

Jacques Ellul as a Theological Exegete of the Old Testament

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JACQUES ELLUL WAS UNEXCELLED in the twentieth century in his creative theological use of the Old Testament, in works such as *Violence* and *The Meaning of the City*. He was also unexcelled as a theological exegete of the Old Testament text—that is, someone who from time to time focused on expounding particular works within the Old Testament. I here consider three such expositions from different stages in his life: *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (on 2 Kings), *The Judgment of Jonah*, and *Reason for Being* (on Ecclesiastes).

The Politics of God and the Politics of Man

The Politics of God and the Politics of Man (Eerdmans, 1972; French original, 1966) is my favorite Ellul book. Fifty years ago, there was nothing to read on the theological significance of 2 Kings; indeed, it was hard to imagine that it had any theological significance. Even Calvin didn't produce a commentary on 2 Kings. Then along came Ellul with his magnificent observation that "this Second Book of Kings is characterized by two aspects of revelation. The first is political in the narrow sense; the problems in most of the texts are political."¹ The second is that "more than anything else . . . it displays concretely the play of what Karl Barth has called the free determination of man in the free decision of God. We are constantly in the presence of the relation

1. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 13.

between man's action and God's" (his work and the translation belong, of course, to the days before gender-inclusive language).²

Second Kings thus implies an approach to a conundrum that has been important in Western thinking: how can we say both that God is sovereign and that human beings make real decisions? It's one of those questions that is answered (or rather discussed) more effectively by narrative theology than by systematic theology. The latter properly focuses on analysis, logic and unequivocal statement. Without giving the impression that they see this question as a conundrum, the Scriptures themselves approach it in a narrative way. In 2 Kings,

we see man deciding on a great number of actions freely and alone. Many of them fail. They are nonsensical. They misfire. They are lost in the sand. But some succeed. And when this occurs, these deliberate acts which men do for their own reasons and according to their own calculations are the very ones which accomplish just what God had decided and was expecting (even though the men often do not know this or are not aware of it at first). These acts enter into God's design and bring about exactly the new situation which God planned.³

In expounding this theme Ellul talks the reader through a number of the stories in 2 Kings, some involving Israelite and Judahite kings, some involving foreign kings and leaders. The first one he covers concerns Naaman. What an extraordinary story it is, about the way Yahweh heals a man who is a military warrior and a victor over Israel, who ends up "a man who is no longer gnawed away by leprosy physically, a man who, resting in the peace of God, ceases to be gnawed away by the idolatry of the state which divides and corrupts the innermost depths of man."⁴ About Joram, Ellul comments, "It is never possible to see what act of man does in fact fulfil the will of God . . . But what we need to know now is that it is man and he alone, and for his own motives, who manifests willy nilly the hand which gives and takes away, which slays and makes alive."⁵ Then there is a foreign king, Hazael: "the glory of Hazael will be quickly tarnished. The Word of God which launched him will be spoken no more when he invokes it."⁶ About Jehu: "Even when the king is faithful and leads the people to God,

2. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 15.

3. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 17.

4. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 40.

5. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 70.

6. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 88.

everything is still false and ambiguous. Thus God makes the big decision.”⁷ The implication of Ahaz’s story: “The adulteration of the church by power, e.g., its social conformity in the Middle Ages, corresponds precisely to the action described here, namely, that of Ahaz. Our only guarantee of efficacy is the achievement of nonconformity.”⁸ To another foreign leader, the Assyrian Rabshakeh, who defies and scorns Yahweh, the only proper response is silence. In the same historical and narrative context, about Hezekiah: “At issue is God’s honor. We observe that the miracle of God corresponds to the direct insult addressed by man to God. We ourselves need not seek means to avenge God’s honor. God alone avenges his honor. We should simply bow in fear and trembling before this incomprehensible expression of the dignity of his love.”⁹

In a closing meditation on inutility, Ellul concludes: “in spite of God’s respect and love for man, in spite of God’s extreme humility in entering into man’s projects in order that man may finally enter into his own design, in the long run one cannot but be seized by a profound sense of the inutility and vanity of human action.”¹⁰ Yet we can pray, and we can be wise, and we can preach.

The Judgment of Jonah

In light of the thrust of Ellul’s exposition of these stories, it is surprising also to be told that they are all “set in the perspective of Jesus Christ . . . Everything leads to Jesus Christ, just as everything comes from him. Hence Jesus Christ is not absent from the somber adventure of the Second Book of Kings.”¹¹ I do not really know what that declaration means, and I cannot see that Jesus makes much difference to the implications of the stories, which is why they speak so importantly in our Western context. But this statement by Ellul is evidently important to him, and it links with a central thrust of a much earlier work, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Eerdmans, 1971; French original 1952). It is to me a more problematic one. It almost begins by telling us that “the true reality of the book is Jesus Christ,”¹² to which I have to respond, “No it is not.” Perhaps for Ellul it would be more-or-less enough to say “the

7. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 118.

8. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 141.

9. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 181.

10. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 190.

11. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 9.

12. Ellul, *Judgement of Jonah*, 10.

true reality of this book is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ"; I would be happy with that statement.

Ellul properly wants to put in their place two sorts of people: those who say that the book is about universalism rather than particularism, and those who think it is about being swallowed by a whale. No, says Ellul, it is about God and us, about God's relationship with us and ours with God, about the nature of election and the nature of grace and the nature of vocation. They were realities not because of who Jonah was and not for his sake, nor could they be halted or frustrated by his resistance. In a related statement that anticipates his exposition of 2 Kings, Ellul observes that God respects our freedom but makes us fulfill the role he assigns to us in spite of ourselves. The Jonah story is about someone who finds that "the man who flees from the word of God seals himself off in his solitude."¹³ He goes through an adventure throughout which he is "alone in the face of God and in the face of death and in the face of Nineveh."¹⁴ Except that he is unwittingly surrounded by a cloud of witnesses cheering him on. And so are we all.

Ellul also puts in their place people who think that the "psalm" in chapter 2 of Jonah was inserted into the book by an imbecile, which was a more dominant conviction when he wrote this book than it is now. Neither does he accept the view that the fish is a place of salvation for Jonah, which is still a dominant assumption (and I think a correct one). For Ellul, the fish is something more like the Old Testament sea monster. Inside the monster, Jonah is in Hell. In the course of his flight from God Jonah goes though Hell, but from there realizes that God accepts him. Jonah's story further shows how we hold the fate of our fellow human beings in our hands. Our situation is thus not a happy one for us, as God points out in Ezekiel 33. God could have saved Nineveh without Jonah, but he wants human beings to have a part in his work. "The Christian is not just the man who is saved by Christ; he is the man whom God uses for the salvation of others by Christ."¹⁵ Further, "when it is said that God repents, it means that he suffers."¹⁶ It is an implication of the verb *niham*, which means repent or relent or have a change of heart or "suffer grief" (as the Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew lexicon puts it). God takes on himself the wrongdoing of the Ninevites. One can certainly see here an assumption that casts light on what God is doing in Jesus.

13. Ellul, *Judgement of Jonah*, 29.

14. Ellul, *Judgement of Jonah*, 22.

15. Ellul, *Judgement of Jonah*, 89.

16. Ellul, *Judgement of Jonah*, 99.

Ellul often reminds me of Karl Barth and his exposition of the Old Testament in the *Church Dogmatics*, and Ellul does express appreciation (though also criticism) of Barth. He also reminds me of the less-well-known Swiss Old Testament theologian Wilhelm Vischer, Barth's pastor, to whom Barth and Ellul both refer with appreciation. Like Ellul, for me these two are a tad too Christological in their interpretation. But the fact that the God who was involved with Jonah was the God who came into the world in Jesus means that Ellul's reading Jesus into Jonah brings out more than it reads in. And in the end, I guess I would rather keep company with them than with the thin exegetes who see nothing of transhistorical significance in Jonah.

Reason for Being

In *Politics of God* Ellul also comments, "Everything is useless, and we are thus tempted to add: Everything, then, is vanity."¹⁷ It is the starting point of the thinking of Ecclesiastes or Qohelet, and thus of *Reason for Being* (Eerdmans, 1990; French original 1987). Ellul planned *Reason for Being* as his last word, just in case he did not write any more books; he produced it when he was 75 years old. Before his death at 82 he did write some more, as he thought he might, but he sees *Reason for Being* as the summation of thinking he had been doing over his life, not least about Qohelet. Ellul calls his book a meditation, which is maybe an excuse for not being too structured or logically argued, like Qohelet itself.

He notes the paradox in writing a book about a book that warns about writing books. Like everything else, he recognizes, the book he writes falls under the judgment "all is vanity" (he reminds me of Thomas Aquinas allegedly declaring that everything he had written seemed like straw). But there is also in Qohelet the encouragement to do with all your energy what your hand finds to do, and this book is what Ellul's hand found to do. In a parallel with comments in *The Judgment of Jonah*, Ellul is deservedly rude about scholars who attribute different parts of Qohelet to different authors. In connection with Qohelet they do so on the basis of a lack of consistency between the views expressed within the book, as if the scholars had not realized that paradox or contradiction is an essential principle in Qohelet. What strange assumptions critics make, Ellul comments—as if one person cannot write things that are in sharp tension with each other; indeed, if a writer cannot do so, how could a compiler have put them together without noticing the problem? And if Qohelet is so impossibly contradictory, how is it that the compilers of the Scriptures accepted the book? Again,

17. Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 196.

the trend of critical scholarship has maybe moved a little in Ellul's direction over the past thirty years. On the other hand, another aspect to his trenchant critique has more rather than less bite in the twenty-first century. How strange, he comments, that exegetes judge texts instead of seeking to interpret them! They write as if they feel a need to be combative towards them in light of the centuries of these works being regarded as sacred and authoritative, or (I would add) in light of the assumption that we obviously have the right perspective on the truth, on whose basis we can evaluate everything that has come before.

After the discursive introduction in which he makes these points, Ellul divides his book into three sections of eighty or ninety pages each. The first concerns Qohelet's key but controverted word *hebel*. As an equivalent, Ellul is happy with the word *vanité*, which naturally comes out in English as *vanity*. Alongside that not-very-illuminating word, he helpfully puts the words vapor, smoke, unsubstantiality, fragility, and evanescence. The great vanities, Qohelet declares, are power, money, work, happiness, and the good. In that introduction in which Ellul also tells us that we are going to get his own angle on Qohelet, not something that takes its framework of thinking from the work of Old Testament scholars, it is surprising that Ellul discusses the meaning of *hebel* in dialog with a series of such scholars. It is useful that they are mainly French, writers of whom readers in the United States or Britain will probably not have heard such as Chouraqui and Chopineau, as well as ones who are a little better known in the English-speaking world such as Lys, Neher, and Podechard. So here, at least, he does work in dialogue with other scholars, though this is not to say that he fails to incorporate his independent thinking—for instance, in his development of a link between *hebel* and Abel, whose name in Hebrew is *hebel*.

Wisdom is the second great theme in Qohelet that Ellul identifies. He comments that readers are less interested in wisdom than in vanity. With greater boldness than your average Old Testament scholar, he will make comments such as “I am utterly opposed to von Rad's opinion,” which he sees as setting up a false antithesis between Qohelet and Proverbs (I think they seem very different because they have different starting points; they do not mean the same thing by wisdom).¹⁸ In connection with wisdom, Ellul discusses irony, science, finitude, and death.

Ellul's third theme is God, who is mentioned over thirty times in Qohelet. It is no secular book. But it never uses the name Yahweh, which reminds us that the truth it expounds is not limited to the Jewish people. Nor does Qohelet pretend that we know more about God than we do. He does

18. Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 131.

affirm that God in Qohelet is the God who gives, who gives quest and desire for eternity, and gives enjoyment. He also gives judgment, though we can understand judgment as a gift only if we go back behind the understanding of justice in light of Roman law that we have inherited since postbiblical times. And he grants accessibility to him, even though it is an accessibility that needs to be combined with humility.

From time to time in this book, too, Ellul mentions Jesus, as one might expect, often to note that Jesus's teaching coheres with Qohelet's. The God Qohelet describes chose to be Jesus's God. "God has answered our desire for eternity in Jesus Christ."¹⁹ But Ellul does not imply that Jesus is the answer to the question posed in Qohelet in a way that means Qohelet's questions are no longer questions for us. If anything, Qohelet's key insights about the ambiguity of power and wisdom stand with more force after Jesus.

It is possible to be a sophisticated Hebraist, Ellul comments, but a superficial thinker. Somehow Old Testament scholars forget why they got interested in the Old Testament books in the first place, and never come back to expounding what the books have to tell us about God. In contrast with them, that is why I have found Ellul illuminating, ever since I first came across his work on 2 Kings.

Works Cited

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19. Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 247.