

IS GOD A VENTRILOQUIST AND IS THE BIBLE GOD'S DUMMY?

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF THE BIBLE AS A WARRANT FOR DOCTRINES, POLICIES AND MORAL VALUES¹

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Abstract

Two newspaper articles prompted the writing of this academic article. The first one concerns the theological conference “Gateway to the future from a deconstructed past” held at the University of Pretoria earlier this year. The second concerns Christians’ convictions that they adhere to “biblical norms and values”. Both articles reflect on the use of the Bible – either in the past: the Bible and the apartheid policy (the first article), or the present: theological debates concerning the role of women in the church (the second article). Both articles evoked reactions which were published in the relevant newspaper. The articles and the reactions (letters to the press) give evidence to the fact that reformed Christians still struggle to accept that God is not a ventriloquist or the prime author of the biblical books. The current article engages the two newspaper articles as well as the reactions and promotes the ideas of reading the biblical books as ordinary literature, of embracing the contemporary world view, and of accepting contemporary human rights.

Key Words: Apartheid; Authority of the Bible; Biblical Norms and Values; Decalogue; Evangelical Norms and Values; Fundamentalism; Human Rights; Ordination of Women

Only when we give up the futile expectation that the Bible’s utterances will express what is right and authoritative can we begin to face it for what it really is, something belonging to an environment entirely different from our own, in which the questions and answers were entirely different.²

Human beings have been thrown back upon themselves, and have learnt to talk always of *human* values, *human* rights, *human* needs, and of *humanitarian* concerns. Ethics, being now only human, no longer comes ready-made, cosmic and immutable.³

Introduction

Early this year the theological faculty of the University of Pretoria held a conference with the theme “Gateway to the future from a deconstructed past.” The conference formed part of the centenary celebrations of the theological faculty which was established in 1917. Professor Jürgen Moltmann from Germany was one of the guest speakers at the conference and the journalist Ina van der Linde thought it fit to write a short report for *Beeld* (an Afrikaans newspaper) concerning the conference. She referred, *inter alia*, to comments by Robert Vosloo, a church historian from the University of Stellenbosch, concerning the use

of the Bible to justify apartheid.⁴ Her article erroneously gave the impression that Vosloo had read a paper at the theological conference. He had not been present but did publish an article two years ago concerning the use of the Bible to justify and promote apartheid.⁵ In the article he discussed the contribution of the Afrikaans-speaking reformed theologian and poet J.D. du Toit (or ‘Totius’ to use his ‘nom de plume’) to bolster the apartheid policy but referred to other reformed theologians as well. Van der Linde’s article led to a second fallacy: that Vosloo had focused only on Totius’ contribution. It is therefore understandable that Amie van Wyk, a theologian from the same reformed tradition and church as Totius, reacted with a letter to the press.⁶ He emphasised that Vosloo was not correct in pointing fingers at Totius alone, since other Afrikaans-speaking reformed theologian also used the Bible to justify apartheid.⁷ He named a few others and then closed his letter with the following statement and question: “What we need to address at present is the question: How on earth did it happen that able theologians from the Afrikaans-speaking churches used the Bible to justify apartheid?”⁸

Van Wyk’s question leaves the impression that he is “a stranger in Jerusalem.” The issue was addressed three decades ago by leading South African biblical scholars. A résumé of their answers may be of help in reflecting on the current use of the Bible in theological debates and to promote ethical norms and moral values. The article intends to illustrate that most South African theologians from the reformed tradition still adhere to an outdated view of the Bible and an old-fashioned use of the Bible to support specific convictions. Nothing has changed since the previous century when the Bible was used to justify the apartheid policy. If there were changes, the issue of ordaining women and of acknowledging gay and lesbian marriages would have been a non-issue in reformed churches in South Africa.

The Past: The Bible and Apartheid⁹

During the eighties of the previous century Jimmie Loader, Ferdinand Deist and Willem Vorster were bold enough to criticise reformed ministers and theologians’ use of the Bible to bolster the apartheid policy.¹⁰ They were a younger generation of biblical scholars whose research reflects that they took cognisance of the publications of James Barr (1924-2006). They were at ease with his argument that the Bible “is not a problem-solver”¹¹ and that – in the words of Philip Kennedy – it “was not written in heaven, but in a dusty corner of the world.”¹²

According to Loader, theologians from the Afrikaans-speaking reformed churches are at home in fundamentalism when it comes to the use of the Bible.¹³ Although he did not focus on the publications of those theologians who in the past supported the apartheid policy, he analysed a fair number of publications by reformed South African theologians across the board. He took his cue from Barr’s book *Fundamentalism* and illustrated that the “three pronounced characteristics of Anglo-American fundamentalism” can be identified in their works.¹⁴ The three characteristics are: (1) emphasis on the infallibility of the Bible, (2) hostility towards the modern critical study of the Bible, and (3) the conviction that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not true Christians.¹⁵

Amie van Wyk from the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) felt offended by the classification and a lively debate ensued between Van Wyk en Loader.¹⁶ It was soon evident that the theologians from the GKSA and the theologians from the “Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika” (NHKA) might claim that they both adhered to the authority of the Bible but they did not work within the same paradigm.

Ferdinand Deist focused more on the use of the Bible in the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) and left it to other scholars to engage the views prevalent in the two other Afrikaans-speaking reformed churches. According to him, theologians in this church are at home in the philosophical tradition called “common sense realism” when it comes to how they view the relationship between their theological statements and the Bible.¹⁷ These theologians dismissed the modern critical study of the Bible and opined that readers who identify historical mistakes in the Bible, or read a biblical book (or section of that book) as fiction – and thus not as communicating real events – are undermining its authority.¹⁸

Deist’s claim and Loader’s convictions do not differ substantially. Barr argues a case that fundamentalists do work with a *correspondence theory of truth*, or “common sense realism” as Deist prefers to call it. They are convinced that when the Bible “refers to an external event in space and time” that event did happen – and happened in exactly the way the Bible narrates the event.¹⁹ It is therefore understandable that NGK theologians could use the story of the building of the tower at Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) to justify the apartheid policy.²⁰ According to them, the story does not narrate mere fiction but historical facts. It is a historical report about God’s intervention to prevent humans from establishing a city where unity and not diversity prevailed. God’s wish for humans was to settle in various locations across the world and to become different nations speaking different languages and developing diverse cultures. When they went against God’s will, God acted swiftly and undermined their actions. The architects of apartheid believed that they took God’s will to heart and therefore devised a policy in line with it.

Willem Vorster went further than Loader and Deist and argued a case that both the apartheid and anti-apartheid theologians of the NGK cherished the same convictions about the Bible and used it in the same way in their arguments. Both believed the Bible to be the Word of God but they used the Bible “as a coat hanger” to legitimise their convictions concerning the structuring of the South African society.²¹ He delivered a plea for a paradigm change concerning the authority of the Bible and the way it is used to formulate theological convictions. Although he never referred to the paradigm change that occurred at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries,²² he was well-aware of this change.²³ He surely would have endorsed Barr’s statement: “If one wants to use the Word-of-God type of language, the proper term for the Bible would be Word of Israel, Word of some leading early Christians.”²⁴

Deist was critical of Vorster’s stance in his article on the use of Scripture in the NGK and said: “Declaring the Bible another kind of book – for instance, an ordinary story book (Vorster 1977) – from what it is commonly held to be may earn the academic a heresy trial (...), but it will not lead to a change in *paradigm*, for which Vorster (1984) called.”²⁵ According to him, one should “refrain from attacking people’s ‘view of Scripture’” and focus more “on the *reasons* why some theologians use the Bible the way they do.”²⁶ According to him the NGK’s apartheid and anti-apartheid theologians took the Bible as a “pristine *source of information*” that could be tapped for eternal truths. Both groups ascribed to the modernist views of truth. Deist pleaded for a post-modernist understanding of truth in which the Bible “becomes a contextual conversation partner, rather than a de-contextualised collection of norms and truths, so that an appeal to Scripture can no longer be an appeal to final authority, but a reference to part of a variegated, sometimes even contradictory, tradition of contextual thought and action, that may be helpful in our own practical decisions.”²⁷

Deist’s article was published in a special issue of the New Testament journal *Neotestamentica* to honour Vorster after his untimely death the previous year (1993). Were

Vorster still alive, he would surely have drawn Deist's attention to the fact that his plea for a paradigm change and Deist's plea for a post-modern use of the Bible do not differ substantially. Both were convinced that one should read the Bible as literature coming from a distant past. Deist's own untimely death in 1997 left a still younger generation of biblical scholars with the task of continuing the discussions which he, Vorster and Loader had started.

The next section concerns the newspaper article by Yolanda Dreyer and serves as illustration that the discussions about the Bible and its use have not abated since 1997. Women theologians are now joining the discussions and they bring new perspectives to the table.²⁸

The Present: Current Debates and Female Voices

In February 2013, Yolanda Dreyer published a short article on biblical values in the Afrikaans newspaper *Beeld*.²⁹ Two reformed theologians reacted to her arguments and viewpoints.³⁰ Her article was titled "'Bybelwaardes', 'n vroom refrein" ("Biblical values', a pious slogan"). She argues that Christians claim too easily that they uphold "biblical values" but never reflect on the real source of those values. She illustrates this point by discussing two church members' opinions expressed at a conference which she attended. According to one (a male church member), the Bible is adamant that men should be regarded as the legitimate head of the family. Women should accept their advice, guidance and wisdom, honouring them as head of the family. Women should be humble and take second position. As this is a 'biblical norm', Christian women living in the twenty-first century should behave accordingly and not rebel against their biblically-assigned position. The second church member (a female church member) cherishes similar opinions and does not question her church's tradition of ordaining only men. According to her, God made it clear in the Bible that only men should become ministers and pastors. Women have to fulfil other roles in the church.

This unquestioning acceptance of church policy and practice as reflecting "biblical values and norms" inspired Dreyer to confront readers with some of the Old Testament "texts of terror" and then ask some incisive questions about the so-called "biblical values".³¹

Dreyer's first example is the story of how Sarai induced Abram to send Hagar, their Egyptian slave-girl, away after she became pregnant with his child (Gen. 16).³² Sarai could not have children and it had been on her advice that Abram had sexual intercourse with Hagar. But after it transpired that Hagar was pregnant, Sarai became jealous and started to ill-treat her. The consequence was Hagar's banishment from the household. She had to flee, while Abram and Sarai did not care about her and the child's survival. "What biblical values does the story communicate?" Dreyer asks.

The second example is the appalling Old Testament stories about the extermination of villages (Jos. 6:17; Num. 21:2-3; Deut. 7:1-2, 20:16-17; 1 Sam. 15). These stories concern the ban (Hebrew *herem*) whereby every living creature in a village had to be killed because Yahweh commanded it. "If Yahweh willed and approved such atrocities, what do the stories communicate about the life of non-Israelites and animals? Is it a biblical norm to despise foreigners, to ill-treat and even kill them?" Dreyer asks.

The third example concerns the contradiction between Malachi 2 and Ezra 10. In the first text, Yahweh says he hates divorce, but in the second text, Ezra commands the Judeans

to get rid of their foreign wives. Asks Dreyer: “Now what is the ‘biblical norm’ on divorce if the Bible communicates two contradictory points of view?”

Dreyer also refers to two examples from the New Testament to show how difficult it is to extract norms and values from biblical texts. The first comes from the letter to Philemon. The slave Onesimus is sent back to his slave-owner, Philemon, with the instruction to be a well-behaved slave, while Philemon is instructed to welcome Onesimus back, and to treat him as a fellow-Christian. Nowhere does Paul encourage the abolition of slavery,³³ which could then be regarded as a biblical norm and value. Certain nineteenth century Christians used the Bible to argue exactly this point.³⁴

Dreyer’s second New Testament example concerns Jesus’ treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). The Jewish leaders wanted to react according to the rules and regulations given in the Torah (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), but Jesus reasoned differently and saved her from being stoned by the mob. Dreyer asks: “Where is the man who slept with her? Or does the biblical norm apply only to women?” And then comments: “This seems to be the case when one looks at how ministers and elders treat young girls who fall pregnant before marriage. It seems that church discipline is reserved only for women.”

Dreyer eventually argues that the two church members’ viewpoints about the status of men reflect the convictions of certain churches and groups in our society, and are not really biblical norms and values. She then delivers a plea for Christians to look instead for “*evangelical norms and values*”. Evangelical norms and values are to be found in the message and acts of Jesus. He often ignored the opinions and interpretations by the Jewish authorities of his day and made no claim of adhering to “biblical norms and values.” He did not act legalistically, but wisely, thus making life possible for those who found themselves on the wrong side of the law, or were the outcasts of society.

Dreyer did rather well in drawing Christians’ attention to the fact that what they deem to be “biblical norms and moral values” are often only current norms and values in South African society. Christians project their prejudices and values onto the Bible, arguing that they are “biblical norms and values.” One may say that they read out of the Bible the interests they read into it.³⁵ However, Dreyer’s plea to search for “*evangelical norms and values*” is somewhat naïve. This will be argued in the next sections.

Two Critical Reactions to Dreyer’s Article

Two Afrikaans-speaking theologians in the reformed tradition reacted to Dreyer’s article, accusing her of incorrect interpretation of the Bible. Koos Vorster, a professor at the GKSA’s Seminary in Potchefstroom, argued that she ignored the core themes of the Bible.³⁶ If one takes those themes into account, it becomes evident that there are “guiding principles” in the Bible which may help people to make good ethical decisions.³⁷ Vorster claims that the Bible presents women as created in the image of God, just as Adam was. Women are partners in the covenant and are saved by Christ in the same way as men. The second mistake Dreyer commits, according to Vorster, is that she takes descriptive stories as prescriptive for how Christians should behave. He emphasises that descriptive stories may hold a lesson for Christians but they do not prescribe specific behaviour.

The second theologian to react to Dreyer’s article, Tony Simpson, belongs to the same church tradition as she does (NHKA). He accuses her of promoting feminist interpretations which, in his opinion, ignore the cultural settings of biblical texts. He claims that, had Dreyer paid more attention to the historical context in which the texts originated, she would

have come to different conclusions. Moreover, if she had been looking for biblical norms and values, she should have started with the Decalogue.³⁸ The Ten Commandments reveal God's will for time and eternity. When it comes to Hagar and her predicament, it is Abram, rather than Sarai, who should be blamed. Abram did not fulfil his role as head of the family and he jumped the gun when he did not trust God. In the matter of the slave Onesimus, who is returned to his slave-owner, the letter of Paul prescribes good Christian ethical behaviour on the part of both slave and owner.

Critical Comments on Dreyer's Plea and the Reactions

Dreyer's article and criticisms of it by Vorster and Simpson serve as examples that the issue of the authority of the Bible and how it should be applied to the contemporary context have not been solved yet. Reformed theologians still believe that God is either a ventriloquist or the prime author of the biblical books.³⁹ The old reformed convictions concerning the Bible and its use are still alive in post-apartheid South Africa.

According to Tony Simpson, the Decalogue should be a guide for Christians in their search for decent norms and values, and it can be said to contain the quintessence of biblical norms and values. But if we are to face the facts, the Decalogue as it is formulated in Exodus 20:1-17, is not addressing Christians. Rather, it addresses a Jewish male, a member of the Israelite covenant community. The Decalogue does not address Israelite women at all. The tenth commandment allows us to gather that women in that society were regarded as being among men's possessions. Nothing is said about their moral rights or duties. It is thus evident that women were not treated as equals. A woman's standing depended on the fact that she belonged to her father, her brother or her husband. It would have been extremely difficult for a woman to survive on her own in that society. Like Ruth in the Bible, she had to play the game according to the rules of men if she wanted to survive.

This Jewish male whom the Decalogue addresses was, economically speaking, rather well-off. He possessed a house, a wife, children, slaves and livestock.⁴⁰ In all likelihood, he belonged to the late pre-exilic Judean or early post-exilic Jewish community. He lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE. The first and fourth commandments give evidence of this fact. The first commandment emphatically commands that only Yahweh should be worshipped. Contemporary Old Testament scholars opine that the Israelite religion became monotheistic only during the reigns of the Judean kings Hezekiah and Josiah (i.e. during the seventh century BCE). In other words, the religion was not monotheistic from its very inception.⁴¹

The fourth commandment concerns the Sabbath. Old Testament scholars maintain that the celebration of the Sabbath became important only during the exile. Another justification of the claim that Exodus 20 addresses a Judean/Jewish male living in the sixth or the fifth century BCE is the motivation attached to the fourth commandment. The justification or motivation refers to the creation story in Gen. 1:1-2:4a. It is stated that God rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2-3). The first creation story is assigned to the P-document of the Pentateuch and that document originated during the sixth century BCE.⁴²

But there is another aspect of this version of the Decalogue that deserves our attention. This is the introduction, which reads: "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 1:2). It is evident that Yahweh cared for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, and liberated them from bondage. However, according to the fourth and tenth commandments, Yahweh allowed his liberated people, now living in the Promised

Land, to possess slaves themselves! Some of these slaves came from their own society (although they were called by different names, cf. Lev. 25:39-43). This is astounding. What does liberation mean if only some or certain groups benefit from being liberated?

Simpson argued that Dreyer did not pay thorough attention to the context of the texts to which she referred. But, ironically, he fared no better with his claim that the Decalogue reflects good 'biblical values.' The Decalogue evidently reflects the values of the society in which it originated and at least two of these values are problematic as far as our society is concerned: (1) the conviction that women are to be seen as men's possessions, and (2) the conviction that one is allowed to enslave other human beings. A contextual reading of the Decalogue reveals that Simpson's criticism does not hold water. The pot, in this case, cannot call the kettle black.

When we read and study the Decalogue in its context it becomes evident that the last six commandments of the Decalogue are not unique to Israel. Stephen Harris delineates this as follows: "The remaining commandments – honouring of parents and refraining from anti-social acts, such as murder, theft, adultery, or perjury – are paralleled in the legislation of other Near Eastern societies."⁴³

The Decalogue does not reflect the direct words of Yahweh nor does it present timeless ethical norms and values. Moreover, it is not as benevolent as Simpson claims. A critical reading reveals that it communicates ancient Near Eastern norms and values, which of itself is not bad. However, it does undermine the conviction that the Decalogue reflects God's will for time and eternity.

If critical reading of the Old Testament confronts us with the idea that its norms and values are time-bound, then what of Koos Vorster's argument that Christians should preferably focus on the core themes of the Bible? He claims that had Dreyer paid more attention to the core themes or fundamental motifs of the Bible, she would have discovered important 'guiding principles.' However, he refrains from saying what the core themes of the Bible are and how they could be applied in our society. He does claim, though, that the Bible on the whole paints a positive picture of women. Women are created in the image of God. They are partners in the covenant, and, like men, are saved by Jesus Christ.

Concerning his statement that women are also created in God's image, he probably has the following text in mind: "God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). It has already been pointed out that Genesis 1:1-2:4a forms part of the P-document of the Pentateuch. Keeping this in mind, we should remember that Genesis 1:27 forms part, not only of the first creation story, but also of the whole P-document, and that document "is not conspicuously egalitarian in its view of women."⁴⁴ To claim that the Bible as a whole paints a positive picture of women begs the questions: "Why were women not ordained as ministers and priests prior to the twentieth century?" and "Why does the Reformed Church to which Vorster belongs even now not ordain women as ministers and elders as other reformed churches do?"

The arguments by Simpson and Vorster do not really counter Dreyer's. Moreover, they do not help us understand how we could use the Old Testament to reflect on norms and values in our day. The two theologians still adhere to outdated doctrinal convictions about the authority of the Bible. But what about Dreyer's own arguments? Is her conception of "*evangelical norms and values*" above reproach? I do not think so, but we should at least acknowledge that she finds herself in good company. Don Cupitt recently published a book in which he claims that "Jesus of Nazareth was a remote and very remarkable pioneer of

our modern humanism.”⁴⁵ He argues that to “live from the heart” was central to Jesus’ message.⁴⁶ Cupitt, however, goes further than Dreyer in his critical reflections and it is doubtful whether Dreyer would concur with the following statement from his pen: “By deifying Jesus, the Church destroyed almost everything he stood for.”⁴⁷

In my opinion, both Dreyer and Cupitt side-line the Old Testament. That Christians should preferably look for “*evangelical norms and values*” suggests that the Old Testament is expendable. Dreyer’s arguments left me with the impression that the “*evangelical norms and values*” she would like to promote are linked to the positive aphorisms and acts of Jesus. I would like to know how she would react to Jesus’ handling of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. At first, he ignored her cry for help. Then when he eventually engaged with her, he used a rather derogatory word for Canaanites. They were ‘dogs.’ Compared with Jews, they were low class. He was not comfortable about throwing the bread meant for the children (Jews) to the dogs (Canaanites). Christians should remember that Jesus was a first-century Jew who shared the convictions and prejudices of his contemporaries.

We have been conditioned by later theological reflections to think of Jesus as a perfect human being with perfect moral values, tending to forget that he was a first-century Jew whose manners, customs and values were different from ours. Historical research made it evident that Jesus was not solely a moral teacher but that his message about Yahweh’s kingdom was politically motivated. He was a Jewish prophet who cherished the hope that Yahweh would once again restore his kingdom in Palestine and that this kingdom would be different from the Roman Empire.⁴⁸ The ‘good news’ he proclaimed could be summarised as his hope that Yahweh would soon establish a more equitable kingdom.⁴⁹ His message has nothing to do with the spiritual kingdom constructed and proclaimed by later Christians. His message is not to be equated with that of mainline churches which can be summarized as Fall-Redemption-Judgement.⁵⁰

The Future: A Proposal

It is a positive development that women theologians and biblical scholars are joining the discussions about the authority of the Bible and the way it is used in theological arguments, and in promoting Christian norms and values. However, South Africa needs more critical women theologians and biblical scholars to challenge traditional convictions about the Bible and its use. The following three issues need their attention and input: (1) the Bible as a compilation of ancient religious literature, (2) The Bible as ordinary literature, and (3) the Bible, ethics and human rights.

The Bible as a Compilation of Ancient Religious Literature

Any reflection on how Christians may use the Bible in discussing the norms and values of our society should start with the acknowledgement that the Bible is a collection of religious literature written by humans, centuries ago.⁵¹ Christians should not construct a doctrine of Scripture which turns the Bible into something so sacred that it is no longer anchored in the cultures of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. Furthermore, translators should translate the Bible so that it still reflects that world. When they read the biblical books, readers should feel that they are entering a strange world characterised by strange manners, customs, and values.

It is also well to remember that God does not communicate directly with readers through the Bible. Many Christians still refer to the Bible as “the Word of God,” maintaining that God communicates with them by means of the Bible. This view turns God into some sort of ventriloquist who uses the Bible as a dummy to communicate with human beings. This is an outdated view of the Bible and Christians should rather acknowledge that there is “a crowd of different human voices” coming from these texts.⁵² This allows for the contradictions in the Bible. To try harmonizing texts coming from different authors and different contexts is unwise and it does the texts no justice.

The Bible as Ordinary Literature

When Christians read the biblical books, they should not feel obliged to accept the values and norms they communicate. There are indeed horrifying stories in the books but readers should not ignore the context where they originated. To use our contemporary understanding of human rights as a yardstick when we read the laws, stories, prophetic utterances and wisdom sayings would be as unwise as trying to impose onto our society the morals and values the biblical books communicate. Today there are numerous books and ways of reading which can help readers understand the biblical books better.⁵³ One of the better ways of reading biblical narratives is to approach them as we would any other piece of literature. This includes studying, *inter alia*, the characters, the plot and the setting. Jan Fokkelman quite correctly says: “Being able to work with such simple, but basic narratological tools as plot, hero and points of view is much more important in the encounter with the Bible than being devout.”⁵⁴ If Christians read like this, they will once again discover that there is ‘music’ in these texts. They will discover that the biblical stories invite readers to participate and to reflect on what they have read. In doing so they may discover that some of the biblical stories invite them to think about what it is to be a human being living, not alone, but in a community, in relationship with others. Christians need to rethink how they construct the other and how they engage with him/her.

Consider as an example the story of David’s affair with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-13). He connived with his army general, Joab, to get Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, out of the way so that he could disguise his adulterous act (2 Sam. 11). Think of the parable the prophet Nathan told David after the death of Uriah. David was caught off-guard when Nathan announced that the parable reflected David’s treacherous acts (2 Sam. 12:1-9). The reader who reads this story and is not engaged existentially should revisit his/her roots as a human being.

While reflecting on this story, it is also wise to take note of the introductory verse: “At the turn of the year, when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab out with his other officers and all the Israelite forces, and they ravaged Ammon and laid siege to Rabbah” (2 Sam. 11:1). In the Decalogue, Yahweh forbids murder, but this text evidently does not question the practice by ancient kings of commanding their armies to kill innocent people. Perhaps this story could help us in our reflections on who is to be held responsible when armies commit atrocities: the individual soldiers, the army general in command of the unit, or the king/president of a country? Surely David could have decided not to go to war. He could have decided to turn his back on the standard practice by ancient Near Eastern kings of going to war during specific periods in the year. And how would this apply to us? Could our country decide to invest more money in education and spend less on military weapons? What should we do with President Eisenhower’s 1953 statement? He said: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”⁵⁵

Biblical stories could encourage us to ask critical questions. They should therefore not be brushed aside as outdated and irrelevant.

The Bible, Ethics and Human Rights

According to Don Cupitt, there are two types of ethical theory: (1) Theological ethics, which claim that God has revealed his will to humanity. This revelation is to be found in nature and in Scripture, or, better, we have “natural moral law” and we have “revealed religious law” which should guide us. And then there is (2) “modern humanist ethics.”⁵⁶

The idea of natural moral law explains why, long before the existence of Israel and the coming of Christianity, people behaved morally. People in other religious traditions also behave morally, not only Christians. Moral behaviour is thus not confined to Christianity or the Christianised world. However, following the Second World War (1939-1945), a new type of ethical theory has developed. People are no longer looking to religious traditions for moral guidance and wisdom alone. They are creating it themselves. The birth of contemporary human rights gives evidence of this.⁵⁷ The most revealing thing about human rights is that they are not static entities but they develop with the emergence of the new situations with which humans have to deal.

Living as we do in the twenty-first century, we cannot ignore human rights. We need to absorb them into our lives and integrate them into our life stories. But since our life stories have been interwoven with the Christian tradition, of which the Bible is a part, we cannot turn our backs on either the Bible or the Christian tradition. However, Christians should see these for what they are: human documents and human reflections. We can learn from these to see where things went wrong and what could be done better. Nevertheless, the Bible and the Christian tradition can no longer serve as the only guides for our acts and behaviour in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Reformed churches are currently discussing the issue of whether people with a homosexual orientation should be ordained and allowed to marry in church. Many Christians believe that the Bible clearly reflects God’s will on this issue, and they often quote verses from Leviticus and Romans in support of their perspective. Robert Carroll quite correctly argues that Christians who use biblical texts to discriminate against and even condemn gay people should practise consistency and obey the other Levitic commandments as well. He writes as follows: “Neither Leviticus nor Paul can be regarded as adequate authorities for constructing a modern account of sexuality or sexual relations (...) Who among the anti-homosexual brigade has not worn garments ‘made of two kinds of stuff’ (Lev 19:19) – check the labels on your Marks and Spencer’s clothing! Such impurity is on the same level as bestiality and homosexuality and incest.”⁵⁸

The Bible does not give clear-cut answers to the problems with which twenty-first century Christians grapple. A considerable number of overseas biblical scholars have reflected and written on this issue⁵⁹ and concluded that the Bible should be seen for what it is, a book written by humans living in a world that is totally different from the one in which we are living. The duty of Jews and Christians today is “to read the Bible ‘critically’, with open eyes, with questions, even with judgments on the values it is offering us ...,” as Jonathan Magonet states so emphatically.⁶⁰

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Endnotes

- ¹ Since the early years of his academic career Hendrik Bosman took an interest in the Decalogue and Old Testament ethics. This article is offered as a token of appreciation for his contribution to this field of study in the South African context.
- ² James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 43.
- ³ Don Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2001), 96.
- ⁴ Ina van der Linde, "Tussen vergeet en onthou," *Beeld By*, Saterdag 27 Mei 2017, 14-15.
- ⁵ Robert R. Vosloo "The Bible and the Justification of Apartheid in Reformed Circles in the 1940s in South Africa: Some Historical, Hermeneutical and Theological Remarks," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1 (2015), 195-215.
- ⁶ Amie van Wyk, "Apartheid het vele vadere gehad," *Beeld* 1 Junie 2017, 10.
- ⁷ If Amie van Wyk took Notice of Robert Vosloo's article he would have discovered that there is no reason to criticise him.
- ⁸ The original Afrikaans reads: "Die groot vraag is net: Hoe op aarde het dit gebeur dat talle bekwame teoloë uit die Afrikaanse kerke apartheid op grond van die Skrif regverdig het?"
- ⁹ The whole story of the use of the Bible since the early 1940s to support apartheid is narrated in the following books: Johann Kinghorn (ed.), *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* (Braamfontein: Macmillan, 1986); J.A. (Bobby) Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa* (Durban: Maskew Miller Longman, 1987); John W. de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Twenty-fifth anniversary edition. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).
- ¹⁰ There were three Afrikaans-speaking reformed churches in South Africa during these years. All three of them had their roots in the reformed tradition of the Netherlands: (1) the "Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK)," (2) the "Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA)," and (3) the "Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Afrika (GKSA)." Loader was a member of the NHKA while Deist and Vorster were members of the NGK.
- ¹¹ Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 142.

- ¹² Philip Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for old Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 255. In Ferdinand Deist's words: "Dat die Bybel nie uit die lug geval het nie, dat dit werklik in die geskiedenis ontstaan het, ... blyk daaruit dat ons vandag, ... geskiedenis van Israel en die vroeë kerk kan skryf ..." Quoted from his book *Kan ons die Bybel dan nog glo? Onderweg na 'n Gereformeerde Skrifbeskouing* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1986), 65.
- ¹³ He first expressed these views in the article "Ortodokse fundamentalisme en die gebruik van die Ou Testament in Suid-Afrika," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 35(1&2) (1979), 101-118. He then revised and translated the article for the symposium "Scripture and the Use of Scripture" organised by the Institute for Theological Research at Unisa.
- ¹⁴ James A. (Jimmie) Loader, "The Use of the Bible in Conventional South African Theology," in *Scripture and the Use of Scripture*, ed. Willem S. Vorster, (Pretoria: Unisa, 1979), 1-25 (14).
- ¹⁵ James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), 1.
- ¹⁶ J.H. (Amie) van Wyk, "Skrifgesag. Teologie en Kerk," *In die Skriflig* 19(74) (1985), 42-43; J.A. (Jimmie) Loader, "'n Antwoord aan prof J.H. van Wyk," *In die Skriflig* 19(76) (1985), 40-42; J.H. (Amie) van Wyk, "Prof Amie van Wyk antwoord prof J.A. Loader oor die strominge binne die Ned. Her. Kerk," *In die Skriflig* 20(77) (1986), 45-48.
- ¹⁷ Ferdinand E. Deist, "Naïewe realisme en Ou-Testamentiese wetenskap in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk" in *In Mensetaal oor God se Woord: Huldigingsbundel opgedra aan professor A.H. van Zyl*, red. Willem S. Prinsloo and Wil Vosloo (Kaapstad: Lux Verbi, 1988), 23-32. *Ibid.*, *Ervaring, Rede en Metode in Skrifuitleg: 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk 1840-1990* (Pretoria: RGN, 1994).
- ¹⁸ Deist formulated this as follows in Afrikaans: "Vanuit die perspektief van die naïewe realisme is dit logies onafwendbaar dat iemand wat 'n (historiese) fout in die Bybel vind, of die teks van die Bybel nie-referensieel lees, daarmee sê dat die Bybel onwaar is, dat dit nie geïnspireerd is nie, dat die verlossingsboodskap daarvan onwaar is ...," Deist, "Naïewe realisme," 27.
- ¹⁹ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 49.
- ²⁰ *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkerverhouding in die lig van die Skrif*, (Kaapstad: NG Kerk-Uitgewers, 1975), 14-18.
- ²¹ Willem S. Vorster, "The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: A shift of paradigm or of values?" in *New Faces of Africa: Essays in honour of Ben (Barend Jacobus) Marais*, ed. J.W. Hofmeyr and Willem S. Vorster (Pretoria: Unisa, 1984), 204-219 (208).
- ²² Mark A. Noll aptly describes the paradigm change as follows: "... the Bible, however sublime, is a human book to be investigated with the standard assumptions that one brings to the discussion of all products of human culture ...", *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 45.
- ²³ His inaugural lecture gives evidence to this. Cf. Willem S. Vorster, *'n Ou Boek in 'n nuwe wêreld: Gedagtes rondom die interpretasie van die Nuwe Testament* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1977).
- ²⁴ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 120.
- ²⁵ Ferdinand Deist, "Post-modernism and the Use of Scripture in Theological Argument: Footnotes to the Apartheid Theology Debate," *Neotestamentica, Special Issue* 28(3) (1994), 253-263 (255).
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.
- ²⁸ Other theologians and biblical scholars who have published books concerning the Bible and its use since 1997, are: Louis Jonker, Jan Botha and Ernst Conradie, *Die Bybel in Fokus: Leesgids vir 'n nuwe tyd* (Kaapstad: Lux Verbi, 1997); Izak J.J. (Sakkie) Spangenberg, *Perspektiewe op die Bybel* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1998); Jan van der Watt, Stephan Joubert, Jan du Rand and Piet Naudé, *Hoe lees ons die Bybel?* (Vereeniging: CUM, 2002); Adrio König, *Ek glo die Bybel – ondanks al die vrae* (Wellington: Lux Verbi.BM, 2002); Dirkie Smit, *Neem, lees! Hoe ons die Bybel hoor en verstaan* (Wellington: Lux Verbi.BM, 2006); Gerrie Snyman, *Om die Bybel Anders te Lees: 'n Etiek van Bybellees* (Pretoria: Griffel Media, 2007).
- ²⁹ Yolanda Dreyer, "'Bybelwaardes' 'n vroom refrein" (*Beeld* 4 Februarie 2013), 10.
- ³⁰ Tony Simpson, "Teologiese benadering kort konteks" (*Beeld* 6 Februarie 2013), 13; Koos Vorster, "Beskrywende Bybeldele skryf nie altyd voor" (*Beeld* 6 Februarie 2013), 13.
- ³¹ The phrase 'texts of terror' originates with the biblical scholar Phyllis Trible. Compare the title of her book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM, 1984).

- ³² While Dreyer's article has no references, I have added references for the sake of readers of this article.
- ³³ C.M. Conway, "Supplying the missing body of Onesimus: Readings of Paul's Letter to Philemon" in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Quran as Literature and Culture*, ed. R.S. Sabbath (Biblical Interpretation Series 98, Leiden: Brill, 2009), 475-484.
- ³⁴ Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So: Uses and abuses of Holy Scripture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 3-6.
- ³⁵ R. Joseph Hoffmann, 'Afterword,' in *What the Bible Really Says*, ed. Morton Smith and R. Joseph Hoffmann (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 241,
- ³⁶ Vorster, "Beskrywende Bybeldele skryf nie altyd voor."
- ³⁷ Adrio König cherishes similar ideas. Compare his book *Ek glo die Bybel* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2002), |27-92.
- ³⁸ Simpson, "Teologiese benadering kort konteks."
- ³⁹ The following may serve as examples of the conviction that God is a ventriloquist: "As God vandag met ons praat, beteken dit dat God nie bloot herhaal wat in die Bybel staan nie. Die Bybel is eerder 'n instrument wat God gebruik om met ons te praat oor die wêreld waarin ons vandag woon." (Louis Jonker, Jan Botha, Ernst Conradie *Die Bybel in Fokus*, 104). "Ja-nee, ons lees die Bybel nie sommer vir die lekkerkry nie. Ons lees dit omdat ons ver wag dat die Here met ons gaan praat." (Jan van der Watt, Stephan Joubert, Jan du Rand and Piet Naudé *Hoe lees ons die Bybel?* 71); "God se stem hoor mens net wanneer jy sy 66 boeke van begin tot einde deurlees;" (*Ibid.*, 95); "Hierdie God van die Bybel het Hom naamlik aan die Bybel verbind, aan hierdie volkome historiese, volkome menslike dokumente, om deur die eeue daardeur met mense te bly praat." (Dirkie Smit, *Neem lees!* 52).
- ⁴⁰ John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1998), 5. David J.A. Clines, "The Ten Commandments: Reading from left to right," in David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The ideology of writers and readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26-45 (33).
- ⁴¹ Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- ⁴² Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Wadsworth, 1995), 31, 52.
- ⁴³ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 125. Cf. also Michael Coogan, *The Ten Commandments: A Short History of an Ancient Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 43-44.
- ⁴⁴ John J. Collins, "The Impact of Feminist and Gender Studies" in *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. John J. Collins (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 95.
- ⁴⁵ Don Cupitt, *Jesus and Philosophy* (London: SCM, 2009), 96.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ⁴⁸ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 17-41.
- ⁴⁹ Bruce J. Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
- ⁵⁰ Philip Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions to Old Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), ix, 255.
- ⁵¹ Knut L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: A Textbook on History and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19-22.
- ⁵² Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, 1.
- ⁵³ Sue E. Gillingham, *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1998), 115-186; David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
- ⁵⁴ Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: A Practical Guide* (Tools for Biblical Study Series 1: Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999), 206.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 162.
- ⁵⁶ Cupitt, *Jesus and Philosophy*, 95-96.
- ⁵⁷ Andrew Clapham, *Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

- ⁵⁸ Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991), 81.
- ⁵⁹ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*; *ibid.*, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Explorations in Theology 7; London: SCM, 1980); *ibid.*, *Holy Scripture: Canon, authority, criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983); John Barton, *People of the Book? The authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988); Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold* (London: SPCK 1991); Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 204; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
- ⁶⁰ Jonathan Magonet, *The Subversive Bible* (London: SCM, 1997), 7.