devised, described or proposed a new hermeneutic; or if he has, he has done so only in the form of scattered, offhand comments. He has done something better; he has produced some striking biblical studies. And any hermeneutic ought to be judged by its fruit rather than its theory.

The specimens to be considered are three recent books (recent in *English*, that is; the dates of their original French publication are 1969, 1950 and 1966 respectively — Ellul was busy meeting the challenge even before it was raised). They are *The Meaning of the City, The Judgment of Jonah* and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (all issued by Eerdmans). The first of these undoubtedly is the classic demonstration of Ellul's method. The second displays a variation that may have even more significant implications. The third does not reveal anything particularly different from the other two regarding method — and our interest here is solely in the method of these books and not their content.

I. Ellul's Continuous approach

For want of a better term, Ellul calls his a "continuous" reading of the Bible — a reading that, he claims, is "neither literalistic, fundamentalistic, nor imaginary." His main quarrel with the dominant school of hermeneutics — characterized by such techniques as redaction criticism and the analysis of forms, literary genres,

traditions and sources — is not that its techniques are faulty but that the forest gets lost because of its exclusive attention to trees. The consequence is that these scholars tend to think in terms of biblical messages rather than of a biblical message. Thus there is Luke's message, an entirely different one from John's, which again is entirely different from Paul's, and this even to the point that the redactor is promulgating a different message from that of the original author, etc., etc.

Now Ellul is far from wanting to deny that a multitude of hands (and minds) were involved in bringing the Scriptures into their present form. Neither is he opposed to the sophisticated methodologies that modern criticism has devised for locating and separating the various strands of thought. What is at issue, rather, is a matter of fundamental mindset. If one customarily comes to the text looking for distinctions, these are what he will find and it is with these he will be impressed. However, without necessarily disputing these findings at all, the scholar looking from a holistic perspective will find and be impressed by connections, developments, continuities, supplementaries.

And so Ellul is convinced that on very many important topics the Bible does have a message. A message which — he specifies — is "complex and yet integral." That phrase is crucial and pinpoints the distinctiveness of Ellul's approach. The current hermeneutic of liberal scholarship, we have suggested, tends to deny (or at least ignore) the integrity of the biblical message. But for its part, the hermeneutic of conservative scholarship tends to deny (or at least ignore) the complexity of the message. This is done in either or both of two ways. For the one, the assumption is made that the biblical message is all of a piece; whatever is said at any one point in the Bible is identical with (or at least in simple agreement with) what is said at all other points; one verse can be expounded with the help of any other verse, without regard to when, where,how, or by whom either of them was written. For the other, the Bible is interpreted dispensationally, the reason some counsels are differ-

in time, the narrative became meaningful for those who found it worth preserving in the Jewish tradition. Later, perhaps slightly different or enlarged meanings were found by those who made their own contribution to the book's history when they placed it in the Hebrew canon and gave it the status of Scripture. Still later (and this is the crucial step for Ellul), Jesus rather prominently mentioned the Jonah story and suggested that it could be understood as a sign or parable of himself. Later again, references by some New Testament writers indicate that the early church was finding real meaning in Jonah. Finally — though, to be sure, it was not a decision focused on Jonah — there was the decision that incorporated the book as an integral part of the Christian Scripture. And, Ellul would maintain, the inspiring work of the Spirit was going on throughout this long process. Suddenly we have found all sorts of room for a continuous reading of even the minuscule Book of Jonah.

Ellul's faith-assumption, of course, leads him to peg the continuity of his Jonah-exposition upon Jesus; and Jesus' own words about Jonah become an invitation to explore what the book might signify — a parable of Jesus. Ellul's exposition is utterly christocentric. Yet Ellul is clear about what he is doing. He does not even pretend to be exegeting the book that was written by an ancient Hebrew; he expounds the book that has been transformed by Jesus' citation of it and as it now stands as an integral element in Christian Scripture.

It is this clarity that justifies Ellul in insisting that his hermeneutic is not fundamentalistic. He is not about to claim that the original author, either consciously or through subconscious manipulation by God, wrote into his book a bunch of coded references predicting what later would happen regarding a man named Jesus. Ellul is dealing interpretations that the Holy Spirit brought into the book at later times and through other hands including Jesus' own).

The difference here is that between a drama critic's treatment of a playwright's script and his treatment of a performance of the same play. Modern scholarship confines itself to the original script

a play — except that the primary assumption must be made that the Spirit has served to make the Bible a book (even though a most complex one) rather than, as is widely assumed, an almost chance collection of numberless fragments representing the divers thoughts of goodness knows how many minds.

Further, because Ellul's faith-assumption is that the heart and focus of the Spirit's revealing work lie in Jesus Christ, the history of Jesus inevitably must become the center out of which the continuity and coherency of the whole are to be sough. Thus both the Bible's own content and the fact of its centering in Jesus Christ become very real limits and controls over what Ellul can approve as exegetically permissible. He can say, for example, "I do insist that the case is that sociological studies truly are pointing back to biblical thought rather than that we are making the Bible say what we want it to say under the influence of these sociological studies!"

IV. Applying Continuous Reading to Jonah

Regarding City, then, a "continuous reading" obviously signifies going through the Bible as a whole. But turning now to The Judgment of Jonah, it is just as obvious that it must signify something a bit different. The continuity possible in exegeting the two-page book of Jonah would seem to be more than slightly constricted. The book is very brief both in length and in idea content. It cannot be the work of more than one writer or at most two, and there is not much that can be tested in the way of oral transmission, redaction, etc. Also, the book is not closely related to any other books of the Bible and is not concerned with any of the turning points of the larger salvation history. Where is there for a continuous reading to go?

Ellul knows. The historical formation of the book seems to have been quite circumscribed and self-contained, but the subsequent reading and cogitating and interpreting of it have not been. Thus,

ent from others is that one of them was meant to apply only to one age and another only to another. Ellul's approach, however, comes through as fresh and as different from that of either the typical liberal or the typical conservative.

II. Ellul's Understanding of Inspiration

We have talked about the difference of mindset. Behind Ellul's mindset is a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. I am sure he would say that in the end the continuity of the Bible, which makes possible his "continuous" reading of it, is to be attributed to the operation of the Holy Spirit. But it is not necessary to stop simply with saying this; more can be said regarding how the Spirit operates in employing even natural, historical means.

Central to Ellul's approach at this point is his insistence that inspiration is not a localized action effecting only the original author of a passage and only at the moment of his writing. Inspiration by the Spirit is a continuing and cumulative activity but accompanies a text from the occurrence of the events it will later record, through the transmission and interpretation of the oral tradition; through the act of its being written down; through its consequent arrangement, supplementation and redaction; through its ultimate finding of a place in the canon; and clear on to its being pondered and understood by the believing reader.

Nor is the process to be understood solely in terms of mystic influence. There is an abundance of evidence to indicate that later biblical writers were quite familiar with the work of their predecessors and were consciously building upon it. And even where that connection is not that direct, all of these authors, transmitters and redactors were operating out of a background of a common (although developing) religio-cultural tradition. In short, there is enough historical continuity in the process of the Bible's forma-

tion to justify the assumption that an ideational continuity might be found in its content.

The historical continuity is loose and fluid though to suggest that the ideational continuity is bound to be complex — thus conceding full validity to modern hermeneutical efforts in identifying and relating distinctive strands of thought. Yet that historical and Spirit-directed continuity is firm enough to indicate that we dare not stop with independent strands but should proceed to explore the integrity of the cord they weave.

And so, in The Meaning of the City, Ellul proceeds through the Bible from cover to cover in order to find its message regarding the significance of the symbol-actuality that is "the city." He reads through a wide-angle lens that makes it possible to plot large scale movements and trends of thought, rather than through the customary small focus magnifier which is used for discovering who wrote a given verse and what he had in mind when he wrote it.

I recall vividly my first reaction to some of Ellul's exegesis: Does he seriously believe that he has established that this is what the author meant by that verse? I soon realized that I was asking the wrong question. It should have been two questions:

1. Would the biblical author agree that Ellul's exegesis is in line with the overall thrust of his thought?

2. Perhaps more crucial: If all the People who contributed to the end-product of the biblical canon (who *together* constitute the locus of the inspiration of Scripture) were to form a committee, would their consensus be that Ellul's reading of this verse is appropriate to the thought movement of the canon as a whole?

Regarding Ellul's City, it became clear to me that the answers to these two questions could be, would *have* to be, a very strong Yes even at places where the answer to my original question might

be very doubtful indeed. It will be difficult for even the most critical scholar to deny that Ellul has brought to light out of the Bible itself a coherent and consistent theological argument concerning the meaning of the city.

Now, of course, scholarship would be in real danger if ever these two approaches were confused — if Ellul or anyone else got the idea that his type of reading establishes *the same order* of biblical truth as does detailed, scientific, historical and textual research. We need the rigor, precision and close control that only the modem methodologies can provide. But as the rising call for a new hermeneutic would indicate, we also need the more free and uninhibited wide-angle reading. The two are not incompatible. Indeed, the continuous reading is, to a real degree, a second step; and Ellul is quick to use the findings of specialized scholarship in his own cause. But the important thing is that everyone involved be completely aware of what sort of exegesis is being done in any given case.

III. A Different approach to Control

Undoubtedly some scholars object that the Ellulian approach — by, so to speak, jumping over the microscopic analysis — has rejected necessary controls and turned the exegete loose to follow his imagination in making Scripture say whatever he wants it to say. But this is not true; the nature of the control has been changed, but control there still is, very much so.

The control in modem hermeneutics consists of scientifically tested evidence regarding the immediate context of a passage; that is to say, the linguistic, semantic, literary, historical, cultural, ideological, religious context of the act of the passage's originally being written. In Ellul's approach, on the other hand, the crucial context has to do with the role the passage plays in the theological coherency of the Bible as a whole. This control is not any different in kind from what a secular critic uses in exegeting, say, a novel or