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# GOD DEFEND NEW ZEALAND: CONTEXTUALIZING OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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It was a normal morning in Manila. Much like many others that I've experienced in my six months so far in the Philippines. I left our flat to walk to the classroom, less than 200 metres away. Without a thought I walked down the concrete path, when suddenly, right in front of me was a huge black snake. It must have been . . . 1 feet long! And it just lay there, staring at me, waiting to make it's move - which could only have happened if there were a strong wind - it was already dead. OK so I don't have any gory snake stories. But I'm not a missionary to a remote jungle tribe. I'm a teacher at Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in a city of 10 million people. There just aren't very many big snakes around.

Instead, my work goes on in the classroom. I teach Old Testament in the classroom. I try to make the Old Testament *live* in the classroom so that my students can go back to their countries and their churches, and make the Old Testament live for their people. I teach Hebrew, and Biblical Interpretation, and Old Testament theology, and the books of the Old Testament.

Actually I don't know how to make the Old Testament live in the countries where my students come from: Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Korea. I've never been to some of these countries and if I had, I wouldn't have enough experience to tell them what to say to their people. So I go to class and we talk about the Old Testament and they tell me a bit about their cultures, and we try to work together to come up with some starting points.

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A Message to the New Zealand District Nazarene World Mission Convention, January 23, 2001.

We have a great text book in Old Testament theology to get us started. It's written by an American, Walter Brueggemann.<sup>1</sup> I wish we had a book like this written by someone from Asia or the Pacific, but there isn't one. And if we have to have a book written by an American then I think this is the best one to have. Brueggemann's book is about 750 pages long and the students don't like that part. But the good thing about it is that it tries to make the Old Testament live for the American context. Brueggemann doesn't think that studying the Bible is very interesting and when you finish you can put it down and get on with your life. He knows that the Bible has to make a difference. And to make a difference it has to be relevant.

And so he traces the history of Old Testament theology. But he doesn't cover the history just out of curiosity, or to show how the study has developed. He covers the history to show that Old Testament theology changes when the context changes. Old Testament theology is different for Germany in the 1930s than it is for America in the 1990s. So Brueggemann analyzes his own context and he identifies the main characteristic of his culture: pluralism. There is a new generation that doesn't believe in absolutes any more. Just look at how Clinton handled the questions at his impeachment trial. He redefined "truth." Many people now consider truth to be very individual: what is true for you may not be true for me. Brueggemann writes his Old Testament theology to address these issues.

In the classroom at APNTS we take this model, and we try to apply it to the different countries that are present. What is the cultural identity of the students? How does Old Testament theology address that context?

The cultures of the Philippines are more group oriented than the individualism of the West. Formal relationships are very important. There are expected patterns of behaviour when dealing with other people. Respect is shown through titles and loyalty. There is a concept called *utang na loob* – a debt of gratitude. It's something like "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." But it goes deeper than that. It's an obligation. It's not voluntary. So some workers will pay their boss a portion of their salary every month out of gratitude for having the job. It's not voluntary. It's expected. It's an expression of loyalty. Filipinos feel they must be loyal to their superiors, even if it hurts them, even if it hurts their family or friends. Loyalty is everything.

So I suggested to my Filipino students that loyalty may be the key for Old Testament theology in the Philippines. Loyalty is very important in the Old Testament. It's not the same as *utang na loob*, but it's very important.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

It's part of the covenant between God and Israel. God will protect his people and be loyal to them, and they must obey him and be loyal to him as their God. The deepest Hebrew word for love is *hesed*. *Hesed* involves loyalty.

I know even less about PNG culture than I do about the Philippines, but when I think about Papua New Guinea, I think of "payback." Payback is the rule of retaliation - an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.<sup>2</sup> It plays out in tribal battles where warriors are often killed. If one tribe loses a warrior, then payback is required. The warriors of the tribe must fight that tribe again until they can kill one of their warriors. And so the cycle continues—an endless cycle of payback. I asked my PNG student about payback. He said that it's not only negative, but also positive. Good is also paid back for good.

But what does payback have to do with Old Testament theology. I suggested to my students that it might be relevant in the context of God's sovereignty. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord. People want to get their revenge, but they need to leave it in God's hands. Old Testament law allows an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but that's not an invitation to payback; it's a limitation of payback. Payback might be relevant for the covenant relationship too. The covenant has blessings and curses. Blessings are for those who are faithful to the covenant with God, and curses are for those who break the covenant. It's like payback, positive and negative. God pays back good to those who love him, and he pays back curses to those who don't. That's an oversimplification of Old Testament theology of course. There are also natural consequences for those who disobey God. In fact, he can't protect those who step outside of his protection and love. And this is only supposed to be a beginning point for making the Old Testament live in Papua New Guinea.

But this is my job. To take the Bible, and help my students see how they can apply it to their own settings. I can't do that for them. I can only make suggestions that might get their thinking started. In the final analysis, they have to make the Bible live in their own contexts.

So I presented these ideas to my Old Testament theology class. I asked them what they thought. They all thought it was very good, of course. How could they disagree, the Filipinos are loyal to their professor and show respect in formal relationships, and the PNG student didn't want any negative payback!

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<sup>2</sup>Some American proverbs reflect a similar principle: "What goes around comes around"; "turn about is fair play."

But I lay awake in bed the night after presenting these ideas, and I began to think. Here I am coming up with suggestions for the Philippines and Papua New Guinea; and I'm trying to get my students to make the Old Testament *live* for their contexts, but I don't have any brilliant ideas about how to relate the Bible in ways that specifically fit my own New Zealand culture. So I began to think about the most important characteristics of New Zealand culture. Buzzy bee and vegemite didn't seem to give any live options. Then I thought of Gallipoli.

I may be wrong, but it seems to me that Gallipoli was a defining moment for New Zealand. When we hear "Gallipoli," we're like a bunch of Texans when someone shouts "Remember the Alamo." During World War I, the British navy dropped ANZAC<sup>3</sup> troops on a small curve of beach under steep cliffs. They were expected to defeat the Turkish positions at the top of the cliffs, the high ground beyond, and the entire Gallipoli peninsula. In the first three days 900 New Zealanders were killed. The final count eight months later was 2700, not to mention thousands wounded.<sup>4</sup> At first the deaths were glorified. These men had made the ultimate sacrifice in war. But more recently it has become clear that those men were sacrificed because they were not British. They were little more than a decoy. Mother England had betrayed her children. Mother England was supposed to defend and protect her colonies—but she did not. Who will defend New Zealand?

Then I think of World War II. The conflict comes much closer to New Zealand. It's not just a European war fought far away, but it is also a Pacific war, and Japan is getting closer: Korea, Manchuria, China, Indo-China—New Zealand must defend its borders. But how can a couple of million people with limited resources defend thousands of miles of coast line? We tried. We built ramparts and battle stations. You can still see them around the bays of Auckland harbor and on Mt. Victoria. The ANZACs were away in the Middle East fighting. It was the territorials—18 year-olds, and World War I veterans who took up the challenge. They "stood guard in slit trenches along the coast armed with ancient weapons, knowing their resistance would be hopeless."<sup>5</sup> We took our barbed wire

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<sup>3</sup>Australia New Zealand Army Corps (a single armed force made up of soldiers from two countries).

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Barnett and Richard Wolfe, *New Zealand! New Zealand! In Praise of Kiviana* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 18.

<sup>5</sup>Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican, 1959), 290.

and a few .303 rifles and went down to the beach to keep the Japanese away.

But how can such an attempt from such a nation defend against the attack of an airforce and navy like that of the Japanese? It was ridiculous. By some twist of fate or Providence, the Japanese advance bypassed Australia and New Zealand and headed east across the Pacific towards Hawaii. Defenseless New Zealand was saved, almost at the last minute.

So what song do you sing when you're crouching in a trench on the beach in 1941 with a .303 rifle. You have ten bullets in your clip and a hundred yards of barbed wire. You're standing there to defend 60 miles of beach against the attack of the Japanese armed forces. What song do you sing in your most vulnerable moment? "God Defend New Zealand."

God of Nations, at thy feet,  
 In the bonds of love we meet,  
 Hear our voices we entreat,  
 God defend our Free Land.  
 Guard Pacific's triple star  
 From the shafts of strife and war,  
 Make her praises heard afar,  
 God defend New Zealand.

Men of every creed and race  
 Gather here before thy face  
 Asking thee to bless this place  
 God defend our Free Land.  
 From dissension, envy, hate  
 And corruption guard our State.  
 Make our country good and great.  
 God defend New Zealand

Peace, not war, shall be our boast.  
 But, should foes assail our coast,  
 Make us then a mighty host.  
 God defend our Free Land.  
 Lord of battles in thy might  
 Put our enemies to flight.  
 Let our cause be just and right.  
 God defend New Zealand

Let our love for thee increase.  
 May thy blessings never cease.  
 Give us plenty, give us peace.  
 God defend our Free Land.  
 From dishonour and from shame  
 Guard our country's spotless name.  
 Crown her with immortal fame.  
 God defend New Zealand

May our mountains ever be  
 Freedom's ramparts on the sea.  
 Make us faithful unto thee.  
 God defend our Free Land.  
 Guide her in the nations' van,  
 Preaching love and truth to man.  
 Working out thy glorious plan.  
 God defend New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

That song was written in 1875, but became New Zealand's national anthem in 1940. 1940 when the Japanese had already invaded northern Indo-China. At that time, more than any other in our history, we were aware that only God could defend us.

So what does all this have to do with Old Testament theology? Perhaps an Old Testament theology for New Zealand would be called "God Defend Israel." It comes back to the covenant relationship again. God made a covenant with Israel and that covenant included national protection and defense. So they sang a kind of national anthem, found in Deuteronomy 26:5b-9:

My ancestor was homeless,  
 an Aramean who went to live in Egypt.  
 There were only a few in his family then,  
 but they became great and powerful,  
 a nation of many people.  
 The Egyptians were cruel and had no pity on us.  
 They mistreated our people and forced us into slavery.  
 We called out for help to you,

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas Bracken, *Saturday Advertiser*, 1875. Adopted as national anthem in 1940 as set to music by John Woods.

the LORD God of our ancestors.  
You heard our cries;  
you knew we were in trouble and abused.  
Then you terrified the Egyptians with your mighty miracles  
and rescued us from Egypt.  
You brought us here and gave us this land  
rich with milk and honey (CEV).

The Israelites were helpless. They were defenseless. They were slaves in Egypt. But God came to their defence. He defended them and freed them and made a covenant with them to protect them always. When they tried to get other nations to defend them, God got upset. He spoke through the prophet Isaiah when Syria and Israel were attacking Jerusalem (Isaiah 7). King Ahaz asked Assyria for help; he asked the king of Assyria to defend him. But that was not God's plan. God wanted to defend Jerusalem himself. He longed to hear that anthem again, sung with meaning, "God Defend Jerusalem." But the anthem was not sung. Instead of singing about how God had rescued them from Egypt, King Ahaz wrote to the king of Assyria and said, "I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me" (2 Kings 16:7, RSV), and because of that, Jerusalem became subject to Assyria.

We live in a very independent and self-sufficient age. But we need God, not only in our national security, but in our church. The Church of the Nazarene in New Zealand needs God. It sounds so obvious, I hope. But sometimes we need a reminder. A focus on God and his power in our hearts and lives is the characteristic of holiness. A focus on God as defender of our nation is characteristic of our culture. Too often we think we can defend our own country and run our own church, but we need God.

We have no military defenders now. Soon after World War II we realized that Britain could no longer defend us. So the ANZUS agreement was signed with America in 1951. Now we don't have ANZUS either. In 1973 Britain joined the EEC and we began to lose our biggest market for lamb. We are on our own now. The Church of the Nazarene, too, has come beyond its dependence on leadership from outside. We don't have any Nazarene missionaries here now. They will not defend us. They will not build the church here.

But we cannot defend ourselves either. Self-sufficiency is not the answer. We do not have the power to bring holiness to this great nation. We must look to God. God defend New Zealand.

I have a tape at home of the hymn “Be Thou My Vision.” I try to play it every day. I play it in the morning with my devotions. For those few minutes I don’t want to study anything, or read anything, or say anything. I just want to focus on God. I want to get my orientation centered on him. When I see my vision, I want to see him.

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art—  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

High King of Heaven, my victory won,  
May I reach heaven’s joys, Bright Heaven’s Sun!  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.<sup>7</sup>

His vision, his church. Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” God defend New Zealand. “On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matt 16:13-20). When Auckland First church was built in 1951, they found volcanic rock, solid rock. They blasted that rock with dynamite to make a foundation for New Zealand’s first Church of the Nazarene. “On this rock I will build my church.” We need a focus on Jesus and his holiness. We need him to give us a vision and a passion for the Church of the Nazarene in this country. It is his church. He will build it. The vision he gives us will be himself—Jesus as Lord. That’s what missions is about. That’s what ministry is about. That’s what the church is about. It’s about Jesus Christ. God defend New Zealand. God defend Aotearoa again.

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<sup>7</sup>Eleanor H. Hull, versification, 1912, of translation by Mary E. Byrne, 1905, of traditional Irish hymn, ca. 8th c. *Sing to the Lord*, 460.