
By What Authority?

The Bible and Civil Disobedience

by Ched Myers

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Civil disobedience as a political tactic is of relatively recent genesis, but resistance to human sovereigns is as old as civilization itself. In the ancient world this resistance usually took the form of refusal to abide by the decrees of a king or a ruler's authority. Such disobedience was a serious undertaking.

Although democratic dissent and "free speech" were not unknown, the normal paradigm of political rule was that of sovereign's absolute authority. Since the king was Divine in the ancient Mediterranean world, disobedience meant transgressing the very order of the cosmos. The radical monotheism of the Bible – the belief that only God was sovereign – therefore accepts acts of resistance to ruling political authority as part of the salvation history of Yahweh.

In surveying the biblical material for light on an essentially modern way of posing the question ("civil disobedience"), we must define what it is we are looking for. We are not, on the one hand, looking for a "doctrine of the state," though this impinges on the topic; nor are we, on the

other hand, cataloguing every form of subversive political action in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for biblical antecedents to our modern experimentation with civil disobedience. Thus, the focus is resistance to the structures of authority in a given biblical social formation.

There are two fundamental forms of resistance, which can be actions taken by individuals, small communities, or large, mobilized groups.

The first we can call **defensive disobedience**: action aimed at protecting persons from aggression or injustice by the ruling structure, usually taking the form of non-cooperation with law or policy. A modern example would be draft or tax resistance.

The second is the **offensive disobedience**: action intending to, through confrontation and engagement, expose moral, legal, or political contradictions in existing policy. Non-violent direct action at nuclear weapons facilities would be an example of this.

In looking at disobedience to structures of authority first in the Old Testament, it is important to

keep in mind the essentially negative view of kingships that formed the core of the original desert tradition. The tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 is quite probably an ancient Hebrew polemic against the centralization of authority, technology, and political culture in imperial urban centers, such as ancient Babylon. Turning to Israel's self rule, 1 Samuel 8 suggests that the founding of the monarchy was a rejection of sovereignty of God in order to have a king "like all the other nations." The people here forfeited the decentralized tribal-charismatic policy of the era of judges – a political model that is still revered in the eschatological writings of the New Testament (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30).

French theologian Jacques Ellul sums up the political analysis of 1 Samuel 8: "political authority rests on defiance; it is a rejection of God: it can only be dictatorial, abusive, and unjust." This attitude, at the core of the oldest traditions, is crucial in understanding the uniquely important role given to disobedience in the recitation of salvation history in the Hebrew Bible.

Classicist and rabbinic scholar David Daube writes in *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*: "The oldest record in the world literature of the spurning of the

governmental decree occurs in the second book of Moses... This oldest instance of conscientious disobedience concerns a case of genocide."

The reference is to the story of the birth of Moses (Exodus 1:8-2:10). Hebrew midwives defy an order by Pharaoh to kill all Hebrew males at birth and cover their tracks by lying to Pharaoh. The mother of Moses then takes her baby "underground" in order to save his life.

This story of defensive Old Testament disobedience is interesting for many reasons. First, it is highly political in nature, the backdrop being the oppression of the Hebrews and their threat to the social stability of Pharaoh's Egypt. The story, then, inaugurates the Exodus narrative.

Second, quite apart from the shock that many Bible readers in the United States may receive from discovering such bald-faced defiance of, and lying to, established authority, the disobedient act provokes greater repression on the part of the authorities. This response is very familiar in modern practice of civil disobedience.

Third, and most important to Christian readers, the story is closely paralleled in Matthew's birth narrative of the new Moses: Jesus. The second chapter of

Matthew recounts that the infant Messiah is also threatened by royal infanticide, is saved by the civil disobedience and deception of a third party (wise men), and goes underground to escape Herod. These stories reflect the bitter experience of power, pitting the genocidal political realism of kings against the divine hope borne by infants.

The book of Esther has a plot that similarly turn on a series of facts of non-cooperation to a pagan ruler. This "historical novel," like the book of Daniel, is set in a Persian court but is meant to be instructive to the Jewish community at a later date. Esther contains three notable instances of non-cooperation.

The narrative begins with the queen of Ahasuerus, Vashti, refusing to be put on show for the kings guests. This defiance, remarkable for the setting of an Oriental court, opens the way for the Jewess Esther to assume the role of queen and sets the stage for the Jewish leader Mordecai to refuse to pay homage to one of the kings governors, Haman. In order to save Mordecai and the entire Jewish community from retaliation for this non-cooperation, Esther breaks the kings rules of visitation and manages to persuade him to overturn the edict for a pogrom.

The message of the story

seems to be that Jews who find themselves in positions of access to power, like Esther, must act in solidarity with those who take positions of non-cooperation on matters of principle, like Mordecai. The story may have been a kind of handbook for the persecuted Jewish community in its deliberations on concrete strategies of resistance.

This is certainly the case for the book of Daniel which, according to Daube, "may be described as a veritable charter of civil disobedience by a religious minority." At issue are Jewish dietary laws and, more importantly, the refusal to worship the oriental monarch. The account involves Daniel's solitary witness in chapter 6, as well as the group resistance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in chapter 3. These exemplary stories of faith in the first half of Daniel set the stage for the thinly veiled political criticism of Antiochus IV Epiphanies in chapter 7 to 12.

The apocalyptic imagery in Daniel, according to Daniel scholar J. Collins, "may be understood as a political manifesto.... The mythical symbolism of the vision of Daniel is designed to inspire active but non-violent resistance.... The wise man need not fight, but can express his resistance to the

power of the king by non-compliance with his orders, and endurance of whatever suffering results.”

This tradition of defensive civil disobedience for a persecuted community is later appropriated in the New Testament by Mark’s apocalypse (Mark 13) and the book of Revelation.

There is an offensive disobedience tradition as well in the Hebrew Bible. The most massive action in defiance of a king of course is the Exodus event, which we can almost characterize as a “national cessation.” But there is a strong tradition of dissent even within the Israelite theocratic/monarchial period, which we know as classical prophecy.

The court prophet Micaiah under Ahab defied the imperial expectation for favorable predictions on the eve of a military adventure (1 Kings 22) and was thrown in jail, after first mocking government-controlled forecasters and then discrediting the king’s legitimacy in a parable. Like wise, Elijah refuses to tell a king what he wants to hear (2 Kings 1), despite attempts of military intimidation.

At the center of the tradition of Hebrew prophecy is the conviction that the word of God must be spoken, especially when it portends bad tidings that will

never be gladly received by the authorities. This is perhaps expressed most clearly in Ezekiel 33.

The notion of the prophet as “watchman” is not unlike the modern democratic idea that a “loyal opposition” must resist unjust laws and policies for the sake of the survival or integrity of the body politic. Thus, Martin Luther King, Jr. broke segregation laws to demonstrate the absolute incompatibility of apartheid with the U.S. Constitution.

Jeremiah is perhaps the greatest practitioner of this vocation in the Old Testament. His language is symbolic action, such as the purchase of the linen girdle in chapter 13 and the earthenware jar in chapter 19, that dramatizes the religious and social apostasy of the people. His actions more often than not land him in jail (chapters 20 and 32).

Jeremiah’s offensive engagements with the ruling caste of his time are highly political, such as his symbolic action of wearing a yoke to protest military alliances for purposes of national security (chapter 27), or his purchase of land on the eve of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem to signal that hope lay not in futile resistance but in God’s power to preserve the people through exile (chapter 32). Thus did the great prophet Jeremiah fulfill his

vocation “to pluck up and break down” kingdoms (1:10).

As suggested in the story of Moses’ birth, what is remarkable about “civil disobedience” in the Old Testament is how Israel perceived its salvation story as so often contingent upon acts of non-cooperation with authority. Rahab the harlot is given a firm place in biblical history by her politically partisan resistance (Joshua 2, Hebrews 11:31, James 2:25). David himself survives his contest with Saul the king only because Saul’s son, Jonathan, and daughter, Michal (David’s wife), give their loyalty to David in defiance of their father (1 Samuel 19-20).

It is worth noting how often women figure in roles of disobedience to achieve their aims. Daube notes that “a woman is the main figure also in the Greek prototype of civil obedience”: Sophocles’ *Antigone*. From the early narratives on, there is a sense that the politics of non-cooperation are the special weapon of oppressed sectors.

We have evidence from rabbinic writings that strategies and the political and moral ethics of resistance and non-cooperation were the subject of serious deliberation within the persecuted Jewish community through the time of the emperor Hadrian. We can assume that the same

discussions went on in the early Christian communities.

There were incidents of mass political civil disobedience in both Rome and Palestine under the Romans. Given the essentially defensive political posture of religious minorities in the Roman empire, it is all the more impressive that the weight of New Testament evidence strongly indicates an offensive posture toward authorities. ***T h e singular model for civil disobedience for the Christian is of course the ministry of Jesus, much of which can be understood as calculated confrontation with the structures of socio-political power of his day.***

We can briefly survey its two phases: his ministry in Galilee and his final days in Jerusalem.

Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ first mission around the region of Capernaum (Mark 2:13-3:6) presents us with a Jesus who systematically assaults the social order of first-century Jewish Palestine. Jesus takes on the rigid social caste system of clean and unclean by calling a tax collector into his discipleship community and underscores the point by sharing table-fellowship with a variety of outcasts. By touching a leper, recorded in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus was already considered impure; by

eating with “sinners,” Jesus defies the Pharisaical codes of ritual purity. Jesus’ next act is to publically decline to participate in a recognized fast day, an attack on the relationship between religious piety and the legitimization of leadership in Jewish society. Finally, Jesus assaults the symbolic center of synagogue Judaism, the Sabbath, by transgressing Sabbath laws and boldly asserting, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (2:27).

In each case, the act is public and carefully planned to address the various aspects of the social world of his time. Moreover, Jesus not only breaks regulations which were law in his day, but he asserts his perfect right to do so in every case (2:10, 17, 19, 28). The sequence, not surprisingly, culminates in one more public confrontation in a synagogue, where Jesus again breads the Sabbath law by healing a man’s hand (3:1-6). The response to these acts by the local Galilean authorities is a commitment to do away with Jesus.

This sequence is a dramatic and protracted “civil disobedience campaign” because the law was the foundation of Jewish social order. There was no “secular realm,” only a foreign colonizer, Rome, whose laws and religion were also inseparable. The

sequence is characteristic of the whole of Jesus’ ministry. He challenged the authority of kinship regulations (Luke 2:41-52; Mark 3:31-35), the dietary customs that gave Jews much of their social identity (Mark 7:1-5, 14-30), and the claim of the wealthy and the educated to their social and religious status (Mark 10: 17-23; 12: 28-34). Most importantly, Jesus’ confrontation had a directly political thrust: his campaign was finally directed at the center of power, Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-56).

Luke’s account of the Jerusalem section of Jesus’ ministry is another sequence of highly symbolic and politically crafted actions. It begins with a messianic entry into the city, and a lament over Jerusalem’s imminent demise (Luke 19:28-44). Then comes perhaps the most dramatic and provocative of Jesus’ actions, the “cleansing” of the temple (19:45-48).

The temple was both the political and economic heart of the Jewish social formation and the center of the symbolic order of Israel. To take action to shut down its commerce completely and denigrate its operation was a bold interpretation of the prophetic tradition of civil disobedience.

It is no wonder that the next episode in Luke’s narrative is a direct challenge by the authorities, who are already plotting his

arrest, to Jesus’ authority to act in such a way (19:47-20:8). Civil disobedience is always most potent when it provokes a crisis of authority. As in many cases taken to court today by nonviolent resisters, Jesus responds to the challenge with a counter-challenge aimed at undermining the legitimacy of those who are in power. His counter-challenge is the parable of the vineyard (20:9-20).

The Jewish leaders, if not many modern interpreters, understand exactly the political point of the parable and proceed to press Jesus further. If he does not recognize their jurisdiction, will he acknowledge the authority of the colonial power, Rome? They thus throw back to him the infamous tribute question (20:21-26). In response, Jesus tells another parable, posing rhetorically the question as to the relative jurisdiction of Caesar in light of the rule of God. His opponents are stunned and perceive his answer as another instance of blatant defiance of the rule of law, which they level at him later in his trial (23:2).

It is sufficiently clear from these two narrative sequences that Jesus is portrayed as deliberately choosing a prophetic style of confrontation with authority, at virtually every level of law and custom in society, in

order to underscore the new authority of the kingdom of God. It is inevitable that he would meet the cross, a form of capital punishment reserved by the Romans for political dissidents, and that the Jewish authorities would work in close collaboration with Rome to secure his condemnation.

Jesus expects his followers also to embrace this cross (Mark 8:34). They are to carry on his ministry of confrontation through the proclamation of the new order. They can expect that they too will be delivered up to councils, beaten in synagogues, and forced to stand before governors and kings (Mark 13:9)—a catalogue of the four levels of local and central Jewish and Roman authority in Palestine.

In the narratives of the early apostolic church, this continuation is precisely what we find. The post-Easter community takes up where Jesus left off: in the temple, publicly challenging the order of sin and death, and being dragged before the authorities (Acts 3:1-4:18).

It is in the apostolic testimony that we have the clearest formulation, twice for emphasis, of the conflict. For preaching about Jesus, Peter and John are arrested and must answer to the high priest. “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you

rather than to God, “ they tell him, “you must judge” (4:19). In a similar situation recorded a chapter later, Peter answers, “We must obey God rather than men (5:29).

Acts portrays the ministry of Paul as involving no less systematic conflict with the authorities (16:16-24; 19:23-41; 21:6-14), a fact confirmed by Paul’s own letters, many of which are penned from jail. Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians speaks of a mandate wherein believers are to “ take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather unmask them” (Ephesians 5:11).

The more defensive posture of disobedience to authorities is a very strong strand in much of the later New Testament literature. Similar to Daniel, the book of Revelation is a resistance document, probably reflecting persecutions under the emperor Domitian in the last decade of the first century. Chapter 13 is particularly recognizable as a call to non-cooperation with Roman authority and an exhortation to Christians to accept the consequences of their resistance.

John writing as a political prisoner in exile, objects to Rome not only because of its persecution of Christians, but also because of its slave trade and oppressive economic structures (6:6; 18:3,(-20) and military

policies (6:2-4, 15; 16:13-21; 20:7-15). John insists that Christians must not only refuse to cooperate but also take steps to disassociate themselves from the imperial menace (18:4-5).

The well-known and much-abused teaching of Paul in Romans 13 must also be considered here. Numerous commentators have established that Paul is not advocating absolute and uncritical subordination to every authority, but rather exhorting conditional cooperation with the state that is “not a terror to good conduct” (Romans 13:3). What is usually overlooked is that this teaching was needed at all; the implication is that the normal Christian practice was non-cooperation. Ellul comments, “Paul’s verses seem to me a reaction against the extremist of the anti-political position.”

Peter wishes to ensure that Christians are being put in prison for the right reasons: “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker: but if you suffer as a Christian, let you not be ashamed” (4:15-16). These words reflect genuine pastoral concern for the ambiguous public face, and often mixed personal motives, that are inherent in the practice of civil disobedience.

Both Romans and 1 Peter take

a firm stance against the excesses of offensive disobedience and pastorally encourage defined and controlled defensive actions. No one who seriously proposes civil disobedience in our modern setting will deny that such political and pastoral guidelines are necessary to maintain public and personal integrity.

By the time of the writing of 1 Timothy, the “good fight of faith” is still conceived in terms of making a good defense before magistrates after the example of Jesus (1 Timothy 6:11-16). The writings of the time are full of concern about conduct in an era of persecution. This is not surprising, since as D. Stevick points out in his book *Civil Disobedience and the Christian*, “Such pleas reflect a time when, in the eyes and by the laws of the empire, to be a Christian at all was to be in a state of civil disobedience.”

The early church struggled to form an ethic of obedience and disobedience because the nature of the kingdom seemed to radically contradict the atmosphere of imperial control in which the early Christians moved and lived. The Pauline gospel of freedom from the law was especially potent politically. For Paul, the central metaphor for faith was the contention between

the old and the new order for the obedience of the believer.

The stance of the early church, with its recognition that conflict with the state was inevitable, made it imperative for a complementary set of teachings to be developed concerning subordination, in order that the freedom of the gospel not become an occasion for gratuitous or exploitative conduct (Romans 6:1, Galations 5:13). It is unfortunate that the latter set of teachings, originally conceived as a counterpoint, has become so often the one-dimensional ethic for a church no longer in collision, but rather in collusion, with the state.

Much can be gleaned for our modern practice of civil disobedience from this overview of biblical antecedents. First, we must be careful not to draw too many direct parallels. While we may find ourselves resisting for the same reasons as our biblical cousins, our socio-political setting is quite different, especially due to the influence of democratic ideology (if not reality). We should no more argue a reductionist position—no disobedience unless the Bible specifically stipulates it on a given issue—than we should a literalist one—every issue important to the biblical witnesses should be of equal importance to us. (We

might, for example, have a hard time getting as excited about dietary fidelity as Daniel did.)

Second, we must affirm the pluralism of the Bible in matters of civil disobedience style. The Scriptures are full of both offensive and defensive modes of confrontation.

Third, the biblical pluralism regarding attitudes toward the legal system holds a lesson for us. On the one hand, there is a strong strand of repudiation of the courts as a vehicle for gaining a hearing for truth: Jesus remains silent before Pilate, and Paul doubts the justice to be gained in Roman courts (1Corinthians 6:1). On the other hand, Paul took advantage of many opportunities to testify before the rulers of his day (Acts 23-26), even to the point of insisting upon the rights of "due process" (Acts 16:37-39, 22:25-29, 25:11). Prophetic silence and prophetic speech before the law both have biblical precedent.

It is clear enough that civil disobedience in many forms is biblically justified and at times even imperative. The failure of most Christians to acknowledge that is a hermeneutic problem, not an exegetical one. For too long, Christian teaching has been entrenched on the side of "law and order"; perhaps there needs to be more theological attention

given to the contemporary meaning of "freedom from the law."

The U.S. church has historical as well as biblical roots to draw upon, given the rich precedents of nonviolent direct action and non-cooperation. Only by more seriously developing a politics of non-cooperation and nonviolent engagement with authority will the church begin to embody a truly hopeful alternative to the spiral of violence and repression in our time. Then "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers" (Ephesians 3:10).

