# Anarchist Threads in Scripture

**A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 3**

Mark Van Steenwyk

2011

# Contents

For most Christians, there is one big reason for rejecting anarchism: it isn't biblical. Or is it? A superficial reading of the Bible reveals a God who thinks of himself as a sort of Warrior King, who sanctions state-enacted genocide, and who promotes a string of saintly kings, like King David. When Jesus arrives, it is to start a Kingdom of God that, apparently, seems content to co-exist with early rulership. In fact, Jesus himself says to "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" and Paul advocates being good subjects to the governing authorities. Therefore, Christian Anarchism is a contradiction in terms, right?

Furthermore, the sorts of ideas many Christian Anarchists hold are also glaringly unbiblical. Like nonviolence (after all, many biblical heroes were prolific smiters). Like communism (after all, certain patriarchs were "blessed" with vast property–which they didn't share equally with all). Like egalitarianism (after all, Paul tends to affirm male leadership, Jesus praises a Centurion who holds a position of authority, etc.). The Bible is the enemy of anarchism. Right?

I don't think so. While it is outside the scope of a single article to tackle every challenge that traditional readers of Scripture advance against anarchism, I would at least like to offer a sort of overview that can serve as a simple lens for seeing Scripture differently. I'll try to provide links to other resources for those of you who'd like to dig deeper. To really address the myriad of issues that emerge from an anarchic reading of Scripture, one would probably better be served with a commentary series. What I'm offering here is a super simple overview, not a complete survey. If any Bible scholars out there want to publish an Anarchist Bible Commentary Series, I would not only be happy to buy a set, but also would have great ideas for who should contribute.

## Hebrew Scriptures

Let's start at the beginning. One can easily read Genesis as an anti-civilizational text. After all, it tells the story of humans living in harmony with nature. The first act of violence is committed by the agriculturalist (Cain) rather than the nomadic herdsman (Abel). As we know, agriculture emerges with the advent of civilization. This murderer is the person who establishes the first city. Later, as humanity "progresses" all sorts of crazy things happen, like when human population spikes, the "sons of elohim" have sex with women, people become increasingly wicked, and God sends a flood to reboot creation. Later, folks gather to build a huge tower that reaches to the heavens; God scatters the people. For the most part, Genesis is remarkably negative about the civilizational project and its subsequent imperializing tendencies.

As Ched Myers suggests, "in the 'primeval history' of Gen 1–11 Israel's sages—redacting older sources and probably writing in the aftermath of the failed monarchy—also attempt to explain [the rupture from primal life]. Eden can be interpreted as a mythic memory of the old symbiotic lifeways: humans, creatures and God dwell intimately and richly together (Gen 2)."[1] When paradise is lost, humans are relegated to hard agricultureal toil, the first city is attributed to murder, God has to drown the earth to knock back the evils of civilization.

"The "Fall" in Gen 1–11, then, is not so much a cosmic moment of moral failure as a progressive 'history' of decline into civilization—exactly contrary to the myth of Progress…The biblical primeval history thus should be considered not only as "mythic memory," but also as perhaps

[1] read more of Ched's thoughts on the "Fall" here: http://www.chedmyers.org/system/files/The%20Fall%20-%20Anarcho%20Primitivism%20%2526%20the%20Bible.pdf

the first literature of resistance to the grand project of civilization—rightly warning against its social pathologies and ecocidal consequences."[2]

The rest of Genesis follows the story of the first patriarchs, who YHWH has called out to become a people who will follow YHWH into a promised land. Throughout Geneis, trouble happens when the Jews favorably interact with imperial powers or try to settle too soon. It should be pointed out that, while the patriarchs had lots of possessions, it is a stretch to put modern notions of property rights upon them. Pre-agricultural nomadic peoples were tribal. While they certainly weren't egalitarian (at least in this case) their understanding of ownership was certainly more communal. The wealth of the tribe or clan or family was for the benefit of all. And, it would seem, that God's vision for Jubilee would push that even further.

Exodus tells the story of a people enslaved by the Egyptian empire and how YHWH delivers them. You know the story–YHWH is revealed to Moses in the burning bush and calls him to lead the Israelites out of slavery into a Promised Land. Of course, once they are liberated, the people grumble and complain–desiring a return to Egypt instead of the long journey in the wilderness. As a result of their grumbling, YHWH keeps them in the wilderness for forty years. Moses passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua–a sort of military hero who engages in war against the indigenous peoples of Canaan. The people successfully settle and are attacked by their neighbors, leading YHWH to raise up "judges" to lead the people in combat against the adversaries of Israel.

YHWH sets up a brilliant economic and political reality, which will follow Jubilee economic practices (for more on that go here and here) and, instead of having a centralized government, there is temporary leadership as need arises. Instead of a king, God dwells among them–direct rule, not a rule by king or priests. For example, one of the leaders who emerges, Gideon, tells the people "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you."[3] Unfortuantely, Gideon's offspring attempt to set up a sort of dynasty.

The people keep complaining for a king, and eventually YHWH relents. Saul–who fits the people's idea of a king–sucks. He dies in battle and David (after some oft-told bible stories happen), becomes king. The kingdom splits during the time of David's grandson. As things continue, some of the kings please YHWH, but others of them suck, leading to the eventual demise and captivity of both the northern and southern kingdoms.

This story–from Exodus to the monarchy–seems pretty simple. However, there is more going on than what we remember from Sunday school. As Wes Howard-Brook writes, "As it stands in its canonical order, the story conveys a relatively (and deceivingly) simple message: the shift from a twelve tribe confederacy under YHWH's rule to a human monarchy 'like the nations' (1 Sam. 8:5) was a disastrous betrayal of the unique status of Israel as YHWH's 'chosen people'…Israel 'converted' from the religion of creation to the religion of empire, with predictable results."[4]

It is important to highlight some of what makes this a "deceivingly" simple message. Wes' book (which I cannot recommend enough) delves into the complexity and foolishness of assuming that the reign of David with worship centralized in a Temple in Zion should ever be considered a golden age or ideal. There is, according to Howard-Brook, a tension (or out-right contradiction) between the pro-monarchic "'Zion theology' that placed YHWH in the Jerusalem temple" where Solomon "could be understood as truly empowered by YHWH with 'wisdom'"

[2] From Ched Myers article "the Fall" in The Encyclopdia of Religion and Nature

[3] Judges 8:23

[4] from Come Out My People, p. 95

and the prophetic "Sinai theology" where "Solomon's 'experience' can be written off as either wishful thinking or simply as propaganda."[5] In other words, the Hebrew Scriptures present a sort of argument between the religion of Empire (where a faithful, powerful, secure, wealthy and vast nation is centralized in Jerusalem, where the YHWH's temple and king dwell) and Creation (where a faithful people live in Jubilee, encounter YHWH in creation and amidst people, and live as kin without an earthly ruler).

As we read through the prophets, when God speaks, it is usually through a prophet who challenges the king's power and who stands outside of the machines of the state. So much could be said here. But it is astonishing how much the prophets link idolatry and exploitation of the poor. The prophets, it would seem, still hold God's jubilee vision in their imaginations.

One of my favorite proto-anarchist sections from the Hebrew Scriptures is Ezekiel 34. God judges the "shepherds" or rulers of Israel, essentially striking them down to become the people's sole Shepherd. Incidentally, this may be the passage that Jesus had in mind in his "sheeps and goats" story in Matthew 25. Here's a choice quote:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice…[6]

## The New Testament

The New Testament is, for the most part, much more straight-forward to read anarchisticly. There are probably several reasons for this. First of all, the authors were writing in the context of occupation. And the King of the land was a stooge of the occupying forces. Folks aren't going to have much nice to say about rulership in that sort of context.

Secondly, Jesus' claim to the throne of David was strange. It simply didn't follow the typical king narrative. That makes it hard to know how to relate his "reign" with other sorts of reigns. One is left either saying that the risen Christ supports their particular rule–or rules through them, that spirituality is separate from politics (in some way), or that Jesus' reign is itself–without mediation through other rulers–both spiritual and political. If you choose the last option, you are getting close to Christian Anarchism.

Thirdly, the New Testament was written over a relatively short period of time. We should give the Hebrew Scriptures credit for covering so many contexts over a longer period of time. It doesn't take long for Christian writers to start speaking favorably of Rome or hierarchy or accumulated personal wealth. But, for some reason, the early Christian writers didn't think highly of such things.

Let's jump right into the origin story. Luke tells the story of Jesus birth. Jesus mom, while Jesus was still in the womb, said the following words while filled with the Spirit:

> [God] has shown strength with [God's] arm;
> [God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
> [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
> and lifted up the lowly;

[5] ibid., p. 132

[6] Ezekiel 34:15–16

> [God] has filled the hungry with good things,
> and sent the rich away empty.[7]

Jesus grows up. He starts his ministry and is tempted by the devil in the wilderness.[8] The temptation of Jesus by the devil reveals the manner in which Jesus understands his authority. There is almost no similarity between how Jesus conceives his own authority and the way kings so. Jesus is an un-king. He is tempted politically, economically, and religiously to assert his messiah-ship. But he refuses. The temptation isn't so much that Jesus shouldn't receive policial, economic, and religious power from the devil instead of God. Rather, the temptation is about the sort of Kingdom Jesus should pursue. Jesus is the un-king.

Later in Luke 4, right after his trial and baptism (so much more could be said about this!), Jesus goes to his home town and (of Nazareth) and gives a political manifesto of liberation for the poor and oppressed, essentially announcing his messiah-ship and the coming of Jubilee. Unfortunately for some insurrectionary anarchists, Jesus seems to be willing to include oppressors in the kingdom. Which is why his hometown folks–who must certainly have known him well–try to kill him. I often wonder if any of these folks had baby-sat him. After all, many assume Mary ended up being a single mother at some point. When was the last time your babysitter tried to kill YOU?

Just to jump ahead a bit, in Luke 17:21 Jesus quotes Leo Tolstoy: "The kingdom of God is within you" (or among you). In the context, it seems to be a way of suggesting that the kingdom of God isn't a place, a demonstrative regime change, or a clear event. Rather it is here. Now.

Later, when Jesus heard his friends arguing amongst themselves the pecking-order in this kingdom,[9] he tells them: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." This COULD be about organizational "servant-leadership" of the sort that John Maxwell encourages. But it is likely that Jesus is asking his friends to rethink their entire way of thinking about socio-political realities. I'll let you decide.

Before I move on from Luke…the next time you read his Gospel, try to read it through the lens of Jubilee, where the ones who have accumulated have to give up and the ones who have lost receive. The whole of Luke's Gospel (and Acts) is so Jubilee laden that reading it aloud to bankers has the same effect as sunlight on vampires.

In Luke, Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell everything and give it to the poor.[10] He says the same thing to his disciples, by the way.[11]

In case you think only Luke is quotable for anarchists, the Gospel of John is also pretty juicy. For example, Jesus calls Satan the "prince of the world" which is likely a way of referring to the Roman Empire.[12]

In John 18:36, in a conversation with Pilate, we learn that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. Actually, it is perhaps better translated as "not from this world." Usually, this is interpreted as

[7] Luke 1:51–53

[8] Luke 4

[9] Luke 22:25–26

[10] see Luke 18:18–30 or Mark 10:17–31

[11] Luke 12:13–34 is one of the most compelling economic passages in the entire Bible.

[12] see John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11

saying that Jesus' kingdom is spiritual or heavenly. However, the way such dualistic language worked in that time makes such a meaning unlikely. Rather, Jesus is saying his kingdom is different. It is something entirely new. It is a gift from God–it comes from God.

Moving ahead to after the resurrection, we read of an account of civil disobedience in Acts 5. When ordered by authorities to stop their teaching, they answer: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Here's what most people hear when they read that: "We must obey God rather than any human authority in those rare circumstances where there is a clear and obvious contradiction between what the law says and God says, since God's laws trump human laws." I'm not so sure. If you believed that your messiah was a socio-political/religious un-king who died and then rose from the dead (and then mystically poured his Spirit out upon you), then you might simply mean "we must obey God, not any human authority."

This makes sense of how the early church practiced community. They were encouraged, among other things, to work out their issues internally rather than appealing to the courts.[13] In Romans 12, Paul argues that his friends in Rome should "not be conformed to this world [read: empire], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." This is, again, often read as a call to be spiritual or heavenly minded. But, given the larger context, it would perhaps best be understood as a challenge to stop being so Roman-ish and, instead, pursue the way of love.

"But Mark, I don't see the word 'empire' anywhere in Scripture. Why are you leftists always going on about 'empire?!' Well. Here's the thing. The early church was sneaky. They didn't want to sound overtly treasonous. So usually we have to try to inhabit their context with our imaginations to see Rome as they saw it. And no writing is as anti-imperial as, perhaps, John's Revelation. Read Revelation 13, 14, and 17 for a not-so subtle picture of oppressive Rome.

## But What About…?

Yeah. I know. There are still a lot of open questions. The comments below would be a good place to raise them. But, for now, I'll just address the two most commonly raised passages against Christian Anarchism.

The first is Romans 13, where we're told to "submit to the governing authorities:"

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.[14]

I've written about this briefly before. But there are several things that one must keep in mind:

[13] 1 Corinthians 6:1–6

[14] Romans 13:1–7, NRSV

1) This passage occurs immediately after Romans 12, where Paul challenges his readers to bless persecuters, live peaceably, never avenge, feed enemies, and overcome evil with good. By clear implication, the "governing authorities" are persecuting enemies whose evil needs to be overcome with good. Given that Paul is likely drawing directly from Jesus' teachings, it may be best to interpret the the call to "be subject" as an application of the call to "turn the other cheek." It is not about obedience or citizenship.

2) Jacques Ellul suggests "The passage thus counsels nonrevolution, but in so doing, by that very fact, it also teaches the intrinsic nonlegitimacy of institutions."[15] In other words, the very fact that Paul has to argue, in light of enemy-love, that the people forsake revolt reveals that the "governing authorities" are, in some sense, worthy of revolt. Just like Jesus' call to turn the other cheek recognize that, under normal circumstances, one would hit back.

3) John Howard Yoder (and others) have (rightly) challenged translating the Greek word tasso as "instituted." Rather, one could make the case that the authorities are "restrained" by God. Paul could be advising them not to revolt since God is currently restraining the rulers.[16]

4) Because of translations, we don't often recognize that Paul's language of the "powers" isn't simply referring to "demons." His language blurs our categories between political and spiritual.

5) It is a mistake to take this as a universal message of how Christians everywhere ought to relate to government. Wes Howard-Brook states: "We can say, though, that whatever Paul meant to convey to the Christians at Rome in the 50s, it was not a general principle of subservience to imperial authority…we've seen how Paul's letters regularly insist on attributing to Jesus titles and authority that his audience would certainly have heard as 'plagiarized' from Roman sources…The most likely explanation of Romans 13 is that it was a message addressed to specific concerns of Roman Christians under Nero."[17]

And so, from Paul's perspective, the Christians in Rome in the 50s should not revolt. Rather, they should love their oppressors and leave wrath to God. This isn't because the government is good, but because we are called to the way of love. Furthermore, God has restrained the wicked government and will judge it.

Much more could be said about what such wisdom means for us. At the very least, it encourages us to trust God, love our enemies, and (I believe) leaves room for nonviolent struggle.

Tied for the most referenced anti-anarchy passage is Mark 12:13–17:

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

I could say a lot about this passage (and have written a lot…go here for one example). Clearly they were trying to trap Jesus to either denounce Rome publicly or affirm Roman occupation.

[15] Jacques Ellul, Anarchy and Christianity, p. 88

[16] see John Howard Yoder's the Politics of Jesus

[17] Howard-Brook, p. 464

The fact that Herodians and Pharisees are working together against Jesus is essentially the same as when, in old Tom and Jerry episodes, Tom and Jerry teamed up against a common foe. Ok, it isn't the same; it is far worse. But you get my point. But what is remarkable about this passage isn't so much that Jesus is clever. But in the implications of his statement.

Are the implications that we should be Augustinian, creating a distinction between church and state? Or even separating them into two separate kingdoms with different claims as Luther advocated (for more on the "two kingdoms" view go here)? No. This is a very smart slap against Caesar without simply denouncing Caesar. By pointing to their coin (no good Jew should have a graven image like a coin in their pocket to begin with), Jesus is exposing idolatry and saying that such things belong to Caesar already, not God. If you've got any Caesar-stuff, it should be rendered accordingly. But what is God's belongs to God. Or, to quote Dorothy Day, "If we rendered unto God all the things that belong to God, there would be nothing left for Caesar."

Lest you think that such approaches to scripture are a recent innovation, I direct you to Irenaeus. Irenaeus was a 2nd Century bishop in the fringes of the Empire in Lugdunum, Gaul. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. In other words, he was removed from Jesus by two generations and was a friend of a friend of Jesus:

"The Lord himself directed us to 'render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's,' naming Caesar as Caesar, but confessing God as God. In like manner also, that which says, ' You cannot serve two master,' he does himself interpret, saying 'You cannot serve God and mammon,' acknowledging God as God, but mentioning mammon, a thing also having an existence. He does not call mammon Lord when he says, 'You cannot serve two masters,' but he teaches his disciples who serve God, not to be subject to mammon nor to be ruled by it…"[18]

In other words, it would seem Irenaeus believes that the thing we should render Caesar is our renunciation. Caesar's lordship is comparable to that of mammon. He is only your lord if you are his slave.

[18] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.8.1

Mark Van Steenwyk
Anarchist Threads in Scripture
A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 3
2011

Retrieved on March 26, 2025 from https://www.jesusradicals.com/blog-archives-2005—2017/anarchist-threads-in-scripture-a-primer-on-christian-anarchism-part-3

**usa.anarchistlibraries.net**