

Divine Rights of Leaders:What Kind of Leader is Moses?
リーダーの聖なる権利～モーセはどのような指導者か

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モーセは、しゅうとでありミディアン祭司であるエトロの羊の群れを飼っていたが、あるとき、その群れを荒れ野の奥へ追って行き、神の山ホレブにきた。そのとき、柴の間に燃え上がっている炎の中に主の御使いが現れた。彼が見ると、見よ、柴は火に燃えているのに、柴は燃え尽きない。モーセは言った。「道をそれて、この不思議な光景を見届けよう。どうしてあの柴は燃え尽きないのだろう。」

主は、モーセが道をそれて見に来るのを御覧になった。神は柴の間から声をかけられ、「モーセよ、モーセよ」と言われた。彼が、「はい」と答えると、神が言われた。「ここに近づいてはならない。足から履物を脱ぎなさい。あなたの立っている場所は聖なる土地だから。」神は続けて言われた。「わたしはあなたの父の神である。アブラハムの神、イサクの神、ヤコブの神である。」モーセは、神を見ることを恐れて顔を覆った。

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What Kind of Leader was Moses?

Saturday last week (October 29) I gave an address at the annual meeting of the Christian Universities in Japan on the theme “Paradigm Shift for Christian Universities in Asia is Overdue.” I shared my observation that Christian Universities in Asia are standing at crossroads. I also offered my suggestion as to how to bring about paradigm shifts for Christian Universities in Asia as a whole and Japan, Taiwan and Korea in particular.

The topic of my public lecture on November 1 was “In the Beginning Were Stories and Not Texts”. I spoke about stories as a way to break out of the concept and doctrine that dominated Christian theology from Europe and America. God is the God of stories! This God of stories in Christian theology in the West and in the East has been neglected. The Bible consists mostly of stories. God is the God of stories before God was conceptualized and dogmatized by Christian theology.

Following what I said in the previous two lectures, today I would like to touch on the subject of history, and as an example I would like to look at the familiar figure of Moses as a leader under the divine right to rule, the religious and political systems that controlled humanity for centuries, East and West, until democracy finally prevailed in modern times.

How to Read History

I would like to begin with a basic question of “How to read History.” I am not a historian but an avid reader and interpreter of events in history. Naturally, “how to read history” leads to “How to see (understand) history.” I have observed that most Christian churches in Asia suffer from what I call “history-deficient illness” but do not know or do not admit it, that is to say, being oblivious of what has happened in history or distorting historical happenings. This is very strange as Christianity is supposed to place premier importance on history. I think the main reason is that Christianity has interpreted events in history with the norms set by faith and doctrines and not by what has actually happened. It is thus of paramount importance for Christians to learn how to read and understand history. This is especially important in Asia where cultures and religions other than those of western Christianity have affected the great majority of people from past to present.

Three Elements in Understanding History

History is a very complicated affair. Simply put, history is a totality of the world, a nation and even an individual person. But one can identify at least three elements that affect our understanding and interpreting of what has actually happened. These three elements are subjectivity, ideology and religious faith.

Subjectivity

Speaking of subjectivity, one is reminded of the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). His famous diction is “subjectivity is truth”. This may be correct philosophically, but from our daily life and theologically it may not be quite so correct. Just to give an example from our everyday life. In Taiwan where I came from, traffic regulation requires that keeping to the right is the correct thing to do, but here in Japan the traffic regulation is different. In Japan to keep to the left is the right thing to do. Walking on the sidewalk around here in Doshisha University, I tend to keep to the right out of habit, thinking I am walking on the right side of the sidewalk while other people walking on the left side are wrong. Of course it is I who am wrong and other people are right. My subjectivity as someone from Taiwan subconsciously affect my walking contrary to the traffic regulation of Japan.

Subjectivity in theology has led to many problems. Theologically, do we not emphasize the objectivity of God? True, Churches of the Reformed traditions speak of the “internal” witness of the Spirit. But the Spirit that works in believers “internally” (subjectively) comes from God “objectively”. God’s objectivity precedes our subjectivity and the basis of our subjectivity. In this crucial matter of the working of God’s Spirit, “subjectively is truth” does not seem to apply.

Subjectivity does not apply to history either. To understand and interpret history subjectively, dealing with history as a private property, as it were, and manipulating it in accordance with what suits you at certain times is the root of the problem for Christians. The historical value of history is in this way greatly diminished or non-existent.

Subjectivity leads to ideology. Ideology, to put it simply, is to hold history captive to what one embraces as fundamental to one’s political conviction. Communism is an example. For that matter, capitalism can be an ideology if one hold amassing wealth is the highest value for individuals or for a nation. Worldwide economic setback today may not be entirely a bad thing. It makes us to sit up and think whether economic prosperity alone constitutes the well-being of us human beings.

Closely related to subjectivity and ideology is religious faith. We all know that one’s subjective perception of the world in which we live and a certain political ideology that goes along with it can become one’s religious faith almost directly. That is why our globalized world continues to be beset with racism, sexism, “my nation above all” kind of nationalism, and religious exclusiveness. Religious faith tends to obscure and distort interpretation of history. It is at the roots of religious and political conflicts and bloodshed. Has not the Christian Church understood and interpreted the history of Israel subjectively, almost exclusively ideologically and from Christianity-centered religious faith? Is this not the main obstacle when it comes to dialogue with other religions?

How to Read History?

This leads to the main theme of this lecture, that is, how to read history. History consists of stories. I do not know of history, of any history, that is not made up of stories of what has happened. History deals with what has happened and above all is made up of stories of what has happened. Knowing that understanding and interpreting of history is clouded or buried in subjectivity, ideology and religious faith, the first thing we have to do is to untangle history from subjectivity, ideology and religious faith.

How to deliver history from Christians from the “Babylonian captivity”, to use the expression often used by Karl Barth, of subjectivity, ideology and religious faith? This is the main theme we try to address ourselves in this lecture. My suggestion is quite simple: reading history from “behind” and from “underside”. Let me explain what I mean.

First, reading history from “behind” . As has been said, history consists of stories. This is a key point. A history has more than one layer of meaning. As a matter of fact, it has multilayered meanings. To get at multi-layered meanings, one has to get “behind” a story. A story should have many “behind” stories, that is to say, one story is made up of more than one “behind” stories, one “behind” story after another. One has to realize this nature of a story. Not knowing this “behind” nature of a story, the Christian Church has stayed with the surface of biblical stories, believing surface reading is the only possible reading. What can be a more mistaken reading of biblical stories!

A Story has to be read also from “underside” . Early Minjung theologians in Korea emphasized this aspect of reading history, and they were correct. History tends to be interpreted by those who have political and economic power, by those who hold “upside” positions. To know what a story tries to appeal and convey, one has to read it from “underside” , from the sides of the politically suppressed, economically oppressed, racially and gender-wise disadvantaged people. That is to say, reading history from the vantage-point of common people underneath. This way of reading history should be applied to biblical stories as well. Christian Churches tend to read history of Israel from the vantage point of leaders, rulers and “chosen people” . Such reading leads to all sorts of problems. Christianity being the only true religion in the world is one of the problems.

Divine Right to Lead— the Story of the Burning Bush

What has been said have deep and wide implications for our understanding and interpreting of Moses’ leadership before and after the Exodus. Most Christians hold Moses as the supreme leader, God appointed leader, thus a model leader for Christian leadership. We can examine this stereotyped view on Moses’ leadership by citing two stories in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament). First, there is a well-known story of the burning bush in Exodus 3 . Moses was in the desert of Horeb tending his father-in-law’ s sheep. As the story goes, he saw a strange sight: although the bush was on fire, it was not being burned up (3:2). Then he heard a voice saying to him: “Come no nearer; take off your sandals; the place you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob … I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cry against their slave-masters, I have taken heed of their sufferings … Come now; I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall bring my people Israel out of Egypt … ” (3:5-10).

This story has been seen as God’ s calling of Moses to be the leader of the Exodus. But is it as simple and straightforward as that? This story in fact has a “behind” and “underside” story to it. We are told that while Moses was still in Egypt living in the Pharaoh’ s palace, once he tried to arbitrate the conflict between his people in the street. The one of them said to him in protest: “Who set you up as an officer and judge over us? ” (Exodus 2 :13) The man was right, Moses must have thought. He did not have the proper credentials to be a judge over his people in Egypt and to be a leader to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. What he needed was a credential from God. That must have been a chief question while he was herding his father-in-law’ s sheep in the desert of Horeb for forty years. The question almost obsessed him. That must have led to the sight of the burning bush that gave him “the divine right” to be the leader of his beleaguered people in Egypt. The story of the burning bush should be read in the light of the story of the question about his leadership raised by his own people in Egypt. The story of the burning bush confirmed him with “the divine right” to face his people in Egypt and lead them out of Egypt.

The Divine Right to Rule — the Story of the Golden Calf

The story of the golden calf is a very familiar story. Christians understand it as a story of the people of Israel committing idol worship. But is it as simple as that? Does not the story shed some light on how Moses as a leader, conducting his leadership as “the divine right to rule” ?

The story of the golden calf tells us, while Moses was away for a long time, receiving the ten commandments from God on Mount Sinai, leaving his people in a most inhospitable desert. The story goes on to say, during his long absence, the people of Israel obtained Aaron’ s consent and permission to make a golden calf “to go ahead of them” (Exodus 32:1). Coming down from the mountain, Moses saw all this and was enraged. He then took his place at the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the side of the Lord? Come here to me; and the Levites all rallied around him. He then commanded the Levites and said to them, “These are the words of the Lord the God of Israel: Arm yourselves, each of you, with his sword. Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill his brother, his friend, his neighbor.” The Levites obeyed carrying out Moses’ order and about three thousand people died that day at the hand of the Levites (32:26-28). That was a terrible bloodbath! Is this what God commanded Moses to do? Or is this an order from Moses to enforce his leadership as “the divine right to rule” ? We have to think deeply. A similar question can be raised regarding the Massacre at Jericho and Ai (Joshua 7 and 8).

Reading Biblical Stories with a Microscope

What has been said give us another hint of reading Bible stories: projecting Bible stories we usually abhor onto the familiar Bible stories to get at the more or less an entire picture of the familiar stories. If we project the two stories referred to above onto Moses, we would have a second thought about his leadership. To be able to read bible stories in this way, we need to use a microscope to enlarge those stories and look at them in the face. Jesus did just that. He told his audience: it was said a long time ago, but this is what I say to you …

We have to know that the divine right of leadership has had a long history. Most of human history is dominated by political and religious ideology of divine right to rule and lead. It led to feudalism and dictatorship. It is only in the modern age of democracy that divine right to rule and lead was challenged and replaced by democracy in many nations today. Needless to say, when Christians read stories in the Bible, they have to remember that it has been a painful process of humanity to be free from the tyranny of the divine right to rule and lead, feudalism and dictatorship. Moses was both a beneficiary and victim of the Divine Right to rule and lead. In the course of human history, how many revolts and revolutions people have had to wage to be free from divine right to rule, from feudalism and from dictatorship!

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同志社スピリット・ウィーク秋学期
今出川水曜チャペル・アワー「奨励」記録