

DOES CONTEXTUAL EXEGESIS REQUIRE AN AFFIRMING BIBLE?

LESSONS FROM 'APARTHEID' AND 'AFRICA' AS NARCISSISTIC HERMENEUTICAL KEYS¹

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Abstract

It has become almost impossible to critique the concept of contextual exegesis of the Bible in Africa. Moreover, "relevance" in biblical interpretation is implicitly understood as the texts of the Bible affirming the current socio-political project(s) of a group with a current claim to power. Clearly, such hermeneutics are ideologically determined efforts at seeking legitimacy for these socio-political projects. Criticism of or alternatives to such efforts in biblical interpretation are regarded with severe suspicion. Building forth on previous studies, this paper analyses the ways in which, first, "apartheid" and now, "Africa", have functioned as such narcissistic hermeneutical keys. The critical religious and socio-political functions of the biblical texts are thus lost in this "political carnival" (J Ellul).

Keywords: Apartheid and the Bible; Africa and the Bible; Contextual Hermeneutics; Bible and Politics

An Obscured Affinity

One of the more or less obscured affinities in South African biblical hermeneutics is the much closer parallels between earlier Afrikaner nationalist (i.e. apartheid) theology and current African nationalistic (i.e. black) theology than either of these parties would lightly admit to. One of these parallels is focussed on in this paper, namely the unexpected, yet striking similarities between the way "apartheid" and "Africa" can be seen, in overview, functioning as interpretative keys to the Bible within these two respective South African theologies.

This is done by summarising here previous research of mine on this and related themes, published between 2001 and 2006, and by teasing out some theological implications on the interaction between the Bible, hermeneutic projects, faith, and politics. The "teasing out"-part has as its focus more particularly the current position of power of these two interpretative strategies, namely Africa as hermeneutical key. Apartheid having lost almost all theological currency in South Africa, analysis of the current position of power is thus more relevant, since "(b)etter readings expose and critique power privilege in society, support and encourage positive social change, and affirm difference and inclusion" (Ukpong 2004:25). In this case, that relevance has much to do with the fact that in some instances, and in different parts of this continent, "Africa" as a hermeneutical key to the Bible has attained something of a militancy; at times, even of racism. The ironies here, of course, lie thick...

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A Methodological Note

It will become clear that I write somewhat differently with regard to the two hermeneutical keys I analyse below. I am more circumspect about the key of "Africa" than I am about that of "apartheid". This difference has to do with personal history, which leads to two different interpretative roles regarding these two themes. Since I have lost my innocence regarding the modernist ideals of objectivity (cf. Lombaard 2002a), intellectual integrity demands acknowledgement of the critical perspectivist role (cf. Lombaard 2004:2-9) any scholar takes regarding the subject matter at hand. Specifically, with regard to apartheid theology I have more of an insider's view; with regard to African theology, more of an outsider's. Of course, both the insider's and the outsider's perspective are equally valid (Rabe 2003: 149-161); yet, both have their inherent biases which should be acknowledged. Having grown up in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, known for its biblical support to apartheid, gives one a sense of orientation regarding these issues, in order that assertions resonate immediately as valid, or not. However, years after this youthful "embeddedness", and following my initial academic training, I taught for four years at an ecumenical theological seminary steeped in anti-apartheid theology. There I got to know this manner of hermeneutics intimately. What is more, in post-apartheid South Africa the basic tenets of liberation hermeneutics have come to permeate all mainstream theological thinking, becoming thus a sort of theological *lingua franca*. Therefore, though I write about familiar territory in both instances, these familiarities have been constituted differently. For the sake of scholarly openness – that the interpreter may be interpreted – this variance should be kept in mind.

The Bible Reader as Ventriloquist

No Bible reading, pre-scientific or scholarly, is interest-free: we all seek something when we read (what Schleiermacher 1959, Heidegger 1962 and Bultmann 1952 & 1955 called *Vorverständnis* – cf. Thiselton 1992:44-46). The human condition is such that we tax all texts we encounter with values added, personal costs reduced, meanings short-changed. The economics of reading thus entails much miscalculation – hence Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle and Heidegger's merging horizons as descriptions of the somewhat messy process of generating meaning.

In South Africa, the strongest historical influence on the way the Bible is dealt with, is "the mishandling of Scripture in Protestant Orthodoxy" (Le Roux 1993:39; cf. also Loader 2006:696), namely:

...the Bible became something static which consisted of 'proof-texts' or 'dicta probantia' which were taken indiscriminately from both Testaments in order to [prove] certain doctrines. Exegesis served the purpose of substantiating the dogmas of the church... In the whole process Scripture 'lost' its dynamic force and was forced into a subordinate position.

The way *context* is interpreted, runs parallel to this (Le Roux 1993:39):

Our theological past is being scrutinized for all kinds of 'non-historical' purposes. History is viewed as a store-room containing information about the past which can be abstracted easily and be subordinated to a specific theology... [H]istory thus became something static with one fixed meaning which serves the interests of certain groups.

In short, "our religious past is deformed by one-sided political interpretations" (Le Roux 1993:39). The way the Bible was read in the project to support apartheid, and the way it is

now being read to find affirmation for the continent of Africa, provide two examples of this tradition of employing the Bible.

'Apartheid'

It was a sense of anxiety about the mixing of races, together with a concomitant uncovering of certain "principles" on race in Scripture (cf. *Ned. Herv. of Geref. Kerk* 1948:279-280), which gave sanction to a pro-apartheid reading of the Bible. The socio-political milieu, combined with a set of philosophical assumptions about the Bible and truth (cf. Deist 1994:155-260), gave credence to a theology of apartheid. To state, as did Groenewald (1947:65), that objective exegesis shows apartheid as a "central truth" of Scripture, corresponded well with the sensibilities of an intimidated Afrikaans minority with a current claim to power (Ngcokovane 1989). First and foremost, it was their *own* constituency to whom the Afrikaans churches paid attention. Despite the fact that the Bible does not admit of race as a central theological theme (as *Kerk en Samelewing* 1986:19 would later admit), it could in such circumstances be made "a biblical *principium*" (Durand 1978:4-5) or "biblical keynotes" (Von Allmen 1977:8), without having to clarify what is meant by phrases such as "eternal principles on race relations" in the Bible (WS Vorster 1979:184-187). The social setting would simply uphold such truths.

Furthermore, theological views at the time generally tended to be *declared* valid, rather than arguments and implications weighed (Loader 1978:10; cf. Deist 1994:189-210). Moreover, questioning the "principles" or "conclusions" was understood at once as questioning the authority of the Bible (cf. Durand 1978:9; 1985:41-42). Such a manner of theologising by the church could consequently provide a firm spiritual spine to the political policy of apartheid in South Africa (W Nicol 1988:131; cf. de Villiers 1988:7 & Engelbrecht 1982:29).

Among the favoured texts used in the theology of apartheid to sanction racially segregated congregations were Genesis 11, Deuteronomy 32:8, Acts 1:8 & 17:26, 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 and Revelation 5:9 & 7:9. From the mention of nations and boundaries between nations in such texts, conclusions were summarily drawn about racial segregation within society and in the church (*Sending-beleid* 1935; König 1987:8-11; *Reis met apartheid* 1997:6-7; cf. *Faith & Protest* in Nürnberger & Tooke 1988:41-44).

It was often stated that apartheid had to be attested to by the Bible for it to be accepted as a solution to the "race problem" of South Africa (e.g. Groenewald 1947:43; *Ras, volk en nasie* 1974:5, 8; Du Preez 1955:2; *Herderlike skrywe* 1973:1; cf. Deist 1994:405-415). This tenet having been postulated, the subsequent reasoning ran as follows: while the obvious unity of the human race is founded on Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26-29) and on Noah (Genesis 10:32), the diversification of this unity by God in Genesis 10-11 should be taken as seriously (also Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 32:8; Amos 9:7; Acts 17:26). This diversification of humanity was entrenched and perpetuated with the mission text (Matthew 28:19 – see e.g. Dreyer 1978:68; *Herderlike skrywe* 1973:3f), at Pentecost (Acts 2:8f) and for all times (Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 14:6, 19:15). The implication was thus that such divisions must be observed in modern times (Groenewald 1947:44-47). These thoughts and texts in Groenewald's 1947-work were to be repeated in many a church document and other publications (e.g. Du Preez 1955) endorsing apartheid.

Another, similar, line of reasoning could be pursued: God the Creator is primarily One who separates, as Genesis 1-2 shows (JD du Toit, referred to by Brink 1954:33; cf. Kinghorn 1986:101). In history, God split up the faithful generations of Seth and the unfaithful generations of Cain; disregarding this brings about Divine punishment – the flood of

Genesis 7 (De Klerk 1939:56). However, respecting God's set boundaries bears blessings – Deuteronomy 7:1-11 (Groenewald 1947:57). Therefore, the existence of separate peoples is a “healthy Christian principle” (Wm Nicol 1947:21), in line with God's creation and will. Racial differentiation implied in Genesis 10:32, 18:18, and Matthew 25:32 will continue for eternity, as shown by Isaiah 2:4 (Sampson 1966:72).

The tower of Babel narrative played a significant part in attempts to “prove” apartheid. Babel, it was argued, proves that a false human unity was corrected by God (De Klerk 1939:56). This is thus a history of *grace*, showing the idea of apartheid to be “Scriptural,... Christian,... natural,... and just” (Wolmarans 1978:90; cf. JD Vorster, quoted in Kinghorn 1986:107-108; cf. Villa-Vicencio 1977:27). Even Exodus 9:1 & 10:3 add to the argument (cf. Ukpong 2004:25): it is for “*my people*” that Moses claims national autonomy. This distinction between nations was then traced in the New Testament: the Jerusalem congregation was for Jewish Christians; Jesus and his followers differentiated clearly between Jews and Greeks. Unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6; Galatians 3:28; John 15:4-5; John 17; Ephesians 2 & 4 etc.) is therefore purely spiritual, never at the cost of diversity, and no more than a “supernatural organic communion” (Groenewald 1947:56-61, translated; Federal Council 1960:7-8).

Hence it was clear: the Bible teaches *national* (Psalm 80:14; Isaiah 5:1-5; Philemon 3:4f; 1 Corinthians 7:18), *social* (Deuteronomy 7:2-4, Nehemiah 13:23), *occupational* (Deuteronomy 22:10; 2 Corinthians 6:14), *judicial* (1 Corinthians 6:1-11) and *religious* (Deuteronomy 7; John 17:14; 1 Corinthians 8:4-7 & 10:19-22; 2 Corinthians 6:14 & 7:1) apartheid (Groenewald 1947:51-55). In line with this, and taking the Genesis 19 narrative (Sodom) and Psalm 86:9 (blessing of nations) into account, it is thus impossible to accept “non-whites” into church membership (cf. Loader 1978:19). Extreme interpretations even used the curse of Ham in Genesis 9:25 and the sons of Cush in Genesis 10:6 to allow for overt oppression of blacks by whites (cf. Burden 1994:11-12).

Although the Afrikaans language churches had in time come to deny being theologically fundamentalist (e.g. *Ras, Volk en Nasie* 1974:8, 9), both the popular view from outside (e.g. Sparks 1994:7, cf. 99-100) and the views of theologians from inside these churches (e.g. Loader 1978:14-29; Le Roux 1994:9-10) were less optimistic in this regard. The three large Afrikaans churches, despite their differences, used the Bible in much the same manner (Loader 1978:21). Pro-apartheid interpretations took no cognizance of the distinction between history and pre-history (so still *Kerk en Samelewing* 1986:21; cf. Villa-Vicencio 1977:25), perhaps because the concept of revelation, even oracle, took primacy over the view of the Bible as a temporal document. Furthermore, the meanings of biblical texts were stretched in order to fit the desired intentions (cf. Durand 1978:5). Selectivity and assigned interpretive keys, leading to exclusive interpretations, were added to this hermeneutical construct. The result was a Bible which legitimated, indeed, demanded apartheid of the Christian world if we were to be obedient.

'Africa'

Usually when the issue of the Africanisation of biblical interpretation is raised (cf. Schaaf 1994 for a historical overview), a prominent figure brought into the discussion is the Zimbabwean theologian-politician Canaan Banana (1993:17-32²). Though frequently misunderstood (e.g. Mukonyora 1993:249-262), Banana's concern was with the writing of

² This publication of Banana's views is a further development of his initial controversial paper of 1991. Because this later version responds to certain criticisms during the intervening period, it may be regarded as a better resource.

a *new*, Africanised Bible, with African religious ideas taken up in it³. This is something different to the usual calls for the inculturation of the *extant* Bible. The latter includes, most often, the insistence that on the African continent the Bible should be read in ways that speak directly to the heart of African people. Almost always juxtaposed with “Eurocentric” methods and conclusions, usually related to the missionary enterprise in Africa, the call is then made that these should be rejected as inherently foreign articulations within the authentic African experience, which should be replaced with readings responsive to African sensibilities.

These two matters – the rejection of the continued European influence, and the insistence on a truly African contribution – are the twinned rhetorical lines usually found when calls are made for the “Africanisation”/“relevance”/“contextualisation” of the Bible. Because of the seeming parallels between African cultures and phenomena reflected in the Old Testament, it is the Hebrew Bible which features most prominently in such discussions (cf. Maluleke 2000:91-92; Magesa 2004:99-102). It is my view, however, that a project such as this is, and has always been, bound to fail (Lombaard 2006a:147-151). Central to this opinion lies the historical observation that, while the calls for the African contextualisation of the Bible has grown both in number and in urgency, the search for a uniquely African form of Bible-reading has been unsuccessful. Whereas, as practical means, liturgical expressions of Christianity have become indigenised successfully in various ways, the Bible itself remains still, resolutely, “un-African”. A steady increase in what has been called heritagist and nationalist studies of the Old Testament (Van Heerden 2006b:502-504, following Sugirtharajah 2002) by African scholars, can indeed be seen. The insistence over decades notwithstanding, no study has however been produced in a manner that it could be regarded as now, finally, something uniquely, or perhaps satisfactorily, African. Nobody who implores African scholars to be contextual, really tell us how (Maluleke 2000:100-101). Whereas generalities abound, concrete examples elude us.

This is not to say that Africa and the Bible have not met, and in various ways, in academic studies. For example, interesting studies in comparative theology/anthropology/literature may be found in the form of Masenya’s *bosadi*/womenhood interpretations (e.g. Masenya 1991:41-56; 1996) and Van Heerden’s comparisons of ancient Hebrew and African proverbs (cf. Van Heerden 2002:462-475; cf. also Adamo 2003:18, 21-22). West (e.g. 1991/1995; 1998:3-32; 2006:31-59) has become our foremost scholar on reader response understood as poor, marginalised readers’ reaction to particular biblical texts (cf. also e.g. Momo 2005:151-161). On both practical and theoretical dynamics of translating the Bible into African languages, Wendland (see e.g. 2002:164-201; 1987) plays a similar role. However, these and other studies are not of themselves any more legitimate, or any less, simply because the continent of Africa has now entered into the picture.

What is more, not to beg the attendant question: who and what constitutes an “African”? Would it be criteria of blatant racial, or a ranked pigmentation, identification? Would home language suffice (considering also the influence of European, Arabic, and Indian languages on the continent)? Could country or continent of either personal or genealogical origination, habitation, orientation, or professional occupation be a distinguishing factor? Perhaps ideological commitments? Alternatively, political, social or personal loyalties? Issues such as these, among others (cf. Maluleke 2000:93-94), have come to the fore in an intense recent debate between two Old Testament colleagues at the University of South Africa, Masenya and Snyman. This debate, crossing the borders to racism and sexism, had as its

³ Cf. parallel Western calls for rewriting the Bible, to fit modern(istic) ideals; e.g. Boas 1994.

theme whether white men in (South) Africa have any valid contribution to make within the biblical sciences, given the continent's histories of colonialism and apartheid (cf. Masenya 2002:3-8; Snyman 2002a:8-20; 2002b:799-820; cf. also subsequent editions of the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*). Discussions such as these cannot come to a quiet resolve; this is precluded by what history has shown to be a tenaciously pursued, but futile attempt at finding an inherently African interpretation of biblical texts. The ways in which Africa and the Bible have met, indicated above, are not contributions exclusively attributable to this continent; parallel studies on other continents show this. However, scholarly contributions they certainly are, in the senses accepted internationally of what constitutes scholarship. Critical, intellectual, argued analyses do not adhere to provincial quests for identity and/or affirmation.

For this and other (cf. Lombaard 2006a:144-152) reasons, Bible scholarship on this continent would never be able to claim for itself the epithet of being truly "contextual" theology; that is, in this case, distinctively African science (cf. Maluleke 2000:94-95; Obeng 1997:8-24). The way in which South American "contextual" liberation theology has jumped continental divides to now count among the theological mainstreams also in Africa, India, Europe, North America and elsewhere, illustrates this point well. New, valid theology tends towards the universal; its sources lie always with a few gifted individuals from a certain milieu. In Africa, Bible scholarship shares with other academic fields this difficulty of seeking, yet failing to find a uniquely local angle. Within sociology and identity politics (cf. respectively Jubber 2005, Du Preez 2005), for instance, the realisation has also dawned that a specific Africanness eludes us constantly. Knowledge remains, always, at once both contextually conditioned (Odora Hoppers 2001:76, 83-84) and transcontextually received.

Clearly, Africans make substantial contributions to the understanding of the Bible, both academic and otherwise (cf. Holter 2000:9-25, 38-40, 51-60; West 2000:29-53; Heisey 1998:35-48). The latter can be seen in the variety of ways the Christian faith has become integrated in African cultural matrixes (Bediako 1997:426-444; Mukonyora 1993:249-262). Doubtless, such processes have been facilitated by the translation of the Bible into African languages (West 1999:96-98). However, these dynamics do not apply exclusively to this continent or its people. Nor do theological studies have validity in all segments of the continent – always, the realisation is forced on us that there is no single "Africa". To call on such an "Africa" – be it either as a romanticised idea or, more harshly, an ideological concept – does not serve the scholarly enterprise of any discipline well. More naturally, though, Africa – the land mass; its inhabitants; its archaeological, political and social history; and increasingly, its ecology – is indeed a part of the constitution of any number of scholars, where-ever they may find themselves geographically or subject-specifically. This is a softer sense of "Africa"⁴, in which ordinary, "contextual" interactions with the Bible is found (cf. Van Heerden 2006a:429-438; Adamo 2006:7-25 & 2003:20, 25-26, 29-30; Himbaza 2002:5-7; Mugambi 2004:9). This is something which cannot be either determined *a priori* nor, certainly, demanded (cf. Loader 2006:707-708), as has now become the case in the new "scramble for Africa": mining the Bible for references to Africa

⁴ Debray (1991:248) indicates such a softer sense as: "Déterritorialisé = dématérialisé. Territorialisé = empâté." In this lies no forcefulness, but a sensitivity to context. The 2006 19/2-edition of *Old Testament Essays* also follows a more flexible distinction, by structuring itself as: African interpretations of the Old Testament (OT); the OT interpreting Africa; and attempts at finding Africa in the OT. Even then, a certain drivenness, from an emotionalised continental loyalty, colour some of the essays to the point of unscholarly praise-singing. See also Adamo 2006:16-17. Such one-sidedness leads to poor exegesis and predictable studies (Høyland 1998:56), and damages a good cause through flawed scholarship.

in words, concepts, or cultural parallels (cf. Ntshah 2001:68-82; Dube 2006:80; Lombaard 2006a:148-149). More healthy, certainly, would be to allow for the natural interpretative process in which the “then” of the textual context and the “now” of the interpreter’s context meet, (in)forming contemporary insights and outlooks (le Roux 1995:172-177).

This criticism of the current Africanist project in interpreting the Scriptures is *not* intended to convey a negative view of either the continent or its scholars. Rather, the intention here is to warn against the probable outcome of this project, which would be an exact parallel to the way the Bible had been used to favour apartheid; namely: to domesticate the Bible. In such interpretative endeavours, it is not the Bible which is the focal point of scholarship, nor the hermeneutical difficulties we as modern readers experience (cf. Lombaard 2006a:144-147). Rather, how the Bible affirms “us”, its readers, becomes the purpose of scholarship. In both cases – the pro-apartheid and the pro-Africa readings of the Bible – theologians seek to play ventriloquist. The Bible should mouth *our* concerns. We play “mirror, mirror on the wall” with the Scriptures, seeking out *our* beauty. Narcissus becomes our saint; the Bible our oracle. As a point of principle, we want to throw our voices, which would seem like magic, and the Bible is expected to make the magic work. To demand that of *any* literature for the sake of its (perceived) validity or relevance, is simply unfair.

Alternatives?

Though it is impossible in some absolute sense to speak of any interpretation of the Bible as inherently “good” (Lombaard 2002b:754-765), the alternative certainly is possible. “Bad” readings of biblical texts are those that alter the hermeneutical circle in such a way that own interests are furthered uncritically. Rather than a give-and-take (the hermeneutical circle), the text is mined for references that would support one’s cause. This alters the communicative process between Bible and reader(s) in two ways: the contextual messages of the ancient texts are largely disregarded, and the biblical texts habitually serve but to legitimate. Neither of these features accords the Bible its authentic place as a book of faith, which critically engages with the existential, the socio-political and other commitments of its readers.

The way in which the biblical texts were employed to support apartheid in South Africa, finds striking post-colonial hermeneutical parallels in the manner in which the Bible is now read “for Africa”. In both cases, certain texts receive strong preference over others. On the other hand, the supported cause is uncritically romanticised, with an underlying search for a sense of identity that can be detected in these readings, namely by finding supportive/accommodating references in the Bible (cf. Lokel 2006:532; Mugambi 2004:10; Andrianjatovo 2001:177-187), perhaps in reaction to earlier unaccommodating missionary praxis⁵. Exegetical debate is often limited to refining and extending the already set category of interpretation – a typically ideologically-predetermined strategy of reading holy texts. Moreover, readings that do not follow such lines are then regarded as either irrelevant or – in cases where the dominant reading is questioned – seditious.

By pointing out parallels between the ways these two hermeneutical keys have been employed, this paper seeks to sensitise theologians now reading the Bible “for Africa” (or “for” any other cause) to the exclusionary nature such an exegetical project may acquire

⁵ One wonders whether Africa, in its new role as “missionary continent” – namely as the sender rather than the receiver of Christian missionaries – will fall guilty to this same “greatest shortcoming of Christian missionary activity” (Mugambi 2004:12) in the cultures it enters...

once it hardens into ideology. Ironically, in turning away exegetically from Europe in order to find itself, Africa has to a large extent just played the worst of the Western game anew (cf. Kenzo 2006:248, drawing on Mudimbe 1982; cf. Du Toit 2005:52-63), copying the hermeneutical programme, in this case by seeking to decontextualise the historically-conditioned biblical texts and to recontextualise them in the own culture – an *interpretatio Africana* (Lokel 2006:533; cf. Le Marquand 2006:68). This does not equate to the presentation of a new hermeneutic, as is so often insisted; it is merely more of the same. The sin of the pre-colonial and colonial missionaries we so like to point out, namely that they were blinded to the “real” message(s) of the Bible by the glare of (in their case, Western) culture, is being committed all over again. The geography of the lure may have changed, but the temptation to which is given way is just the same. Put more concretely: a black and deadlocked Jesus is historically just as mistaken as a white and blonde Jesus. Jesus the Jew from Nazareth is not taken as the prime reference in reading strategies such as these; *God-for-us* is just too dominant. For a faith that regards the historical dimension of God’s interventions on earth as vital, such responses echo too strongly others in which the meanings of the Bible had been sold out for the sake of the project.

What is required, is the acknowledgement (Marböck 2000:48; cf. Bennet 2006:169-184) that:

(d)ie Gotteszeugnis des [Bibels] läßt sich ... nicht reduzieren auf selbsterdachte, pflegeleichte Beliebbarkeit, auf einseitige menschliche Interessen, etwa einer Gruppe...; es bleibt vielstimmiges Zeugnis von Erfahrungen mit einem Großen...

A possible resolution, I would therefore suggest, is one that lies in accord with the radical historical orientation of the biblical faith. Of course, historical understanding is not the only kind of understanding: it has its limitations in that it can only interpret what it finds on its own terms, ignoring whatever else is encountered (Roberts 2006:699-708). However, historical criticism⁶ as it relates to the biblical literature has (*contra* Le Marquand 2006:64) long since rid itself of the positivist underpinnings its critics keep pointing out, rendering itself again theologically useful (Lombaard 2006b:18-31). The exegetical advances of *Traditionsgeschichte* à la von Rad (cf. most famously von Rad 1962), upon which has been built the *wirkungsgeschichtliche* approach, among others, along with major advances in philosophical hermeneutics related to the biblical texts (cf. Thiselton 1992), have taken such thorns from our flesh. The narrative nature of historiography rids us of a false scientism, acknowledging the naturally interpretative nature of all scholarship. There is thus a place for faith too, for those inclined to read the Bible in such a manner: living in faith from the Bible-*historically*-understood is not only possible, but also highly desirable (cf. Lombaard 2003:433-450), and – always this has to be said, lest this view be seen as pietist and other-worldly – has strong socio-political consequences (Lombaard 2001:86):

The Bible presents, often in surprising ways, a faith which has a profound political impact. My point is, however, that faith itself, and not the political impact, is the message in/of the Bible. This *faith* has many implications, in all spheres of life. But the same faith can both support and oppose a government (the Chronicler versus the Deuteronomistic Historian, Romans 13 versus Revelation 13). The politics, it seems, is incidental. Life *coram Deo*, whatever the broader societal situation, is the primary focus

⁶ West (2006:42-43) also pleads for critical scholarship, but his call is more towards an ideological-critical reading of the biblical texts, rather than a historical-critical reading, which opens readers’ eyes to the vastness between the “then” of the text and the “now” of today, after which the search for applications by means of parallels and analogies can be undertaken with greater circumspection. For this “application” process too, however, ideological criticism of the present is required (Wendland 2004:328, 333, 336-341).

of biblical texts. The faithful's relation to and interpretation of this context changes; politics is not the message. To adapt media critic Marshall McLuhan's well known phrase: *the medium* (of conveying a view of the context) *is the message*; that is *faith*. "Politics cannot do what the gospel and the Spirit can do..." (Bauckham 1989:10). The true message of the church should not be allowed to get lost within the "political carnival" (Ellul 1986:130).

Christian *faith*, however, in the proper all-encompassing concept of it, will touch on politics. The faithful, to be such, will not withdraw from political pronouncements and actions where such are needed. To be true to the nature of the Bible, we should however not project such concerns of ours into Scripture... It provides no such gardens of Eden for us to return to. The Bible, however, knows of the practical implications of a life of faith in diverse contexts.

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