Leaders and People in Biblical Stories

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James A. Fischer CM STL is a noted lecturer in Biblical Studies and the author of numerous books and articles on biblical subjects, including several contributions to the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* published by Liturgical Press. These contributions include commentaries on *The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*. After a lifetime teaching in Seminaries and Theological Colleges James Fischer is employed presently as a campus minister at the University of Arkansas.

In his latest work *Leaders and People in Biblical Stories* Fischer demonstrates how models of leadership have varied throughout Israel and the Church’s history. He uses narrative critical tools to study the stories of noted leaders in both the Old and New Testaments; and asks for a rethinking of the Church’s approach to authority today.

Chapters included in the text are “Paradise-The Logion on Marriage – The People Speak?;” “Moses-The Prophet and Leader;” “Joshua and the Witnessing Stone;” “Samuel, the Prophet of Doom” “David, as the People Saw the Hero;” “The Prophets – Persuaders of the Common People;” “Ezra and the Rain;” “The Canonizing of the Old Testament;” “The Jesus Story at Its Beginning,” “Marcion, the Necessary Heretic,” and “A Postscript on John Henry Cardinal Newman.” Also included is a Preface which the author uses to detail his methodology, the master metaphor to be used in his analysis of the narratives and his purpose for writing the book. He finishes the text with a tightly written conclusion in which the author sums up his findings and asks some very pertinent questions regarding the exercise of authority in the Church for the future.

Fischer begins his work with the story of Alexander Fleming to whom the discovery of Penicillin is now largely attributed and who described himself as an accidental hero (xiii). He uses Fleming’s story as a jumping off point in his exploration of leadership as told through a selection of biblical characters – all men – which have long been honoured as exercising important leadership roles within the faith communities of the Old and New Testament. Fischer contends that a close analysis of their stories reveals that most of these leaders, like Alexander Fleming, accomplished great things almost by accident.

Through the stories of the great heroes of revelation, from Moses to Jesus, he traces how the voice of the whole people played just as important a role in discerning God’s message in controversy, as did the leaders themselves. In his analysis of the various stories he has chosen to illustrate his thesis, he seeks the voice of the people which lies behind the story (2) so as to determine what part ordinary people played in the handing on of the tradition.
While he acknowledges that leaders are readily recognized as the major actors in the narratives, he points out that, while possessing leadership qualities, these leaders are of no use unless they have a people to lead. He also notes that ultimately the silent masses eventually decide whether or not particular leaders actually lead and this principle applies even for those leaders, who were divinely appointed, such as David and Moses. Indeed, Fischer contends that both the leaders and the people had needed one another in order to balance their view of how they were following God’s will. Fischer asks, in conclusion, if this is a helpful way to look at the present situation of the Catholic Church.

In the last two chapters of the text, Fischer extends his analyses of conflict and tension between leaders and voice of the people to Marcion, a self-proclaimed leader in the early centuries of the Christian Church and now remembered as a heretic; and to Henry John Cardinal Newman a more modern leader in the Catholic Church closer to our own times. Fischer is able to draw on Newman’s large body of extant writings to carry out his analysis.

Fischer sees Marcion’s attempt to establish a canon of Scripture, which excluded the Old Testament and many of the Gospels and other Christian writings of the time, as finally rejected by the voice of the laity. It was Marcion’s proposal that encouraged both Justin Martyr and Tertullian to appeal to the people whose voice prevailed (117). Fischer thus demonstrates that neither the people nor their leaders acted alone to respond to Marcion. Indeed it was Marcion’s flawed proposal that acted as a catalyst for change (111).

Likewise he notes how John Newman was inspired by the example of the laity, whose voice dominated in the Arian controversy of early Christianity rather than those of the Church leaders. It was many of the latter, who actually became Arian Christians, while most of the laity did not. He also notes Newman’s championing of the right of the people to be consulted in the development of official Church teaching. While this proposal of Newman was not widely accepted by the hierarchy of the time, it remained a consistent theme throughout his writings and lead to his own developed understanding of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the ecclesia docens and the ecclesia discerns (135).

The outcomes of Fischer’s analysis of the stories he cites on the relationship between leaders and people are found in the conclusion of the work. Here he argues persuasively that this relationship has always been described in terms of tension and conflict. Indeed, he sees conflict as a necessary rule of life between leaders and those whom they lead. However, rather than a cause for concern, he finds that conflict truly emerges as the essential catalyst of growth in the community of the people” (140). As Fischer states earlier in the work, the outcome of conflict is not conquest, but maturity, "The goal is not to solve all of life’s problems, but to learn to live comfortably ‘with doubt that lies on the fringes of our certitudes’ (93).

His analysis has also shown him that leaders and people have never had a static relationship, for sometimes leaders determined the direction the community took and at other times the people made this decision (140). Indeed, he demonstrates that the people themselves have on many occasions exercised leadership in more subtle ways than their leaders. It was this more dynamic relationship between leaders and people that accounts,
as Fischer suggests, for the variety of leadership models in the long histories of both Israel and the Church.

While he concludes that all those leaders, whose stories have been told, proved to be both competent and incompetent leaders, he also discovered that the most admirable and successful ones were those who depended on dialogue and persuasion (149). This particular finding encourages Fischer to suggest some ways forward to new ways of envisioning authority structures in the Church, which promotes unity in diversity and manifest the lived experience of being the people of God, who cannot fail in matters of faith (144-151).

The reader of this work gathers a lot of valuable information as the stories are told including brief descriptions of various biblical interpretations, methodologies and accompanying modelling of how to apply these. Throughout the work, the author draws heavily on the insights of modern biblical scholarship, the documents of Vatican Council II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Each of the chapters is fairly short and End Notes appear conveniently at the end of each chapter. This factor together with the author’s natural ability as a skilled teacher, to express complex material with an amazing clarity of expression makes for easy and enjoyable reading. End notes also provide the reader with a wealth of further scholarly material on the topics discussed in the chapter which can be used for further research and discussion.

This is a small but significant work which uses biblical narrative as a lens for exploring authority in the Church today and one well suited for a general audience. As chapters are fairly short it would also serve as suitable text for either individual or groups involved in Biblical studies and a source for lively discussion and debated for all those interested in envisioning new ways of exercising authority in the Church for the 21st Century.

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