

## THE NEW TESTAMENT AS POLITICAL DOCUMENTS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The political nature of the NT documents is carefully hidden away in the folds of a centuries-long tradition of Christianising and spiritualising the NT (and the Bible overall). The depoliticisation and demilitarisation of the NT works hand in glove with a long history of its dejudaising and equally long ghettoising of the Bible through narrow spiritual interpretation, obscuring or blurring its socio-political nature.*

**Key Words:** Ghettoising; Depoliticising; Demilitarising; Dejudaising

### Introduction

In 1980 James Barr published an article in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* with the title, “The Bible as a Political Document”. In this publication, he argued that the Bible contains some politically powerful images. His focus was on the OT because he believed it was invoked more often than the NT in political discourse. He identified six politically-related notions that the Bible was deemed to project through the centuries: theocratic; neutral or dualistic; prophetic; migrating nation; new heaven and earth; and liberation (Barr 1980:271-287). The goal here is not to continue along this vein and identify political motifs in the NT along the lines Barr did some three and a half decades ago. Rather, my interest lies in pointing out both the political nature of the NT documents *as such*, as well as to consider what is at stake in pursuing the ‘politicalness’ of the NT, in short, to reflect on the significance of the NT’s political nature.

To some extent my aim is aligned more with an additional concern Barr expressed. Further to but also in relation to the six images he identified, Barr wanted “to consider from what stratum of biblical thinking it derives and to what extent, if any, it is justified when seen against the actual intentions of that particular stratum of the Bible” (Barr 1980:268). But even here my goal does not quite match Barr’s. My aim is not to locate the stratum in the Bible or the NT which is political in nature, but, again, to argue that the very documents in themselves are political in nature.<sup>2</sup> My argument makes the rather obvious but at times also contested point: the NT emerged from a context which was suffused in politics and left its mark on our texts, in a time when politics was not considered an almost separate, distinct part of human life – as is often the case in modern times.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an edited version of a paper read at the annual NTSSA meeting, 7-10 April 2015, Pretoria.

<sup>2</sup> Caveat: Of course the NT as ‘document’ is a convention rather than invention; it is a theological rather than historical or literary category.

<sup>3</sup> Barr was also interested in how the Bible is used politically in modern times. Upon considering the six major political images in the Bible beside one another, Barr concludes that “most political views that have appealed to the Bible or have been derived from it are only partly in agreement with it, or are in agreement only with a

## Un-ghettoising the New Testament? Dealing with Reception History

The contemporary concern with the political nature of the Bible has a historical run-up. In this regard the linguistic turn of the late twentieth century is an important marker as it introduced a new hermeneutical and even epistemological consciousness in New Testament studies.<sup>4</sup> The linguistic turn did not lead in all instances to similar results nor received equal acclaim among scholars, but now the constitutive role and impact of language could no longer be denied. Traditional, long-held beliefs in historical objectivity and the ability to describe a past as it actually happened began to make way for the realisation that the past does not exist outside its literary presentation.<sup>5</sup> With the literary construction of the past acknowledged, attention is required on the one hand for the ideological nature of all historical (re)presentations,<sup>6</sup> and on the other hand for literary texts as cultural products as well as interrelated parts of complex networks of significance (e.g. Lopez 2011:80). Since such interconnectedness is embedded in various power constellations, cultural (Harrill 2011:281-311; Martin 2005:1-21) and political turns (Stanley 2011:111) are taking place in New Testament studies.<sup>7</sup>

It is not surprising then that some scholars have started to notice the political ramifications of the New Testament documents. Jacob Taubes (2004:16, cf. 24-25) for example has described Romans as a declaration of war against Rome. However, the problems James Barr and others raised over the years regarding the spiritualisation of the Bible remain, and in fact, questions regarding the ghettoising of the Bible are becoming stronger. Scholars are asking whether biblical studies can create space for considering the Bible's legacy in contemporary society's cultural heritage, where it has continued to be a "book for life" in the sense of an identity cultural marker (Brenner 2000:11). The continuing focus on the Bible along narrow theological or spiritual dimensions unfortunately has restricted the Bible on many fronts to a contextless encyclopaedia or manual of faith. To be clear, the point is not to deny the theological dimensions of or in these texts. The crux of the matter is rather to consider adequate measures to prevent the totalising effect of theological interpretations, resulting in the exclusion of even richer, deeper meaning of the texts. One such a measure is to acknowledge and account for the NT's political nature.

The NT emerged from a world with an integrated, holistic life and where politics, economics, culture and religion as isolated, discrete spheres of life was unheard of. Those elements called politics and religion today were then so closely connected that they amounted to one and the same<sup>8</sup> (e.g. Hollingshead 1998:x). It does not surprise that the

thin segment within it, or indeed are not in agreement with it at all" (Barr 1980:288-289).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty's edited volume of 1967 is sometimes cited as coining the term 'linguistic turn', but the linguistic turn's many precursors would include many others, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein.

<sup>5</sup> "History itself, insofar as it is discernible by any human being, is just like a text in that it is constructed by a particular person in a particular time and place. And it must be interpreted like a text. There is, in the end, no escape from language and textuality" (Martin 2005:18).

<sup>6</sup> "Of course we must recognize that revolutionary interpretations of Scripture can be [sic] as ideological as interpretations by those in power, just as feminist interpretations can be [sic] as ideological as patriarchal interpretations" (Bauckham 1989:18).

<sup>7</sup> The political and cultural turns at times go in opposite directions; cf. e.g. Harrill (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary labels such as 'theological' or 'political', and especially the attempts to maintain a distinction between them, would not have been understood in the first century CE. "The attempt to suggest a division here between the 'religious' and the 'political' is entirely unhistorical" (Bryan 2005:27). "[G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods" (Ehrman 2008:27).

political nature of the texts often surfaces not in distinction to but especially *through* the theological or ideological tenor of NT documents (e.g. Carter 2006: esp. 83-99; Crossan 2008:59-73; cf. Crossan and Reed 2004:10).<sup>9</sup> So for example, while the imperial ideology of the Roman Empire cannot be equated with the theology of the NT, some interesting analogies emerge when comparing the two.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, and in a way that appears ironic today, the ‘spiritual’ use of the Bible requires proper attention to its political nature and setting, not the denial or ignoring of the Bible’s political nature.

Spiritualisation has not only obscured the political nature of NT texts, but adversely affected the discipline in the ensuing development of a narrowed focus on texts, complete with accompanying truncated notions about language and human society. The long-standing reluctance to account for the world behind the NT texts in its own right and not as backdrop or ‘background’ for the texts, privileged source critical interest in possible textual precursors and form critical attention to formative communities. “[T]raditional commentaries which ignore the socio-cultural context of words imply that language means nothing, and that lexical choices betray nothing about the writer. Words exist without context, and combinations of words become mere poetic or rhetorical adornment” (Hobbs 1995:253). Sociological research, however, ignited the more sustained inclusion of socio-historical contexts in the interpretation of these texts. Contextually aware text-interpretation has impacted on biblical hermeneutics, but also on the Bible’s political use, which probably deserves a word here given accompanying assumptions about its political nature.

Thorough study of the NT texts’ historical context can be an antidote to the simplistic application of the Bible to contemporary (read, political) issues (Bauckham 1989:19). Such application often depended on two flawed principles or processes. The selection of specific texts from the Bible for political purposes rests on the notion that the Bible contains some ‘corrective core’ (Bird 1994:333) which, when discovered, will unlock it as liberatory texts. In addition, the very process of selecting so-called appropriate texts suffers from a major deficiency, as well put by Bauckham (1989:4): the “selection has all too often been governed by expedience rather than by any hermeneutical principle, and it has therefore been in danger of being an ideological manipulation of Scripture to support current principles and programmes”. The detrimental effects of such practices have pushed enquiries about the political nature of the Bible further to the side, and ended up contributing to its ghettoising.

The matter of ghettoising the biblical texts by granting the socio-historical context of their origins novelty (and therefore no real) value and by insisting on spiritualising the texts according to later (modern) theological frameworks, is even more complicated. Such ghettoising often acted in concert with depoliticising, demilitarising and dejudaising

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<sup>9</sup> Seven important characteristics of Roman imperial theology start with recognition of the connections between civilization, mythology, religion and also theology in the Roman world; the centrality of the emperor cult; the promotion of imperial divinity; its spread through imperial-aligned elites; the enduring significance of the divinity of the living Augustus; divine status attributed to emperors as dynastic and imperial prerogative; its promotion largely through images and structures, including poems, inscriptions, coins and images, statues, altars and other structures (Crossan 2008:59-62); cf. Ovid’s *Tristia* 3.1.36-39 where Augustus is portrayed as a Jupiter incarnated.

<sup>10</sup> The imperial cult or emperor worship also illustrates something of the interrelated nature of (what we would call) religion and politics. Ruler cults were not new phenomena in the East, but imperial Rome realised the ideological and socio-political value of promoting and supporting the Roman Emperor cult (Crossan 2008:59-73; Friesen 2001 and Price 1984). As Price (1984:237) summarises, “A Christianizing theory of religion which assumes that religion is essentially designed to provide guidance through the personal crises of life and to grant salvation into life everlasting imposes on the imperial cult a distinction between religion and politics”.

tendencies. In fact, it may very well be that all four, ghettoising, depoliticising, demilitarising and dejudaising, mutually and reciprocally reinforced each other, and all four together jointly.

### Resisting the Depoliticising of the NT

Pleas to discontinue the depoliticising of the Bible are not (necessarily) tantamount to a search for political programmes of action or political action figures in the texts. Resisting the depoliticising of the Bible does not equate with the postulation of or support for a radical, militaristic Jesus<sup>11</sup> deeply involved in the politics of his day (cf. Brandon 1967), or a liberated Paul intent on actively resisting the Roman Empire (Elliott 1994:181-230). As Bauckham rightly insists, “we need to recognize that the political material in the Bible consists largely of stories about and instructions addressed to political societies very different from our own” (Bauckham 1989:12). In the Old Testament, for example, one finds largely a theocratic society, inhabited by a quasi-nationalist, religiously defined people of God in the concept of a perceived *select* group, with different norms, living according to a very particular rule for life, established within a covenantal relationship with their God.<sup>12</sup> In the New Testament an apocalyptic framework explains much of the idiosyncratic behaviour of the two Jews, Jesus and Paul, with respect to their textually portrayed political stances and also in as far as their attitude towards the Torah within a Jewish context is concerned.<sup>13</sup> The apocalyptic tenor of the NT, however, did not waylay the politics of first-century life, but stood in direct relation to the imperial context of the time.

Depoliticising of the Bible happens already when the political frameworks of the day, the socio-political context of the text which is not always directly included in the text itself, are neglected or denied. Reluctance to admit to possible influence of the Roman imperial context on NT texts was supported proficiently through scholarly consensus. The scholarly tradition of Romanisation stressed the ostensible benefits of Roman rule and slighted or denied its brutality and domination of other people (e.g. Mattingly 2011), and so prevented the consideration of its harsh impact on first-century life. Romanisation was not simply, as frequently portrayed, an elite-driven promotion of a bounded cultural identity. The imperialist drive for Roman identity manifested variously in different localities,<sup>14</sup> and was a dynamic, negotiated process rather than some essence.<sup>15</sup> Romanness in no way amounted to

<sup>11</sup> As Barr (1980:276, original emphasis) also pointed out, “Jesus as depicted in the Gospels is not a militaristic revolutionary”, but nevertheless insists that “For Jesus it was much more clear that the actual power, even in Jewish affairs, came from Rome”.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Fletcher (1992:115-117) for examples from the Old Testament (agrarian legislation and the prophets) and the New Testament (slavery) which indicate the importance of and need to take the historical context of biblical texts into account. Fletcher also stresses “the contrast between the social setting of the early Christian communities and that of ... the Israelites in the time of the prophets”. The differences between contemporary and biblical values are especially prevalent in ethics, but room does not allow for discussion. For a quick word on the broad political structure reflected in the Bible, cf. Bauckham (1989:3, 5) on the Old Testament’s role of “ordering Israel’s political life” while the New Testament is addressed to “a politically powerless minority”.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Marcus (1996:24-25) who argues concerning the fraternisation of Jesus with unrepentant sinners that the belief that the “new age has begun to break through” has the necessary corollary that “the Law’s sharp structuring distinction between the realm of the pure and that of the impure has begun to disintegrate”.

<sup>14</sup> People’s experience of public spaces in the Roman Empire entailed two consequences. On the one hand, sharing public spaces facilitated a shared Roman identity and Roman power structures. On the other hand, sharing public spaces at various localities across the Roman Empire contributed to the formation of local identities as well. Shared ideals were as much part of Roman-ness as were their local specificity.

<sup>15</sup> As Graham (2009:1) describes Revell’s position: “‘Roman-ness’ [was] a discourse rather than a static and unchanging label of identity”.

homogeneity but was a discourse that shifted as people engaged in it, in different ways in various places throughout Empire.<sup>16</sup> Empire promoted its self-claimed right to maintain social order and to establish and enforce a normative political regime. In fact, imperial ideology rather than brute force was key to the Roman Empire's power.<sup>17</sup> In the process, imperial ideology mongering worked hand in hand with memory making.<sup>18</sup> The Empire not only crafted policy for its own interests, but also reinvented history to serve its imperial purposes (Mattingly 2011:75-93).<sup>19</sup> A shared historical narrative was created through inscriptions and statues to reproduce the emperor's power and to give it legitimacy: "power was written into the physical fabric of provincial towns" (Revell 2009:107; cf. Punt 2014). First-century people and also those involved in the compilation of NT texts experienced the constant and relentless pressure of the ideological shaping and restructuring of the world and daily life through Roman imperial agency.

Comprehensive studies of imperialism and empire therefore help to frame the parameters of the political context with which to approach also the first century Mediterranean world. With imperialism "as massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life and which cannot be controlled by any one actor alone" (Rieger 2007:4), or focused more on human experience, the notion that "[a]t the heart of imperialism is the denial of right and even humanness to those made subject to another's rule" (Wiley 2007:55), the shape of first-century life becomes clearer. But while modern theory provides useful categories for thinking about empire, at the same time caution is advised to avoid imposing anachronistic and ethnocentric concepts on NT times.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, admitting to the diversity and complexity of imperialism, a number of helpful parameters aid our understanding of the notion. The concept of empire is unencumbered by borders as it postulates a regime that effectively encompasses all reality (the civilised world), in the total sense of the word. Empire's rule extends beyond matters material and, therefore, exercises its influence on people in a holistic and not merely in a corporeal way, impacting on all dimensions of human life. Empire "creates the very world it inhabits," which includes the material or external as well as the internal world as ultimate bio-power. And finally, although empire's practice is "continually bathed in blood," the *concept* of empire is always committed to peace, which is a peace that transgresses all conventional boundaries to become "a perpetual and universal peace outside of history"

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<sup>16</sup> Revell's book can be criticised for its tendency to allow the focus on power relations, political activities and associated structures to relegate the non-elite to passive bystanders, not allowing for their participation except in as far as they experienced the opposite of the elite who regulated their identities through their experiences of the forum, basilica or temple. "[O]ther spaces in town may have acted in a similar manner for different members of the community". The absence of competing identities or opposition to the reigning ideologies, and how these may have been engaged by the non-elite is also absent from Revell's work (Graham 2009:4).

<sup>17</sup> Historically an empire presents itself as a system of instrumental ideas, "an inter-textual network of interests and meanings implicated in the social, political and institutional contexts of colonial hegemony" (Said 1991:8).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. Gowing (2005) on the republic in imperial (=princirate) memory.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Empire or Christianity in the end and notwithstanding its perpetuation of slavery and savage judicial penalties (and still unequal, although no longer restricted to the non-elite), by breaking the elite's monopoly contributed to the ideological consensus that deleted the non-elite from contemporary cultural consciousness (Perkins 2009:172-181). It remains a question whether the non-elite was subsequently allowed agency and voice in memory and historical narrative.

<sup>20</sup> "Its [imperialism's] connotations come from the modern rhetoric of the European nation-state building in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which evoke the polarized categories of 'colonizers' and 'colonized'. These connotations presume 'imperialism' to be a single, uniform phenomenon across world history, literature, and geography. But empires are of different kinds, even if not European" (Harrill 2011:288).

(Hardt and Negri 2000:xv). Although such depictions of imperialism are not without contention, they simultaneously forefront, on the one hand, the complex variety of what is referred to as empire and imperialism and, on the other hand, the appropriateness of including also the notion of hegemony beyond narrow binaries – particularly in the sense pointed out by Antonio Gramsci: hegemony as domination by consent.<sup>21</sup> When imperialism is understood as negotiated hegemony, a much broader scope of activities rather than simply a truncated notion of political-military acts come into play, especially given the cultural impact and influence of the Christian Bible and the NT on Western culture. For the NT, in a word, imperialism concerns the presence of Rome, Romans and their associates.

The political nature of NT texts reflects their socio-historical context of origin. Yet, as much as the early followers of Christ do not seem to catch the attention of local authorities, the NT texts do not appear preoccupied with the Roman Empire in its many different guises.<sup>22</sup> The NT may reveal little directly about Empire because the Jesus followers had little direct interaction with it.<sup>23</sup> Then again, since the Romans ruled through local representatives, the distance between Rome and the NT texts and authors may simply have diluted the Roman nature of political agency at the time. In addition, some NT texts may have seen the actions of local authorities, client kings, and the emperor as part of the constellation of (evil) powers of this world. Coming to terms with the relation between Empire and NT texts is complicated further by a high context-society like that found in the first century, where there was no need to spell out the obvious.<sup>24</sup> One aspect about the relationship between Empire and people is that it clearly should not be understood in binary fashion, or in simple contrasting terms, but as complex relations, often adversarial, mostly compromised, and always up for negotiation. This is the context which constituted the world from which the NT documents derived.

### Rethinking the Demilitarisation of the NT<sup>25</sup>

NT scholars, notwithstanding the ubiquity of the Roman Empire and its soldierly presence, have been conditioned not to recognise the imperial (military) presence, and its impact on the NT texts. In his overview of Pauline images Collins (2008:225-261) cannot muster more than a single reference to military concerns. Collins listed the reference as one form of understanding the *agōn*-topos under a heading “Running and fighting” notwithstanding a wealth of Pauline military images – many of which, ironically, are pointed out at various places in his book. Understandably one can complain that “[i]n commentaries on the other

<sup>21</sup> Moore explains the concept of domination by consent as the “active participation of a dominated group in its own subjugation” and regardless of the fact that the subjugated numerically outweighs those exercising power over them, even if the oppressor or army of occupation may have the advantage in terms of instruments of subjugation such as sophisticated weaponry and the like. “In such cases ... the indigene’s desire for self-determination will have been replaced by a discursively inculcated notion of the greater good, couched in such terms as social stability ... and economic and cultural advancement” (Moore 2006:101).

<sup>22</sup> It may also be a matter of genre, since the NT letters and gospel biographies of Jesus are not quite the same as Ezra 4, the Sibylline Oracles or the Wisdom of Solomon; however, cf. Revelation in the NT.

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions are texts referring directly (Rm. 13:1-7; 1 Pt. 2:13-14, 17; Ac. 25:10-12) and indirectly (Rev. 13) to Jesus followers in relation to the Empire and emperor.

<sup>24</sup> The other side of the coin is important too: reading grids developed over the last two centuries did not tolerate much consideration of Empire and were reluctant to pick up such clues (e.g. Leander 2013, on Mark).

<sup>25</sup> The use of military imagery in the Pauline letters, in connection with social disadvantage was discussed at length elsewhere, see Punt (2016). Harrill (2011:304-308) connects Paul’s heavy use of military imagery to his apocalyptic language, showing the link between the Roman valorisation of war and emperor worship (well symbolised in the carved oak wreath, or *corona civica*).

passages where war/military language appears, the metaphor is also underplayed” (Hobbs 1995:253). Searching for literary antecedents in earlier or contemporary texts to the New Testament in order to explain New Testament texts, assumes that the latter were interested only in literary allusions. But imposing the concerns of Western novelists or essayists on ancient texts smacks of anachronism at least. Yet, the problem is greater, though, in that “[s]uch domestication of the language does not take into consideration the nature of ancient Mediterranean society as an honour-shame society, nor does it take into consideration the way metaphor functions within such a high-context society, which tends to produce texts that take for granted large amounts of information” (Hobbs 1995:252).<sup>26</sup>

The ubiquity of soldiers and military materials, with their physical presence or in occupying ideological space, explain much of the NT’s military imagery. In the Gospels, Lk. 13:1-3 and Mk. 13:7, and Acts 5:36-37 acknowledge tensions between Jews and the Empire, and of revolt and retaliation, hinting at the broader and more pervasive impact of imperial domination.<sup>27</sup> The Pauline letters largely lack direct references to the Empire and its military enterprises in the sense of armed conflict but surprise with a strong presence of military imagery.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, the warlike elements may be related to the apocalyptic tenor and do not really intend to script Christ or life in Christ in like manner (Von Harnack 1905:9; Zerbe 2012:127-129). On the other hand, Paul’s letters mirror the rest of the NT, where war is also not addressed directly although indirect indications to war and fighting occur: sometimes in relation to God’s kingdom and Jesus’ kingship in the Gospels; in appeals for non-retaliation and love of enemies; in reference to Jesus’ personal behaviour; and, with regard to texts referring to the roles of the state and military officials, the use of force (cf. Marshall 1985:115-116; Swartley 2006:48).<sup>29</sup>

Warfare imagery is used metaphorically in many NT texts to describe life in Christ.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of rhetorical aims, such imagery contributed in different ways to the rhetorical construction of social life in the first century. Military images underscore the link between violence and war,<sup>31</sup> but also indicate a masculine sense of identity.<sup>32</sup> “[M]ilitary images can and do collaborate in an interlocking fashion as part of an overarching system of subordination and control” (Marchal 2005:281). On the one hand, Hobbs (1995:250) is

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<sup>26</sup> Drawing on the work of Jacobs-Malina (1993), Hobbs asserts that “the military metaphor presents a decisive shift in the self-understanding of at least a substantial part of the primitive Christian community” (Hobbs 1995:255), a development or a corrective depending on one’s chronology of the NT documents.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. e.g. Schotroff’s calculations of the huge numbers of soldiers during the time of Augustus (1992:157).

<sup>28</sup> Even when Paul details a long list of sufferings endured on behalf of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:16-33), he did not indicate any specified run-ins with the Roman authorities and its soldiers. Partly because of devolution of power along patronage lines? Partly because the presence of Empire in Paul’s letters is the proverbial fish in the ocean scenario, with the fish not accounting for the most obvious part of its context? It has been suggested that Paul as tentmaker (cf. Acts 18:3 ἦσαν γὰρ σκηνοποιοὶ τῆ τέχνης) may have been in regular contact with army chiefs as far as provisioning of tents was concerned (Bruce 1980:235).

<sup>29</sup> As one model of the interrelationship between war and peace in the NT, cf. Swartley’s (2006:50-52) 7 theses.

<sup>30</sup> In the deutero-Pauline Pastorals, Timothy is also exhorted to be “a good soldier of Christ Jesus,” “wage the good warfare,” not “entangled in civilian pursuits” and living with the sole aim of pleasing “the one who enlisted him” (1 Tim. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:3; 2 Tim. 2:4; cf. Clines (2001:185).

<sup>31</sup> “The purpose of being strong as a man, and especially of being stronger than other men, is to be able to overcome them and if need be kill them. The name for strength in action, in traditional male terms, is violence. And the name for the violent action of men in groups is war” (Clines 2003:184).

<sup>32</sup> As Clines (2003:184) notes about Paul, “Paul is no warrior, but he is a traditional male, and he participates in violence in the ways open to him, given the historical and social setting supplied for him in texts by him and about him” (Clines 2003:184). Gender was another important factor in the interplay between the military and social life in the first century.

correct that the bulk of military language is referential or descriptive, and that in the Gospels soldiers are not portrayed to be acting as agents of an alien power. But on the other hand, in a high-context (Malina) social location where social customs and worldview are embedded in the text and not spelt out in every detail, those who received NT traditions and texts would have been in no doubt on whose behalf soldiers were acting.

Military imagery in the NT documents not only suggests malignant influence on communities and their people from the side of the Roman army together with lingering effects, but is also testimony to how in postcolonial mimicry-style NT authors took up and used such imagery, to further their own cause. The ambivalence often inhabiting post-colonial contexts is present in the NT documents, too!<sup>33</sup> The use of military images as metaphors and not references to actual military service indicates both the co-optation of imperial language and its use for a new, different purpose.<sup>34</sup> Martin's (2015:17) argument about historians is equally applicable to exegetes: "The goal of the historian becomes not the conscious or even unconscious intentions of the author but the larger matrix of symbol systems provided by the author's society from which he must have drawn whatever resources he used to 'speak his mind'". Recognition of the political nature of NT texts requires attention not only for their Roman imperial setting, and for the abundance of military metaphors, but also for the Jewish context of these texts.

### Repelling the Dejudaising of the NT

The NT documents are Jewish. Written in Greek and embedded in a Roman world, the NT texts are Second Temple Judaism literature. However, I invoke Reed and Dohrmann's (2013:4) argument here too: as much as "Rome still remains invisible or occluded in a surprising proportion of studies on Jewish materials written under Roman rule and/or by Roman citizens", "Jews are frequently dismissed as atypical by scholars of Roman history" – a remark equally applicable to NT studies by and large. Dealing with matters Jewish in the first century is challenging anyhow, since pluriformity and diversity characterised Jewish life in Palestine and in Diaspora during the Hellenistic and Roman period.<sup>35</sup> Recent scholarship deconstructs the dichotic divide imposed between Judaism and Hellenism (Gerdmar 2001; Engberg-Pedersen 2001). The thinking of someone like Paul was wrapped up in the story of Israel. He wrote not as a Christian theologian, but as a first-century Jewish teacher of gentiles responding to concrete situations in early communities of Christ-followers. The purpose of Paul's letters clearly was not to reject or criticise Judaism, but were Paul's response to God's call to be a "light to the nations" (Johnson-Hodge 2007).

Part of the difficulty of dealing with Judaism in the first century, is that it was neither aloof from the 'normalising' impact of the Roman Empire, nor were the boundary lines

<sup>33</sup> However, as some scholars quickly stress, "...*identifying* the military or modelling rhetorics of the letter does not necessarily mean we must, or even can, *identify with* Paul as model or military figure (as many Pauline scholars have previously done)" (Marchal 2005:286, emphasis in original; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 40-57).

<sup>34</sup> E.g. the power of Paul's images stacked up against the power of imperial images (cf. Collins 2008; Zanker 1990; also Lopez 2012). Eventually the Pauline military imagery reaches its full development in the Pastoral Epistles, with their call upon Jesus followers to become soldiers of God. The correspondence in phraseology between τὴν καλὴν στρατείαν (1 Tm. 1:18); καλὸς στρατιώτης Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (2 Tm. 2:3), and ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως 1 Tm. 6:12 and 2 Tm. 4:7 is evident (cf. Pfitzner 1967:165-171).

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Bij de Vaate and Van Henten (1996:27-28); Goodman (2007:146). In the first-century, there was no authoritative or normative Judaism: Judaism was a *pluriform* phenomenon. This is borne out by the different categories of Judaism(s) during the first century, i.e. rabbinic (or Palestinian), Hellenistic (or diaspora), and apocalyptic (cf. e.g. Howell 1993:317).

between Jewish and non-Jewish identity rigid but, at times, blurred, in fact (Bij de Vaate and Van Henten 1996:28). This leads to one of two conclusions, both contentious. Relaxed 'border-control' in the first century probably initiated more cordial relationships between Jews and non-Jews, and such interaction was likely to generate one of two reactions (and some positions in between): mutual acceptance of Jewish and non-Jewish *bona fides*, or alternatively, a more determined effort – at least from Jewish hard-liners – to re-establish social (and political) control by insistence on adequate lines of demarcation.<sup>36</sup> Such controversies constituted the Jewish context, in which also the earliest NT texts including Paul's letters, were crafted. So, besides Paul's Jewish-affirmative claims in e.g. Rom 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22, his apparent dismissal of his Jewish heritage in Phil 3:5 may not be that at all. In Phil 3:5-6 Paul refers to himself in the present tense as a Jew, listing many attributes in support, but concluding in Phil 3:7, [ἀλλὰ] ἅτινα ἦν μοι κέρδη, ταῦτα ἤγημαι διὰ τὸν Χριστὸν ζημίαν. Segal's observation is typical of general scholarship: "As is quite clear from his rhetoric, he has thrown this all [his Jewish and Pharisaic identity] over to be *in Christ* and this is a mark of derision" (Segal 2003:159). But the interpretive framework is not different religious paradigms, but rather a polemic between Paul and his adversaries. As is clear from his other letters also, Paul is not ditching his Jewish credentials, but he indicates that he no longer bases his status claims on them (Eisenbaum 2009:140; cf. Punt 2015).

Looking at either the NT authors' Jewish context or only their Roman context is not enough, then, because these contexts intersect with one another. So for example, various sources attest to special privileges given to Jewish communities in the Roman Empire.<sup>37</sup> Since political and religious powers were inextricably linked in ancient times, all were expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the politico-religious system. However, "Jews as a rule were exempt from the obligation to participate in Greco-Roman religious feasts and other such rites" (Zetterholm 2009:7). Jewish historian Josephus (*BJ* 7.45; *C. Ap.* 2.282) claims that Judaism was quite trendy in first-century Rome, to the extent that non-Jews adopted Jewish customs and names. On the one hand so-called God-fearers participated in synagogue activities (e.g. Zetterholm 2009:5); on the other hand, various ancient sources indicate that Jews were given concessions<sup>38</sup> which allowed them largely to maintain their customs and beliefs. It means that, notwithstanding occasional outbreaks of violence against them,<sup>39</sup> Jews were relatively settled during imperial times. The early followers of

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<sup>36</sup> An awareness of separation, even a principled insistence upon separation, seems clearly attested in some early to mid-second century writers (Ignatius, Marcion, Justin); equally clearly, we see strong indications of persistent, intimate interactions (Fredriksen 2007:61). "Judaism in the Second Temple Period was not very rigid, and was constantly changing. These changes can only be understood as being the result of an awareness and openness found in certain groups in Judaism during their ambivalent and continuous rapport with the Gentiles" (Mendels 1998:33).

<sup>37</sup> E.g., exemption from military duty and the emperor cult, the right to keep the Sabbath and to collect the temple tax, cf. Perkins (1988:28). Stanley (2011:125) argues that Roman anxiety about their status in comparison with the revered histories of the Egyptians and Greeks, and the special privileges accorded to Jews in many parts of the Empire, are testimony to Roman lenience regarding identity categories. By the fourth century the privileged position of the Jews in the Roman Empire changed with the political triumph of Christianity (De Lange 1978:281).

<sup>38</sup> E.g., exemption from military duty and the emperor cult, the right to keep the Sabbath and to collect the temple tax – and even its transportation to Jerusalem; cf. Perkins (1988:28).

<sup>39</sup> Such animosity came mainly from the Roman intelligentsia and the violence caused by localised tensions, and it was the Jewish success in attracting both converts and sympathizers that often aggravated Roman antipathy (Wilson 1992:835). And ambiguity reigned in any case, "The tension between pro-Roman and anti-Roman sentiment comes to be characteristic of Jewish attitudes in the following years. Prayers for the welfare of the

Jesus who were Jewish or associated with Jews, obviously shared in these privileges. Tensions between Jesus believers and other Jews also showed, as has been the case quite often, that the greatest danger to any community or organisation was often perceived as the danger from within (cf. Green 1985:49-69; Simmel, in Matthews and Gibson 2005:4; Frankfurter 2005:142).

The single biggest problem with dejudaising the NT texts is probably the perpetuation of the notion that Christianity carries in itself some essence that reaches beyond any or all human culture. The NT texts and also early Christianity is de-ethnicised in the process. Such dejudaised essentialism leads to a general failure to appreciate how the NT related to Jewish belief and practice as that which far exceeded any comparable considerations of the contemporary polytheistic cultures. In fact, aspects of Jewish culture were considered normative in the NT as signalled already by the extensive ways in which the Scriptures of Israel are invoked through quotations, allusions and echoes in the NT documents. Not only texts, but the early Jesus followers chose to accept “the master narrative of ancient Israelites”, and not the myths and narratives of the ancient Greeks or the contemporary Romans. “They have accepted the story of this particular ethnic people, the God of their homeland, their myths about creation and the ordering of the cosmos, and the morals inscribed in their sacred scripture.” The dejudaising of the NT texts works hand in hand with the idea held by Christians that their religion transcends ethnicity. Along with a theological interpretation of NT texts, Christians have taken over Jewish identity markers, and translated them into “an ethnically neutral, all-inclusive tradition which is somehow beyond the normal human characteristics of culture, its discourses and practices” (Johnson Hodge 2007:4). The ghettoising of the NT rests upon a theological interpretation averse to the texts’ political nature, and which has purged the texts of both its Jewishness and the significance thereof.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming the Political Nature of NT texts**

Many centuries of reading the New Testament documents as politically quietist have left their mark, also on the scholarly community.<sup>40</sup> However, in recent years various scholars have started pointing to political aspects in and related to the New Testament. The unwillingness to admit to the political nature of the NT texts, the opposition to empire studies, and the reluctance to employ postcolonial and similar approaches to biblical texts often derive from scholarship intent on keeping the privileging of the theological interpretation intact.<sup>41</sup> Traditional biblical scholarship is embedded in theology, but the pressure of theological frameworks tends to skew the investigations of biblical scholarship. ✓ “Our scholarly habit of pretending that we are dealing with primarily religious texts or institutions, which means basically imposing modern presuppositions and concepts on

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empire stand side by side with prayers for its overthrow and the establishment of the messianic empire” (De Lange 1978:266).

<sup>40</sup> Questions about the political nature of NT text raise further questions about how much attention to devote to the history of interpretation. And to the role of methodologies that are biased towards spiritualisation? And how to explain methodologies such as historical criticism’s failure to pick up on socio-political concerns, although as methodology it is not precisely inclined towards matters spiritual? Or did historical criticism with its concern to resist dogmatism and its influence of biblical interpretation contribute to the deflation of theological discourse, which, ironically, contributed to the depoliticisation of NT texts?

<sup>41</sup> Elliott (2000:22,33) e.g. appeals to Said’s postcolonial work and suggests that contemporary Pauline studies by and large have become a “cultural colony of Europe”, in its preoccupation with a theological agenda inherited from the Reformation.

historical materials that had neither concepts nor terms for religion, blocks rather than enhances understanding” (Horsley 1991:163).<sup>42</sup> As Horsley stresses, the NT texts and their history are not ‘religious’ in the narrow sense of the word, and cannot be divorced from those spheres of life referred to today as politics or economics.<sup>43</sup>

As alluded to above, religion in the Roman Empire was predominantly a matter of participation in rituals. “The ritual was what mattered, rather than any doctrinal or theological rationale” (Bryan 2005:117), which augurs against the validity of a construct such as “Roman imperial theology” (cf. Carter 2006; Crossan 2008; Crossan and Reed 2004:10). Officially sanctioned ritual activities constituted religion in the eyes of the Romans. Notwithstanding some ‘theological reflection’ (e.g. Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*), religious rites were what constituted reality for the general populace.<sup>44</sup> Ironically, the realisation of an integrated first-century life-world and the equally socio-political and religious significant lives people lived because they had no other option can and does enhance theological work, including biblical interpretation.<sup>45</sup> One simple but crucial aspect of life in the first century was its integrated nature, where people did not experience socio-cultural, economic-political or religious dimensions of their lives as separate entities.<sup>46</sup>

Admitting the political nature of the NT, that the NT are political documents, does not mean perceiving NT texts as political treatises or themed propaganda. The political nature of NT texts is all about recognising the texts’ political contexts of origin, acknowledging their politically-aligned language, and granting the political significance of their Jewish setting.<sup>47</sup> The chicken and egg argument about whether the spiritualisation of the Bible contributed to the long established and venerated (by some) tradition of the separation of church and politics, or whether the insistence on this separation led to the spiritualisation of the Bible, will probably never be resolved. What is clear, though, is that the failure to acknowledge the political nature of the NT and Bible is deeply entrenched, and is

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<sup>42</sup> Incipient and later Christianity which started to emphasise faith and dogma, and converted people, misrepresented religion in Roman times. Roman religious forms were about actions, performing state and local rituals to appease the gods, even if (as Versnel 2011 points out) ancient religions were not totally devoid of beliefs. Christianity’s emphasis on faith as action and content would have seemed pointless to many, and even as jeopardising traditional understandings of the relationships between gods and humans.

<sup>43</sup> “‘Religion’ is embedded with kinship and/or local community life and/or ‘the state’ in virtually any traditional agrarian society, and hence is inseparable from political and economic matters” (Horsley 1991:163).

<sup>44</sup> A notion underwritten by the frequent references to the unacceptable practices (primarily, of not showing deference to Roman gods) rather than improper belief, reasoning or philosophy: “So, for pious Romans, Christians who refused to sacrifice were evidently *atheoi* – atheists” (Bryan 2005:118).

<sup>45</sup> Appreciating the empire and NT nexus, and empire studies’ value in biblical studies, can then advance beyond the rather reluctant observations of McKnight and Modica (2013:212-213), who summarise the insights of their book with three observations: Cognizance needs to be taken of the reality of the Roman Empire in New Testament studies; the Kingdom of God is in opposition not to the Roman Empire but to the Kingdom of Satan; and, the New Testament writers show readers how to live in the ‘already but not yet’ daily realities of empire.

<sup>46</sup> The world portrayed in both the Old and New Testaments is largely an agrarian world, even with the development towards an urban situation portrayed during the later stages of the New Testament. In an agrarian society one finds “the emergence of world religions, the process of urbanisation, the growth of conquest states, the increase of inequality in social stratification and the increase of the scarcity of resources” (Van Aarde 1994:578-579). Even before our world became so technological and the information age dawned upon us, Grant (1950:303) already argued that the reason for the perceived ‘impracticality’ and ‘impracticability’ of the gospel can be explained by “our overgrown urban and industrial society”.

<sup>47</sup> Of course, the situation is more complex, and requires further work on the complicity of the NT texts when it comes to matters political; e.g. Paul’s rhetoric was characterised by the same tendencies of inclusivity and multiplicity or elasticity as found in the prevailing and later early Christian discourses (see Cameron 1991:7-9).

connected to the modernist insistence on the separation of religion (belief) and politics. This ideological position, as valuable as it may be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has the potential to hamper and even to distort biblical hermeneutics and perceptions about (the nature of) the biblical documents.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Political leaders in various parts of the world have realised, if not always consciously reflected on the political nature of the Bible or at least its fortuitous use for political rhetoric (cf. Punt 2007).

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