No empire, no Bible?
Aspects of the relationship between biblical texts
and current anti-empire views

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Abstract
In both popular and academic writing recently on Christianity
and the historical and contemporary phenomenon of imperial-
ism, a strong current of negative sentiment is to be found on
the latter. Such sentiments are both understandable and valid,
but as a generalised outlook on the phenomenon of empire, it is
too simplistic: an overview of examples from the Bible, one of
the most important constituent elements of the Christian
missiological dynamic, illustrates a more nuanced view. This is
done by indicating four examples from recent Old Testament
research:

• Nuances of Prophetic reactions to empires
• Pro-empire stances in the Historical Books
• Associating with the powerless for the own sake
• Textual reception of imperial decrees

These four aspects caution towards, on the one hand, appro-
priating the Bible too simplistically in favour of a cause and, on
the other hand, judging the empire phenomenon too one-sided-
ly. The entirely valid enterprise of exposing the vagaries of
empire, in the search for ways of sociopolitical organisation of
societies more aligned to traditional Christian values of peace
and love, will be better served by such more sensitive valua-
tions.

Empires a-falling and arising

The 20th century may well be characterised as a century of isms, since it had
indeed been the time slot in human history in which the most concurrent
political ideologies had led to the death of the greatest number of people (cf.
Leitenberg 2006). With the related two World Wars having coloured the first
half of the previous century, and with the Cold War colouring global politics
in the second half of that century, it is little wonder that Fukuyama (1992) could, albeit controversially, refer to the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall as the “end of history”, since the collapse of communism would now, in that view, lead to liberal democracy being settled on as the crown achievement of human politics. In each geopolitical arena of the world, these events had distinctive effects. On the African continent, for instance, the World and Cold Wars were mixed into the remains of the previous centuries’ colonialisms, the rise of African socialist democracies, and various expressions of tribalism, with in South Africa a unique outflow of these combined political expressions finding form in the apartheid ideology and state (cf. e.g. Beck 2000:59–190).

Clearly, the year 1989 marks a swivel in the geopolitical power balances of the globe, but not the end of competing ideologies and accompanying possibilities for political empires. Whereas the notional-geographic East Block versus West Block, or – by ideological identification – communism versus capitalism divide of the 20th century lives on in its after-effects, the subsequent two decades post-1989 have seen potential 21st century world powers slowly building in various economic, military and political ways their respective profiles on the international scene. The single remaining reference point from the ideological-political contestation of what Luce (1941:61) had called “the American century”, the 1900s, remains, indeed, the United States of America. Its status as predominant superpower has however over recent years been, and still is being, challenged from three sources: militarily, by extremist Islam, mostly located in the Arabian peninsula; economically, politically and demographically, by China; and technologically and demographically, by India. These will be the primary weights tipping the moveable scales of international dominance over the coming decades, with Europe remaining an important, and probably stabilising, factor in global economics, law and diplomacy, as well as militarily, with the combined so-called BRICS countries to a large extent defining their own collective economic role within global context (probably as economic growth power; possibly as political enfant terrible; perhaps as merely a historical

1 Cf. e.g. Koschorke 2009 on specifically church affairs.
2 By empire I mean, following eg Twaddle 2005:71–74 and Doyle 1986:30–48, the direct control or strong indirect involvement, either through physical presence or at a distance, by means of military or economic or other power, of rulers from one sovereign power over the now subordinated people of another, and though at times so, both historically and conceptually not necessarily related to either colonialism or capitalism. Although difficult to define with precision, empire may be understood as territorial expansion by a stronger power and by means of different kinds of force, which works to its benefit yet alters its own self-understanding in different ways, and is as such an ancient yet still continuing phenomenon, in which those who had once been suppressed by such an overlord are by no means immune to themselves becoming an empire – Colley 2006:367–382.
3 These are: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; cf. Wilson & Parushothaman 2003:1–23; Cornelissen 2010:3008–3025; Flemes 2009:401–421.
No empire, no Bible? Aspects of the relationship between ...

also-ran), also giving Brazil, Russia, and South Africa additional political influence, though, via the two remaining BRICS countries, India and China.

It is clear that the presence of empire as a major force in local life, wherever that local life is, and in whichever new forms imperialism manifests itself (cf. e.g. Nkrumah 1965), will remain as strongly with us in future as it had been in the past (Twaddle 2005:74), though hopefully in a less tragic way, in what may hopefully be “a better century” (Lombaard 2001:86).

Because of the very negative impact empires had had on those subjected to their harsher sides, missiologists, having during the 19th and 20th centuries moved away from earlier narrowly pietistic tendencies to include broader societal developments in critical analyses (cf. Bosch 1992:8–11, 222–230, 255–260, 438–447) – often on the basis of class analyses in Marxist-like mode, though springing more directly from biblical-inspired sentiments of care for the powerless – have tended to be highly critical of this phenomenon. However, a different kind of “end of history” than Fukoyama’s 1992 work and a different kind of revolution than Marxists’, have perhaps been most foundational to this work of missiologists, which can be summarised in the words with which Schweizer (2010 [1910/1931]:368–369, emphases added) formulated the Jesus event:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.

From such a motivation from faith which concerns itself thoroughly with the well-being of the world, “empire” understandably elicits among missiologists first of all a negative reaction, up to our time, both in academic (e.g. Botha 2008) and in popular (e.g. Niles 2008) milieux. Clearly not all missiological writings that touch on empire are subject to this; the knee-jerk negative reaction however remains more popular. This may be paraphrased, in Weberian ideal-typical fashion, as consisting of an underlying assumption that empire is an exclusively negative force in history, from which came only bad; that Christian missionaries in colonised territories had been either usurped by or were purposively colluding with the empire project, with the
implication that they ought to have known better and acted differently; and the theological value judgement that both God and, therefore, the Scriptures would find such activities unjust – to name just some of the aspects relevant to the most visible reaction to the phenomenon of empire from missiological circles. Although a critical attitude towards all powers that be (or that were) is by no means itself to be judged negatively (on such a positive subversiveness, see Lombaard 2011a), what ought perhaps to be guarded against is what may easily become a one-sidedly negative evaluation of the phenomenon of empire. The question must be asked: with all the bad, was and is there no good?

As a case in point, further to develop this line of inquiry, we may take one of the most basic impulses (among many others, equally important) towards missiological Christianity as we now know it (cf. Bosch 1992:16–24, 56–178), namely the collection of the Holy Scriptures accepted as the Bible. The Bible provides us with an example of something which, to a substantial extent, would not have existed, and with the remainder that would have been something quite different, had it not been for the dynamic of empire that had in various ways historically contributed to this collection of writings coming into being.

Acknowledging the effects of the phenomenon of empire on the creation of the biblical texts of course in no way exonerates empires, either those directly concerned with the coming into being of biblical texts or any others, from the negative effects imperial rule had had for those subjected to them. In no way can the Christian ethic ignore such undesirable matters. However, acknowledging that also valuable impulses arise from such circumstances leads us to more nuanced, more careful appraisals of what the phenomenon of empire has historically meant for and contributed to cultures under their yoke and, later, to cultures in their wake.

The Bible and empire

It is common cause among Old Testament scholars that to read through the Hebrew canon of the Bible is to encounter a range of empires that dramatically influenced the ancient Near East, the birth area of the three monotheistic world religions of our time. Through the Bible, persistent ideas and museums, these ancient influential empires still impact on modern cultures, which receive their ideas, albeit in mediated form. These empires include the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic geographical and cultural expanses, with the latter being replaced shortly before the New Testament era with the Roman empire – and that is just to keep to the

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4 Cf. Lombaard 2011b:74–76, however, for an overview of the instability of the concept of biblical canon, without forfeiting the normativity associated with the Scriptures.
No empire, no Bible? Aspects of the relationship between ...  5

major military and political forces of those millennia. This shared understanding among Old Testament scholars goes back to many sources, including the most influential Old Testament scholar of the previous century, Gerhard von Rad (cf. e.g. Le Roux 2002), who had also remarked on it.

This innocent remark on the ancient empires under the influence of which the people of Israel lived, already creates the expectation that at least some of what we find in the texts of the Old Testament must reflect these circumstances. Such an anticipation can easily be confirmed by an almost bewildering variety of impulses from these empires and reactions to such impulses encountered from the compositional history of the Bible. From these possibilities, for the moment, only four are briefly indicated below, and only from the Hebrew section of the Bible, for illustrative purposes. In addition, the emphasis here is on those processes where the dynamic of empire can be seen to have had certain positive outcomes for the Bible. This emphasis not intended to overlook or to diminish the negative evaluations of empire in the Bible: indeed, those are better known, and will certainly remain so. Rather, the intention here is to indicate that there is another side too. The four interactions between empire and Bible-in-development which indicate such alternate aspects of the relationship between biblical texts and empire are:

- Nuances of Prophetic reactions to empires
- Pro-empire stances in the Historical Books
- Associating with the powerless for their own sake
- Textual reception of imperial decrees

Nuances of Prophetic reactions to empires

Among the books most referred to by biblical interpreters with a special concern for the disempowered, because of their explicit emphases in favour of such groups, are Amos (cf. e.g. Polley 1989) and Luke (cf. e.g. Scheffler 1993). Keeping for our purposes here to the Old Testament: Amos, a highly complex text with a developmental history in its own right (Lombaard 2005:152–159) yet with a pivotal role in the composition of the greater Hebrew Bible (Lombaard 2010:#408), finds its high point of “speaking truth to power”\(^5\) in chapter 7, particularly in the Amos words in verses 14–15 (New Jerusalem Bible; italics added):

\(^{10}\) Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, then sent word to Jeroboam, king of Israel as follows, “Amos is plotting

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\(^{5}\) This phrase was coined by the American Friends Service Committee 1955, and has since become a prominent slogan for the protection of human rights; cf. e.g. Cuomo 2000.
against you in the heart of the House of Israel; the country cannot tolerate his speeches.”

11 For this is what Amos says, “Jeroboam is going to die by the sword, and Israel will go into captivity far from its native land.”

12 To Amos himself Amaziah said, “Go away, see, take yourself off to Judah, earn your living there, and there you can prophesy!”

13 “But never again will you prophesy at Bethel, for this is a royal sanctuary, a national temple.”

14 “I am not a prophet”, Amos replied to Amaziah, “nor do I belong to a prophetic brotherhood. I am merely a herdsman and dresser of sycamore-figs.”

15 But Yahweh took me as I followed the flock, and Yahweh said to me, “Go and prophesy to my people Israel.”

In the Amos words here the power complex of state and religion, in the persons of king and court prophet, are addressed directly. By disavowing for himself any official, bureaucratic support as was the case with Amaziah, prophet to the ruler of the Northern kingdom of Israel, the lay Southerner Amos from the allied yet separate state of Judah finds the legitimacy of his calling to speak up on behalf of the abused poor directly in his appointment to the task by Yahweh (cf. e.g. Pfeifer 1995:75–76).

Up to this point, such a scenario holds promise for the theme of this volume, namely the problem of empire and missiology. However, no clear theological message on empire, as the concept is outlined in footnote 2 above, is in reality to be had from this text, for three reasons:

• Clearly, the issue under discussion in the Amos book is not the legitimacy of the right to rule in a certain area nor, accompanying that matter, the exercise of power across state lines, as would be the case with imperialism, but the abuse of power by a government over against its own citizens. Though – in modern parlance – an issue of human rights abuse (Lombaard 2011b:79–80), and a very Jerusalemite one at that (though dated slightly later; cf. Otto 2009:77–107) is reflected here in Amos, imperialism is not under attack. In fact, the very “words against the nations” (Amos 1:2–2:3), the famous stylistic device with which the book of Amos builds up to the point of accusing Amos’s intended audience themselves of wrongdoing (cf. e.g. Soggin 1987:31–52), accepts without ethical question and, moreover, relies rhetorically on the existence of various territories which had at times indeed threatened the security of Israel-Judah.
• The mid-8th century BCE relationship between the Northern and Southern states in the Israel-Judah alliance (cf. Miller & Hayes 1986:312) is by no means called into question here. The fact that the Southerner Amos seeks to intervene in the “internal affairs” of the Northern state is not experienced as anything approaching imperialism, for the dual reasons that these two states are close sociopolitical allies and that Amos is here seen to act as a lone voice, without support from political or religious circles. Neither does the Amos mission, seen from the other side, entail that the larger, more powerful North should curtail its influence Southwards for the sake of peace or justice. Imperialism is not the issue here, even though this Amos narrative does involve the crossing of political borders.

• In the complex redactional, that is, internally interpretative history of these verses (cf. Lombaard 2005:152–159), after the fall of the Northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrian empire in 722 BCE, these words of Amos are turned on the Southerners themselves by a small group of Amos disciples, refugees from the fall of the North, who with the re-application of these words to the Isaac descendants in the South warn them of the fate that may await them too if they seek to silence critical prophetic voices on matters of social justice towards their kin. The message of Amos in the North, decades earlier, was thus made relevant to the South too. Such growing Judean echoes, or after-effects, of these words over time thus show nothing related to the usual opposites and animosities associated with imperialism.

Therefore, in the Amos book, even though it represents one of the highpoints of ethical consideration on the powerless in society as a starting point of ethical prophetism (a Weberian term – cf. Otto 2005:83, 547 et al), the world of competing empires is simply accepted, uncritically. Even though the smaller territories around Israel-Judah, like these two states themselves, were small in stature and approached imperial status only in their often aggrandising, later historiographical writings, the very real imperial force the Northerners, Israel, had to feel at the hand of the world power Assyria in 722 BCE receives mention only by implication, and even then not as a critique of Assyria’s (ab)uses of power. If the unwarranted exercise of power across the Israel-Judah state lines had been an issue in Amos, there is no doubt that it would have been expressed in some manner parallel to what we find at such a high point here: the problem of unscrupulous exercise of power across class lines.
In the broad historical epics in the Old Testament, much contestation ought to be expected – not only because of the great amount of material incorporated into them, but also because these are competing historical renditions of often overlapping events. The one such grand history, the Deuteronomistic History, spans Deuteronomy 1 to 2 Kings 24 and interprets, through many editorial layers from the time of king Josiah onwards (cf. Römer 2006:45–70), the history of Israel in a light critical of non-Yahwistic kings and practices, later also to offer reasons and apportion blame for the traumatic fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian powers in 586 BCE (cf. e.g. Boshoff 2000:25–34). The other grand history, the Chronicistic History, for its part spans 1 Chronicles 1 to Nehemiah 13 (although the chronological order of Ezra and Nehemiah is at times reversed) and, also from numerous hands from roughly the Second Temple Period, interprets essentially the same history, though with a different intent (cf. e.g. Schmidt 1989:161–171; Kratz 2005:89–93): to stabilise the Jerusalem restoration community after the return from exile, that is, post 539 BCE, even to the point of such highly exclusionary measures (including apartheid-like pronouncements against “mixed” marriages, leading to forced divorces) that later books such as Jonah and Esther simply had to react, though not with much success, against such restrictive theology.

Although both these grand histories are theoretical constructs, and are as such in dispute, they are not without value in offering grounds for comparing and contrasting the different perspectives these respective histories offer on themes such as the purported Davidic dynasty and empire, and its fate at the hand of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires. On this Davidic line, for instance, both grand histories are highly positive, though the Chronicistic History is even more so. Though nagging doubts about the theological validity of kingship in Israel-Judah is found in texts relating to the early kingship, with the book of Judges demonstrating this critical viewpoint, with the rise to predominance of Zion theology such reservations were marginalised. With the existence of a Davidic-Solomonic empire, the writers of these grand histories had few qualms; in fact, such a past is highly idealised, beyond all historic proportions. What is more, the same positive attitude towards their own imperial ruler could even be transposed to the ruler of another empire, when it suited the authors. We see this in the highly positive closing verses of 2 Chronicles and the parallel opening verses of Ezra, where Cyrus, ruler of the Persian empire, adopts a new policy on deported people and in giving expression to this (cf. Miller & Hayes 1986:438–448), both decrees the returning to home of the exiles from Judah

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6 The latter is in line with the growing post-exilic imagination among the elite in Israel-Judah of their glorious imperial past.
No empire, no Bible? Aspects of the relationship between ...

(among other nations) and funds the resultant temple restoration works in Jerusalem. This leads to the contemporary prophet Deutero-Isaiah even calling Cyrus God’s anointed, or messiah (Isaiah 45:1).

Neither their own nor the other empires are evaluated in these grand histories on the basis of the destructive effects they had had for many people. Those empires that caused suffering for Israel-Judah, namely the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, are interpreted as being instruments of God's with which to call Israel-Judah to account; those that seemed to promote the faith the historians subscribed to, namely the Davidic line and the Persian empire, are evaluated positively. Here too we see that a multifaceted set of historiographical factors enter into the pictures historians sketch. One-sided denunciation of imperialism is not found.

**Associating with the powerless for the own sake**

Perhaps the slogan of Third World theologies has been “God’s preferential option for the poor” (with Gutiérrez 1973 being most influential in this respect) – a theological orientation which has been among the most influential of the previous century (cf. Witvliet 1985), influencing all spheres of theological endeavour, not the least of which being exegesis (e.g. Scheffler 1993). Biblical texts have because of this influence been read in altered ways, now also with a view to third way theologies (to employ the language of Balcomb 1993), namely now also to explore the role of the marginalised as reflected in the biblical texts.

However, a certain innocence had gone along with much of such reading, assuming that the biblical texts would with one voice plead the case of the poor. In this respect, greater nuance is called for. Whereas for instance some wisdom texts of the Old Testament, specifically in Proverbs, are indeed positive about the poor, the same could be said about the rich; at the same time, both the poor and the rich (cf. e.g. Kimilike 2007:105–117) are cast in negative light too, for different reasons. A singular voice is thus not heard from the Bible on this matter, as on many others. However, the matter is even more complex: whereas some texts in the Old Testament may seem to be speaking on behalf of the poor, they reflect in fact the voice of the powerful, employing the matter of poverty rhetorically for their own sake (cf. Snyman 2000:294-300).

A case in point is Psalm 109, as recently indicated by Scheffler (2011:192–207). He departs from earlier romantic notions about the poor in the Psalms and how they are identified or identified with, to make two points: firstly, he reiterates the older, more well-known view that the biblical texts never reflect directly the voice of “the poorest of the poor”, but only the voice of those who speak on their behalf, which they can do only because they do not find themselves in such impoverished circumstances, but are in
fact part of the uppermost echelons of society; and secondly, the newer, further developed view that some of these biblical writers give voice to the concerns of the poor not necessarily because they identify with them, but because it advances their own, covert cause. Among a variety of expressions in favour of the poor in the Psalms which are indeed directed towards their plight, albeit mostly from a position of relative power, the perspective of Psalm 109 is in two ways different to this trend: “The supplicant regards himself as poor and needy in order to lay claim to God’s favour as the one caring for the poor, but then he immediately wishes that his enemy should be poor and that his enemy’s innocent children should die of hunger” (Scheffler 2011:202).7

Whereas Scheffler (2002:205) hints at modern sociopolitical parallels to this rhetorical ploy in Psalm 109, namely when in South Africa powerful people can often be seen to claim solidarity with the poor in order from their elite position to advance their own cause, this insight into Psalm 109 opens for the argument in this paper the perspective too that a simple, one-sided support for a good cause cannot simply be assumed to come from biblical texts. In calling the Bible into support on issues such as poverty, imperialism and other causes to which the Christian ethos ought to be sensitive8, exegetical prudence is called for.

**Textual reception of imperial decrees**

In the above three points, the issue had been that the biblical texts concerned showed attitudes that ranged between ambivalence, disregard, and even positive evaluations with respect to the phenomenon of empire. It is important to keep in mind that these texts were canonised in different ways (first, socially; later, through decisions of religious authorities), with these disparate attitudes intact; at times, precisely because of the particular opposing attitudes. The latter is demonstrated most strongly by the fourth example here, where more explicitly than in any of the other three instances, it is the case that, had it not been for imperialism and how it was responded to, the Bible, and in fact all who live under its sphere of influence, would have had a very different character. That this response springs from one of the sociologically most influential of the biblical genres, namely Law, raises the profile of this instance more; that it is a text that lies at the root of the modern human rights culture, from which we now evaluate the phenomenon of empire.

When Badiou (2007:165; cf. Pluth 2010:179) lamented at the beginning of this millennium that “we hear of nothing save for human rights and

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7 This vengeful attitude is found in a number of other Psalms too.
8 On the difference between ethos and ethics as it relates to and from the Bible, see Lombaard 2009b.
the return of the religious”, he had not had in mind how much these two matters would converge. Among the dramatically expanding range of recent developments and publications on this topic (cf. Lombaard 2011b:74–93), a single illustration is highlighted here: the contribution of E Otto on the subversive reception of neo-Assyrian imperial laws among mid-7th century BCE Jerusalem scribes, by means of which the power of the (imperial) state over against the individual is subtly yet for us foundationally curtailed, since it constitutes one of the first stimuli towards our modern human rights culture (cf. Otto 2002, summarised in e.g. Otto 2009:77–107; cf. Lombaard 2011b:81–87). The text of Deuteronomy 13:2–10 was an almost verbatim reception of a very harsh declaration of loyalty demanded by the neo-Assyrian emperor of his subjects. Duty-bound to convert these laws into the context of their society, the Jerusalem scribes however altered the imperial text ever so slightly: the references to the emperor are replaced by references to God. By such refined literary means, absolute adherence of people is now transposed from ruler to deity: only God, and not the state, has unqualified power over people. Although the Deuteronomy 13:2–10 text does not express this in language which modern minds easily grasp as being “liberal”, meant here in the classic sense of promoting the freedom of the individual over against the state, within its ancient context this Deuteronomy-text indeed was that – subtly, but highly influential. This early impetus provides the modern world, via a long history of influence, with one of the basic precepts of human rights: that the prerogative of the state over the citizen is not unlimited, but regulated by the norms of human dignity (cf. Lombaard 2001b:79–80, drawing on Fontaine 2008).

In this example it is certainly the case that, had the neo-Assyrian empire not asserted its despotic power over those under its rule, this religious law in Deuteronomy would not have come into existence; moreover, had the Jerusalem scribes not mutinously, and therefore most shrewdly, altered the received text to produce a translation which in their context affirmed greater freedom of the individual against governing authorities than had been available under any of the empires in the ancient Near East, that idea would not have been preserved, to become in our time one of the pillars of modern “civilised” life. It took an ancient authoritarian empire to elicit, in Jerusalem, a nobler response than any at that time namely to create an idea in what would become quite possibly the most constitutive text of the Western cultural stream, the Bible, in order to help formulate what we experience as one of the highlights of our civilisation, the human rights emphasis which forms the basis of our society, in all of its discourses and practices.
Conclusion

Above, four illustrative instances of the non-negative interaction of empire and Bible have been indicated. Naturally, these examples can be expanded upon, to the point that in the minutiae of many biblical texts, a diversity of reactions may be traced to the contemporary powers that be. Also, only texts that highlight an alternative, in line with the rhetorical intention of this contribution and meant as a kind of correction to many first reactions on the empire-Bible matter, have been touched upon here, but not with the intent to supplant that dominant view. Moreover, the above argumentation has been limited to the Old Testament only: if the New Testament is drawn into the argument too, for instance with the famous “two chapters 13” – that is Romans 13 versus Revelations 13 in their respective reactions to the Roman imperial rulers of the time (Nicol 1988:128), which have led to vastly different appropriations in modern times (cf. e.g. Lombaard 2001:81–83) – the matter can be argued similarly to what has been done above. The complication of the foundational biblical interpretations given to the church by influential theologians under the ambit of the early church once Christianity had become the official state religion, is another matter to be considered: once Christianity had become the faith of an empire, how was power then thought about, from which biblical texts, interpreted in which ways, in support of which causes? In addition, to move to a more modern-historical example: the highly influential Liberation Theologies in their various forms may, if one manages to leave the political-theological fray for an instant to step back and make a broadly sociological observation, be analysed as yet another power struggle in the appropriation of the Bible (cf. Sithole 2011:208–220) – a battle which, at least in elite circles, Liberation Theology has certainly won, leaving it as the dominant interpretative school, with a kind of hermeneutical and often also institutional power to either sanction or suppress other interpretations.

Certainly, a simple relationship between those who wield high power, in ancient times and modern, and the Bible, respectively in its developmental and canonical phases, is not to be found. This ought to caution theological analyses, whether made from primarily ethical, missiological or any other perspectives, to be circumspect both in employing the Bible and in theological pronouncements that draw on the Bible. Writing the Bible always was, and reading that Bible has never been, without a context; often, those contexts include the appropriation of parts of the Bible as an act of contestation over against other parties (Snyman 2000:294–300). To claim truth for such an interpretative act is always possible (Le Roux 1992), yet it

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can remain only a short-lived claim with validity. Long-lived truth claims, however noble initially, have an inherent tendency to become absolutist (cf. Marquard 1989), since they become decontextualised; hence, such truths become oppressive. Against the immediate impulse, which seems to be always inherent to theological debate, a valid truth claim ought never to assume eternal application. Rather than truth being, truth happens, momentarily. To adapt here somewhat illustrations from a related recent theological e-debate (Lombaard 2011c, here offered in translation):

- when, for instance, ancient Israel in the last half-millennium BCE tries to construct a larger than life Moses figure with which to attempt the unification of its various Yahwisms; and
- when, for instance, the Christian church in the first century CE tries to construct miracle stories around the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, in order to prove to their contemporaries that he is He; and
- when, for instance, the post-Constantinian church tries to construct a highly hierarchical view of God and of church in order to cast the Western world as an eternal city (state) of God; and
- when, for instance, the later Enlightenment European society (and all societies around the world touched by it) tries to construct a Christianity eminently suited to the rationality it holds so dear; and
- when, for instance, South American and African theologians since the middle of the 1900s try to construct a God that is less European and more revolutionary, which will destroy oppressive structures of society and bring greater freedom to the disempowered; and
- when, for instance, an artist or a preacher in our time tries to construct a Jesus who is HIV positive, in order to say something meaningful about the major pandemic of our age;

then

- all those attempts are equally valid, inasmuch as they try to give expression to certain theological truths for that specific society within its particular time frame;
and then

- all those attempts are equally invalid, inasmuch as the (intentional/unintentional) endeavour to be contextually relevant renders theological truths which are highly meaningful within a circumscribed set of circumstances, but which are then elevated to the status of all-encompassing truths, so that they on their part become oppressive truths, forced onto contexts foreign to the value they had had.

Time and space misplaced lead to earlier subversive truths becoming, later, the dominant, repressive stances – a position for which the metaphor “domineering empires” would not be out of place.

**Works consulted**


