

Book Review

Biblical and Theological Insights from Ancient and Modern Civil Law,
George Wesley Buchanan, Edwin Mellen Press, Box 450, Lewiston,
NY 14092, 1992, 180 pp., \$29.95 (payment by credit card only)

Professor Buchanan's stated purpose is to illuminate the Bible. He writes from a very extensive background in Jewish studies and shares the excitement of one who has "gained insights that clarified biblical concepts I had never understood adequately" (p. iii). Writing in a style suited to both professional scholar and layman, Buchanan helps to lift the fog from a number of key biblical concepts. These involve terms such as "born again," "apostle," and "covenant," which, he argues, have too long remained unclear to Bible readers. They are in fact legal terms to which we can all relate. Hitherto, however, they have belonged to the specialized vocabulary of theology. Their appropriation by theology has often made the religion of the Bible mystical and divorced it from real life.

Every chapter sparkles with insights. Fascinating parallels are drawn between the courtroom and the biblical language of prayer and worship. Even the structure of churches and courtrooms shows the likeness of the world of law to that of theology. Indeed, the whole plan of God in the Bible appears as a divine legal procedure in which the wicked world is arraigned before the Creator. Terms such as "salvation" belong to the thought-world of jurisprudence as does "covenant," which comes to life when properly rendered "contract." Particularly valuable are Buchanan's observations about Hebrew eschatology, which has such a powerful influence on the New Testament gospel. God has promised Israel a renewed "marriage" contract by which she will be restored to the land. Christians are invited to receive the blessings of that same contract and there will be a time—the day of the Lord—when a trial will investigate how well we have followed the terms of the contract. The Torah is really a written constitution outlining the duties of those who respond to the divine contract.

The significance of Buchanan's findings for New Testament theology is far-reaching. To be "born again" is to receive a new citizenship, to start

life all over again as a member of the new Israel. For me Buchanan's most exciting chapter was the one devoted to a discussion of legal agency, especially as this idea clarifies the relationship of Jesus to the Father. It becomes clear that a large amount of theological debris will have to be swept away before we can grasp the message of John's Christology. John pictures Jesus, Buchanan argues convincingly, as a human person fully empowered to represent his Principal. Jesus "is" God, legally speaking, since he always speaks for God. But John never intended to say that Jesus is God ontologically as later creeds taught. As God's authorized official, Jesus is the ultimate "apostle" or ambassador. This is exactly what Jesus asserted when he declared himself to be "one" with the Father. It was oneness of the same order as the ideal demanded of the ancient judges of Israel. However, Jesus succeeded as the perfect agent where the officials of Israel had failed. The "divinity" of Jesus is his status as legal agent of God. By this definition his real humanity is not obscured as it was when Greek philosophy attempted to explain John's Jesus as the second member of a Trinity.

Buchanan's work should be required reading for all seminary students as well as every informed layman. His rich fund of knowledge is drawn from years of investigation into the background of the Bible. Precisely this sort of illumination of the sacred text is required to rescue the Bible from the anti-Hebraic prejudice which for so long has made it a difficult book for so many. Buchanan's style is lucid and his writing is never dull. The reader may not agree with all Buchanan's conclusions, but he will find himself reading the Bible in a brilliant new light.

Anthony F. Buzzard