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# FRAMING HUMAN DIGNITY THROUGH DOMINATION AND SUBMISSION? NEGOTIATING BORDERS AND LOYALTIES (OF POWER) IN THE NEW TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Networks of power characterised by domination and submission in a hierarchically and imperially inscribed context constituted the original context of the New Testament documents. This article in the first instance explores the extent to which domination and submission generated or contributed to specific loyalties as well as borders in NT texts. Secondly, the impact and lasting influence of fixed patterns of domination and submission on rhetorical, ideological and theological levels are considered – in connection with the extent to which NT documents interacted with and counteracted against such loyalties and possible border-crossings are evaluated. Finally, strategies are suggested for using texts born from domination and submission, as normative scriptures in discussions of human dignity.*

**Key Words:** Human Dignity; Power, Domination and Submission; First-century Social Structures; Biblical Interpretation

## Introduction: Power Relations Built upon Domination and Submission

The authors of the New Testament documents wrote in a socio-historical, setting marked out by networks of power formatted through domination and submission. Hierarchical patterns and imperial imposition characterised the first-century Mediterranean context, in the sense that hierarchy and empire at once constituted and inscribed the social location of communities and people whose lives intersected (also) with these documents. New Testament authors could not and did not escape the ubiquitous and overwhelming impact of their social contexts which were suffused in relations, systems and structures defined by unequal power relations. The texts abound with instances and sometimes glimpses of attempts to move beyond various aspects and notions of a far-reaching and all-encompassing socio-political network of domination and submission. But in the end, the fibre of the New Testament texts, with all its variety and differences, is informed and affected by real-life contexts inscribed by systems of power and regulation, in various ways, unlike that of (post)modern times and therefore different from an era in which human dignity is – overtly, at least – held up as a commendable ideal.

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Invoking biblical documents or even biblical discourse in discussions on human dignity is in itself already both a form of crossing borders as well as a case of conflicting loyalties – to link up with the theme of our consultation. Attempts to enlist the Bible in support of human dignity projects soon face manifold challenges, beyond but not altogether unrelated to temporal and spatial distance: texts written from a context and attitude based on inequality (in gender, ‘class’, and various other senses); texts exhibiting a range of different and even contradicting sentiments and positions; and, texts which have been enlisted as sanction for various indignant convictions and practices.<sup>2</sup> Conflicting loyalties are unavoidable not only in relating biblical texts to the human dignity discourse, with wide-ranging, contradictory opinions about the expediency and feasibility of the Bible’s involvement. It is particularly the broader web of relations built on *domination and submission* which constituted the social location of the New Testament texts and impacted on the texts, that particularly complicates the invocation of the texts in human dignity discussions.<sup>3</sup>

This article in the first instance explores the extent to which networks of power based on patterns of domination and submission generated or contributed to specific loyalties as well as borders in New Testament texts. Secondly, the impact and lasting influence of fixed patterns of domination and submission on rhetorical, ideological and theological levels will be considered – in connection with the extent to which New Testament documents interacted with and counteracted such loyalties, and to evaluate possible border-crossings. Finally, strategies for using biblical texts born from domination and submission as normative scriptures in discussions of human dignity are considered.

### **Domination and Submission: Generating Loyalties and Borders**

A variety of systems and structures, social, political, economic and otherwise, converged to form complex, wide-ranging ideological and social webs of domination and submission. In the New Testament such mechanisms included the following: real and metaphorical appeals to slavery; the imbuing of imperial language; the early Jesus-follower communities’ alignment with a hierarchical household, father and brotherhood and lordship language; and patronal portrayals of God. These well-represented notions and images fill the pages of New Testament texts, with many examples here taken from the Pauline letters.

#### *Slavery*

Depicting slavery as the most pervasive of all systems of domination in the first century world is no exaggeration. Reasons for enslavement included war, piracy and other factors, rendering the profile of first-century slavery varied and wide-ranging. The pervasive presence of institutionalised slavery had a massive impact in the Greco-Roman world, marking the society in terms of domination and submission. And “the master-slave relationship cannot be divorced from the distribution of power throughout the wider society in which both master and slave find themselves” (Patterson 1982:35). The impact of a slaveholding society upon New Testament authors is evident in their presuppositions of not only the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Punt (2010b:621-635) on concerns and considerations in employing biblical material in human dignity deliberations.

<sup>3</sup> My project is thus not one of determining whether a text is or can be imperialising (e.g. Dube 2000:125-155), or whether imperialisation enters courtesy of interpreters. The focus is on how texts that originated amidst networks of power determined by strategies and systems of domination and submission are affected by these social relations, raising particular hermeneutical questions in the case of normative texts.

presence of slavery but also its moral acceptability.<sup>4</sup> Acceptance extended to emphasising the suitable, submissive conduct of slaves towards the authority of slaveholders as an element of proper Christian life. In a slaveholding society characters and habits were moulded by lifetimes of command and obedience, where young and old became habituated to power, all of which was the backdrop for and certainly had an impact upon the emerging structures, worldview and self-understanding of the early Jesus-follower communities<sup>5</sup> (cf. Punt 2009). In Galatians Paul's insistence upon the contrast between siblings and slaves (Gal 3-4 in particular) is a good example of how this distinction formed the framework of his comments on how the community of believers was constituted, their identity and their relationship to the Jewish law.<sup>6</sup> Slavery and the punishment so closely linked to it, the cross, were in their original contexts imbued with what was opposite to human flourishing and dignity. The cross was a symbol of terror and tantamount to the destruction of human life itself – an instrument of shaming, torture and death, unleashed against the subordinate, the wilful, the insurgent – in a word, the archetypical slave (Punt 2009:446). In short, slavery impacted upon the lives and structures but also upon the worldview and self-understanding of the early Jesus-follower communities as is evident in the New Testament authors' (positive) use of slavery imagery (e.g. Martin 1990).

### *Empire*

Given its prevalence and pervasiveness, it is useful to start with the contribution of slavery to relationships characterised by domination and submission. Institutionalised slavery, however, was intertwined with the equally pervasive Empire – the foremost regulating force in the normalisation of power in the first century. Although it inherited and built upon a range of prevalent consciousness(es), attitudes, and even symbols and structures, the breadth and scope of the Empire's material power made it the major social player to be reckoned with in the prevailing context of power, domination and submission. The Roman Empire did not hesitate to use brute force. However, rather than brute force, the persistent threat of violence and its hegemonic ideological claims and attempts to normalise (its) power in society were the most crucial elements in making it so potent and influential. Critical for retaining power, the Empire relied on consent for its self-claimed right to maintain social order and to establish and enforce a normative political regime. Such consent was deliberately sought and coerced also as the Romans invested much time and energy to both overtly and subtly manipulate the daily lives of their subjects. Reminding them of Roman power, people's day-to-day existence was pervaded with iconography associated with the imperial family, affirmed by inscriptions testifying to their political

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<sup>4</sup> Claims that Jesus' teaching about the dignity of all people in the end destabilised the dehumanisation of slaves evidently ignores the importance of the trope of slavery in his teachings (cf. Glancy 2006:145). Another difficulty is also knowing when a narrative, in fact, has a slave in mind, cf. the two accounts of the Roman military official in Mt 8:5-13 and Lk 7:1-10 and the uncertainty about whether the afflicted person is a child or a slave.

<sup>5</sup> While Col 3:22-25 and Eph 6:5-9 addressed both slaveholders and slaves, indicating responsibilities and obligations and ostensibly (and at best) to maintain the stability of the household through treating the slaves fairly, in 1 Pt 2:18-21 slaves are instructed to submit even to excessive and abusive authority (cf. Punt 2010a).

<sup>6</sup> The notion of family cannot be monolithic either in a universalist nor a culturally determined sense, partly because the strong Greco-Roman influence and partly because Paul's own Jewish framework was sufficiently exposed to Hellenistic culture and Roman influence. And on top of this, Jewish families did not differ significantly from other contemporary forms of family in terms of structure, ideals and dynamics (Cohen 1993:2; cf. Kraemer 1993, 2003; Peskowitz 1993:31); not even in the treatment of slaves, when epigraphic inscriptions about the real lives of slaves are compared with rabbinic prescriptions about slaves (Martin 1993:113-129).

power: “to be confronted by such an image and to acknowledge its significance was to replicate and to legitimate his [the Emperor’s] power” (Revell 2009:89). Exposure to judicial decisions and decrees, paying taxes, and registering for a census were equally reminders of indebtedness to the Empire. Beyond administrative engagement, people were exposed to various media such as temples, altars, statues as well as inscriptions of imperial proclamations, imperial milestones, and coins which graphically depicted the same message: Roman power and control is absolute (Ando 2000:x; cf. Punt 2012).<sup>7</sup>

For all its grandstanding, military power and imposing ideological hegemony, the imperial domination and submission defined overlay filtered through incontrovertibly at existential level, that is in the daily, ordinary lives of first-century people.<sup>8</sup> One example is the first-century understanding of peace as linked to violence, that violence was a prerequisite for peace as much as peace was the outcome of violence (Tite 2004:39).<sup>9</sup> The tension – yet juxtaposition – of peace and violence fed into the normalisation of domination in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> This tension is evident in Paul’s alignment of God with peace (ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης) in 1 Th 5:23, while earlier he invoked God’s wrath for the destruction of τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν (“your [the Thessalonians] own countrymen,” 1 Th 2:14).<sup>11</sup> These tensions are ultimately best understood in a context ruled by patterns of domination and submission.

### Patronage

Institutionalised slavery and imperial hegemony intersected with patronage, which strategically informed first-century social structures more than most other socio-political

<sup>7</sup> As far as the Roman “web of legitimating practices entangling Roman subjects within an imperial ideology” is concerned, Perkins (2009:1-15) agrees with other scholars. Adding motive to the equation she argues that it is not only a matter of elaborating imperial ideology, but doing so in the interest of a particular group in the Empire, the elite. This does not mean that the Empire was an elite-driven enterprise but does acknowledge the elite’s vital role in Empire and in shaping ideology. In a ‘unity of self-interest’ the coalition of elites used imperial ideology to further their own interests. Perkins identifies another significant group in addition to the elite coalition, on the other side of the power spectrum, namely the early Christians. But were Christians so alienated from the Roman Empire as Perkins argues (Perkins 2009:40)? Admitting to different configurations in various imperial time frames, the negotiated nature of Empire remained intact.

<sup>8</sup> One of the clearest ways imperial ideology affected the people was through the coins they handled. During the Roman Empire coins were often illustrated with imperial images as well as honorific titles. In this way coins served the important purpose of portraying an emperor as a father requiring the necessary filial devotion. Such devotion did not amount to goodwill as much as adoration, “a virtue that characterises obedience, submission, and respect that a child ought to show to a parent who provides it with security” (Pilch 1999:25). Apart from its economic purpose, coins served a further purpose in imperial times, namely to impose upon all people its ideology and to claim people’s allegiance (cf. Wengst 1987:24).

<sup>9</sup> The similarities between the Roman *pax*, the Greek *eirene* and the Jewish *shalom*, and these jointly with the use of peace in the NT, has led Tite to conclude: “The Roman ‘Pax’ was merely the most prominent expression of concepts that were recognized throughout the ancient world, including Palestine” (Tite 1995:21). Wengst (1987) is representative of many who insist that the peace of the NT did not presuppose or operate in tandem with violence and considered the oppressed; in the end, the claim that “the Messianic peace and the Pax Romana are incompatible” (Schotroff 1992:163) is too simple.

<sup>10</sup> A postcolonial reading is therefore cognisant of the widespread implicit acceptance and sometimes even active pursuance of imperial or colonising influence, by both authors and interpreters (cf. Gooder 2008:182-183), even if for different reasons and goals. Some scholars argue that it was his focus on the cross (cf. 1 Cor 2:2), as the symbol of ultimate violence in the first century CE, that informed Paul’s ‘penchant for violence’ (Gager and Gibson 2005:19). For the violence and shame associated with the cross, cf. recently Scaer (2005, 1-5).

<sup>11</sup> The letter also depicts the audience as suffering things from their ‘countrymen’ just as some ‘Jews/Judeans’ are said to have killed Jesus and the prophets (1 Th 2:14-16). A contrast is created between an in-group whom “God has not destined for wrath” (1 Th 5:9) and those implicitly destined for such a fate – in shrill contrast to the apostle’s own appeal not to repay evil with evil (1 Th 5:15).

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systems.<sup>12</sup> Patronage was a well-established socially-embedded network of sophisticated reciprocity based on inequality, domination and submission.<sup>13</sup> It governed social relationships by arranging power dynamics with the aim of ensuring honour and prestige for the patron. Patronal reciprocity functioned in ways that can be described as either ‘generalised’ (interest of others as primary), or ‘balanced’ (mutual interests as important) or ‘negative’ (dominant self-interest) (cf. Osiek 2009:144). Patronage was particularly evident in the relationship between freed persons and their former masters, often compared to the relationship between son and father.<sup>14</sup> Broad social networks of patronage predated the Empire, but Empire availed itself of patronage’s presence by anchoring it in the person of the emperor as the supreme patron of the Roman Empire, with direct access to the gods.<sup>15</sup> Patronage’s ambivalence in terms of ingrained inequality amidst claims of mutual solidarity attests to potential coercion as well as mutual obligation (Chow 1992), and reveals patronage as a vital aspect in the normalisation of domination and submission.

Paul’s reference to the Corinthians as his children (1 Cor 4:14) is illuminating. He saw himself as their father (4:15; cf. 1 Th 2:11), yet the role of the gospel as the benefit that the Corinthians (children) receive (4:15); love and admonishing that take place (4:14); references made to God’s kingdom of power (4:19-20) and the rod (4:21); the mimetic demand (4:16) and the assumption that he is able to wield and discern true power (4:19-21) are all influenced and underpinned by the power of patronage.<sup>16</sup> As a social system, also patronage showed ambiguity in its power-hungry harshness. It often covered itself in mitigating metaphor and structures, to make it more palatable and to ensure its practicality. On the one hand, closeness to the Emperor ensured social power, and officials and local elites were able and often keen to act as brokers and clients of the Emperor.<sup>17</sup> But on the

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<sup>12</sup> I agree with Osiek (2009:144-146; contra Eilers 2002 and Joubert 2000) that a rigid distinction between Eastern or Greek, public euergetism and Western, private Roman patronage does not hold.

<sup>13</sup> The elements of patronage can be summarised as follows: asymmetrical relationships; simultaneous exchange of resources; interpersonal obligations; relational favouritism; reciprocity; exchange of honour; and, a ‘kinship glaze’ (Osiek 2009:144; cf. Neyrey 2005:467-468). For Chow (1992:33) patronage entailed the following: as an exchange relation, the patron supplies the client’s needs in exchange for the client’s deference; an asymmetrical relationship and unequal power; a particularistic and informal relation with uneven resource distribution; a supra-legal relation, based on mutual understanding; a voluntary relationship; as vertical relationship the primary bond is between the patron and the client; and, a binding and long-range relationship.

<sup>14</sup> The patron retained power over the freed person who was reminded of owing his or her ‘new life’ to the patron. Honouring the patron was expected, and practices such as legal recourse in court for injustice suffered by the freed person, forbidden. A freed person was under the power of the patron, just as the son was under the power of the father. This unequal power relationship was managed through legislation in conjunction with honour and shame values and manifested the practical outcome of a dyadic contract, beyond manumission (cf. Chow 1997:121).

<sup>15</sup> The importance of family metaphors in Roman society and the father and son metaphor in particular, has also been ascribed to the portrayal of the emperor as *pater patriae*. Cf. e.g. Carter (2008:235-255); Lassen (1997:103-120); White (1999:139-172). For the relation between Empire’s notion of order and family relations, cf. Johnson (1997:161-73).

<sup>16</sup> As Chow (1992:190) also concludes, Paul’s position was not domineering but rather precarious. Paul’s appeal to a servanthood-authority on the one hand subverted the claims of the patronal figures in the community but on the other hand asserted his own authority by counteracting the dominating authorities. Chow is correct in arguing that Paul’s effort led to a strengthening of bonds horizontally, between clients, and so subverted the vertical bias of patronage. But Chow neglects to point out that ultimately the patronage of one is privileged above all others, namely Paul.

<sup>17</sup> For the importance of Roman imperial family and promotion of relational ties, cf. McIntyre (2010:109-120); on the other hand, sometimes a brother was the immediate political rival and therefore enemy (which had to be and often was killed) – other examples would include Cain and Abel in the Hebrew Bible, and Romulus and Remus in the Roman world.

other hand patronage was often covered in a ‘kinship glaze’ so as to ameliorate the severity of the client’s position, often leading to a confusing juxtaposing of kinship and patronal notions. In other words, kinship language intertwined with patron-client relations meant that someone could act as broker for kin-people, and this extended beyond the relationships between former owners and their freed slaves. Such brokerage functioned within the auspices of patronage even if kinship language was in attendance (Punt 2012:153-171).

### *Family and Household*

Family and household were not merely involved but were basic to first-century patterns of domination and submission. Patronage was decked out in friendship terms, too, but often it was cloaked in notions of fatherliness or siblingship (Osiek 2009:144). As much as notions of familial relations were used to make patronage palatable, patronage filtered down from public society into the household.<sup>18</sup> While patrons were fond of portraying themselves as fathers, fathers themselves were in fact the patrons of their households and possessed *patria potestas* (absolute authority) over children who owed them their lives. Reciprocal relationships between the fathers and sons were governed by a value system that contained ethical codes foreign to modern Western society. Values such as honour and shame in a limited-goods society implied social antagonism and brought about both blatant and subtle challenges between social equals,<sup>19</sup> which depended upon but also contributed to patterns of domination and submission.

The robust connections made between kinship and patronage did not mean that endearing elements<sup>20</sup> were altogether lacking in kinship relations.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, kinship was affected by patronage to the extent that it was generally conditional, and included obligations and expectations, at formal or informal levels (cf. Meeks 1983:30).<sup>22</sup> It means also

<sup>18</sup> It was especially wealthier men who had relationships and associations with their manumitted slaves (freedmen), friends and those “who sought his help” (Chow 1997:120; cf. Osiek 2009:143-152).

<sup>19</sup> Such notions were also at work in friendship. Whereas the traditional Greek notion of friendship traditionally included notions of equality, notwithstanding elements of benefaction, the Roman style of patronal friendship merely feigned equality. The earlier proverb, “Friendship is equality” (quoted by Aristotle *Eth. Eud.* 7.9.1, 1241b), and friendship “as an equality of reciprocal good-will” (Diogenes Laertius *Vit.* 5.31, translation LCL 1:478-79) notwithstanding, ancient notions of ‘equality’ were hardly similar to modern notions. While friendships were allowed either between equals or with one as a superior (Aristotle *Eth. Eud.* 7.3.2, 1238b; 7.10.10, 1242b; *Eth. Nic.* 8.7.1, 1158b; 8.13.1, 1162ab), ‘equality’ functioned more proportionately than quantitatively (Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 8.7.2-3, 1158b). Already in Plato, a similar distinction between friendship between loving equals, as well as those resulting from the poor’s need for the rich (Plato *Leg.* 8, 837AB), are mentioned (cf. Keener 2000).

<sup>20</sup> “We have seen that qualities such as loyalty, faithfulness, being of ‘one mind/one soul’, sharing possessions, as well as proving one’s friendship through trials, were commonly associated with friendship, appearing in Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian sources” (Batten 2010:55).

<sup>21</sup> And the traditional Greek ideal of friendship as equality appears to have continued to affect popular thought. Already in Homer a leader honoured a friend by regarding him as an equal (Homer *Il.* 18.81-82); friends could be spoken of as “another I” (Diogenes Laertius *Vit.* 7.1.23), and the neo-Pythagorean tradition stressed friendship as equality. Such sentiments were found also among Alexandrian Jewish writers; next to honour shown to parents, ranks the honour bestowed on friends (*Epistle of Aristeeas* 228). In a papyrus letter of the time, an appeal was made to receive a friend “as if he were me” (*P.Oxy.* 32.5-6, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). cf. Keener (2000).

<sup>22</sup> “Friendship appears frequently in private letters, where it often refers to friendship among peers. In such letters it appears ‘usually in the context of performing services for each other’, such as watching over one another’s families or taking care of the other’s debts in his absence until his return” (Evans, in Keener 2000).

then, that kinship language was not aimed at equality or even mutuality.<sup>23</sup> In Galatians, Paul's appeals to kinship and brotherhood in particular were not aimed at equality with his 'brothers'. On the one hand, Paul assumed the role of broker, intervening in the family matters of God's household and insisting on believers' commitment to it (cf. Bossman 1996:170). On the other hand, under the influence of patronage his claims in Galatians amounted to assuming a powerful position of more than only one among other brothers, an elevated status that Paul at times claimed explicitly (cf. Gal 1:15-16) (Punt 2012:153-171).

Without discounting the impact of patronage on families and households, the nature and structure of the very institutions in themselves were prone to power patterns of domination and submission.<sup>24</sup> The gendered nature of families and households in New Testament times fed into such patterns, and are not to be separated from the larger context of imperial conquest. "Changes in sexual practices in the Roman world, intensifying from the second century BC, and the development of an underling ideology of active domination and passive submission, correlate chronologically with the rise of the overseas empire" (Mattingly 2011:120-121).<sup>25</sup> The position of children in households is ready evidence of power regulated through domination and submission. Children's upbringing included regular punishment and beatings as suggested by Jesus Sirach's advice, "Beat his ribs while he is young, lest he become stubborn and disobey you" (θάλασον τὰς πλευράς αὐτοῦ ὡς ἔστιν νήπιος μήποτε σκληρυνθῆεις ἀπειθήσῃ σοι 30:12). The comfort which the book of Hebrews aims to convey to its readership in their suffering, "God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline" (ὡς υἱοῖς ὑμῖν προσφέρεται ὁ θεός: τίς γὰρ υἱὸς ὃν οὐ παιδεύει πατήρ; Heb 12:7), also reveals a context where physical punishment of children was accepted as normal.<sup>26</sup> "As with sexual relations,<sup>27</sup> the discourse of violence had a purpose – sustaining the social and political order through its exemplary use of force" (Mattingly 2011:119).

The New Testament emerged from a context where human domination and submission were privileged, rather than human dignity, where questions prevailed about obligations rather than rights, where dignity was reserved and the prized possession of a few people only.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. also Aasgaard (2004:20-21). In a sense, *κοινωνοί*, as business terminology, rather than *ἀδελφοί* (kinship) would have come closer to notions such as equality or (more appropriately) equity.

<sup>24</sup> "The experience of sex and power in the Roman world was widely discrepant along gender and social lines (that is, among man, woman, slave, freed person, freeborn, citizen, noncitizen, soldier, civilian, rich, poor, etc). But those perspectives were all to some extent conditional on the power structure and the individual's place within it" (Mattingly 2011:121). Mattingly is critical of Foucault's analysis of power. Foucault's helpful insights on knowledge's embeddedness in power relationships, and seeing power better represented as a spectrum with much complexity (rather than simplistic oppositions) should be acknowledged. However, in identifying power networks Foucault tended to neglect the interrelationship between historical contingency and power, as well as to become at times fatalistic and negative in his approach to power, e.g. eliding notions of resistance to power (Mattingly 2011:101-104).

<sup>25</sup> "The inequality of status of the participants, the use of violent, degrading, and humiliating forms of sexual dominance on passive partners of both sexes; all this confirms that colonial desires can give rise to non-consensual and asymmetrical sexual relations" (Mattingly 2011:120-121).

<sup>26</sup> The implicit social setting, in which mature manhood in the Mediterranean context was determined partly through the ability to endure physical punishment unflinchingly (Pilch 1999:3), testifies to the embedded violence towards children.

<sup>27</sup> Roman 'sexuality' was particularly nasty, pornographic, misogynist, violent, dominating, and humiliating (Richlin 1983; cf. Mattingly 2011:118-120).

## **Domination and Submission: Rhetoric, Ideology and Theology**

Well-established and embedded patterns of domination and submission impacted upon the New Testament in many ways, certainly in rhetoric, ideology and theology. But rather than a monolithic imposition, these texts show themselves arising from a context where people interacted with and counteracted against – in short, negotiated with – such systems, structures and thought, that is, where conflicted loyalties and border-crossings happened on social and theological levels. Throughout the New Testament an ambiguous situation prevailed, a context coloured by power normalised in domination and submission, where such patterns were embedded in structures and systems and where people willingly or otherwise subscribed to them. Casting the standards of the dominant group in society as universal was a normalisation of power that determined identities, roles and alignments of power, and called forth various responses. Challenges to the normalised patterns, not to abide by the wishes of the powerful constituted resistance: “The very conception of a different future destabilizes the present and the status quo and thus provides a powerful ideological and political message. It proclaims that another world is possible, that changes can occur” (Perkins 2009:175).

Such sentiments challenge the traditional understanding that people act on unrestrained and rational reflection. Human subjectivity, in fact, is better understood as the result of forces and effects that lie outside the control or register of individuals. Human subjects are not ‘free-floating minds’ since minds belong to embodied human beings and as such are always implicated in historically situated networks (Perkins 2009:12). Helpful here is Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* which explains how social groups undertake reasonable actions without having necessarily deliberated on or consulted about it.<sup>28</sup> Agency<sup>29</sup> depends on *habitus* which is a range of embodied socialized frameworks supplying agents with a rationale for social practices and a sense of the social structure that leads to sensible behaviour in a given context<sup>30</sup> (Bourdieu 1990:52-55; cf. Perkins 2009:12). This is why social agents acknowledge, justify and reproduce social forms of domination, prejudices and common opinions of various areas of life (‘fields’) as self-evident, apparently oblivious in consciousness and practice of other possible social arrangements and structuring of power.<sup>31</sup> It is not a fatalistic or even deterministic concept, since *habitus* is about the inculcation of subjective structures, which explains social patterns and order, and their

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<sup>28</sup> Earlier work by sociologists also emphasise how people are socialised or ‘programmed’ from birth in their society’s values, convictions and norms with the effect that each person contributes unquestioningly to the functioning of the system (cf. Berger 1967:3-52).

<sup>29</sup> Bourdieu distinguishes between agents and subjects, with the latter referring to those who supposedly know what they are doing (Bourdieu 1990:52, 75; cf. Perkins 2009:12). The emphasis is important in Bourdieu’s theory which is a theory of practice: “The theory of practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions” (Bourdieu 1990:52).

<sup>30</sup> “The *habitus* is a spontaneity without consciousness or will” (Bourdieu 1990:56), or with emphasis on the sense in it all. “It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know” (Bourdieu 1990:69).

<sup>31</sup> As will become clear in my reading of Paul, agency can more generally be used as inclusive of subjectivity, particularly in contexts of uneven power relations which impact on people’s notions of selfhood and otherness. This position does not underwrite the past conservative stance which invoked an exclusive universal, but rather postulating selfhood through exclusion rather than inclusion, identifying the self through excluding the Other as defined by and according to criteria and characteristics eschewed by the in-group.



continuity.<sup>32</sup> In short, *habitus* entails that social agents develop strategies which are adapted to the needs of the social worlds that they inhabit, notions which assist in explaining the ambivalence of New Testament authors' positions towards power differentials.

The theological arguments of New Testament authors cannot be divorced from the implications of a socio-cultural context where people's lifestyles, ethos, and communities were imbued with domination and submission. Negotiating power differentials in a world marked by domination and submission disallowed monolithic and simplistic engagements with the powerful or those in authority. Moreover, and pertinent here, negotiating power differentials implied ambivalence in the appropriation of social roles and ideology, and in the interaction between people of various standings and levels of control over power. To stay with Paul, in Galatians he addressed the hesitancy of converts who complied with the religious roles that were normed and dictated by society, instead of living out the challenge of the gospel.<sup>33</sup> In 1 Corinthians Paul at times challenged an apparent deep-set ideology of privilege: it appears that the social stratification typical of the first century world became evident in the Corinthian *ekklesiai*, giving rise to a series of problems (Elliott 1994:181-230). At the same time, Paul's rhetoric of being the least, of becoming slaves and servants of Christ is never far behind, although easy association with or simplistic claims based on such rhetoric is dangerous when it is borne in mind that he addressed people who would have benefited immensely from manumission and better opportunities in life.<sup>34</sup> Paul's rhetoric of abnegation functioned in a context where most people strove for a better life without necessarily aspiring to modern notions of equality, or our sense of fairness. Moreover, often in the midst of Paul's claims of disinvestment of self, patronal patterns of power emerged by means of which Paul claimed back control (cf. Polaski 1999:104-123).

Pauline rhetoric, thus, deserves attention, beyond the rather static practice of applying ancient rhetorical categories to texts, and rather questioning the wherewithal of such rhetoric. Sensitivity to first-century rhetoric entails accounting for the potentially distracting practices of stereotyping and vilifying, and the acknowledgement that references to self and others are not about accurate description as much as about biased portrayal (cf. Knust 2006; Punt 2010c:212-231). So too Paul's theology betrays the influence of patterns of domination and submission. In Paul's language the impact of the Torah specifically on the lives of Gentile followers of Jesus is characterised by references to domination, both in the sense of authority and control (e.g. Gal 3:21-22; 4:21-31; 5:1 [2:5]). And while Paul shared the first-century connection between the innate order of creation and codes of morality, his understanding of sin reflected the daily reality of life in the Roman Empire. For Paul sin was encapsulated in "categories of domination and not those of guilt or action" (Sutter Rehman 2004:78). A range of other ideological and theological concerns, such as about identity, about self and Other, are important but cannot be discussed here. Suffice it

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<sup>32</sup> Criticism against Bourdieu's theory of practice includes that his theory may become too mechanistic, and that his emphasis on the social structures' role in human lives may betray his indebtedness to structuralist thought.

<sup>33</sup> The long-standing scholarly debate on the nature and extent of judaising and much scholarly discussion on the nature of Paul's insistence on the redundancy of the Law for Gentile Jesus-followers (apart from at most a secondary, pedagogical role, 3:24) in Galatians – these arguments have been restricted to a largely theological stance. A socio-historically focused reading such as is advanced here, sees Paul's approach in Galatians as a counter-conventional strategy, as much as Second Temple Judaism generally had good standing in Greco-Roman society.

<sup>34</sup> On the later development of a theology of persecution: "I submit that deriving legitimacy from persecution presents a quandary not unlike those inherited from biblical passages that condone slavery or unhealthy attitudes toward women (and men)" (Kelhoffer 2011:129).

to affirm that New Testament authors frequently invoked notions of domination and submission in theological and ethical deliberation. Although references were addressed mostly to social institutions, a rhetoric of domination and submission seeps through on theological level as well.

### **Texts of Domination and Submission in Human Dignity Discourse**

The use of texts emerging from domination and submission-suffused ancient contexts in modern human dignity discourses makes two initial remarks appropriate. First, the conflicting loyalties between disciplines, theoretical frameworks and academic (and other) convictions disallow for some the invocation of biblical texts in human dignity discussions altogether. For many the boundaries between biblical studies and theological discourse, not to mention between biblical work and socially engaged topics are best kept intact, disallowing boundary crossings. However, tacit acknowledgement that biblical scholars at times cannot avoid taking up roles as constructive theologians and cultural critics in addition to their critical study of texts and contexts (Segovia 1998:51), raises questions about the rigidity of disciplinary borders.<sup>35</sup> Conflicting loyalties notwithstanding, the porosity of disciplinary boundaries augurs well for the nature and praxis of biblical studies.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the hybrid nature of biblical theology makes it as appealing as (potentially) dangerous to both Bible and theology – but this is a topic for another discussion.

Second, matters such as power networks, power inequality and power brokering were not unique to the first-century world or New Testament texts. The point is that they functioned differently; and in particular, obvious and sublime forms of domination and submission characterised the power networks. Since these networks built upon domination and submission informed the New Testament in various ways, not accounting for such patterns and their influence in biblical interpretation, is detrimental and may lead to unwarranted and distorted readings. It is not the ancient presence as opposed to modern absence of power networks but rather the different nature of the power differentials at work that have to be accounted for in biblical interpretation, also in service of a topic like human dignity.

An extensive discussion is impossible at this point but appropriate strategies for using texts emerging from domination and submission, and invoking them as normative scriptures in discussions of human dignity would include at least the following notions.

#### *Beyond an Encyclopaedic Bible*

Mitchell (2003:348, emphasis in original) sounds a warning about a biblical hermeneutic in which “the Bible (or early Christian experience as confirming or correcting it) [is] deemed

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<sup>35</sup> Renewed interest among certain scholars for appropriate and (mostly also) responsible and accountable ways of framing the relationship of the Christian churches with the Bible and biblical hermeneutic are found in appeals for theological interpretation, for rediscovering the Bible in the church, for reading the Bible as Scripture, for reading Scripture with the church, and various other such formulations. Recent contributions include Adam et al. (2006); Bockmuehl (2006); Schneiders (1999); Treiter (2008).

<sup>36</sup> The poststructural challenge to modernist positions stimulated reactionary theological values which include animosity towards Enlightenment and historical-critical scholarship, and led to the irony that postmodernism and fundamentalism at times landed up in the same place: “While Western religious fundamentalism may itself be regarded as a postmodernist phenomenon, it would be equally true to say that much of what passes for postmodernist practice looks like a kind of neo-fundamentalism” (Carroll 1998:51).

immediately and unquestionably *normative* for contemporary life”, especially when social ethics and references to social institutions are lifted out with “intolerable and disingenuous hermeneutical inconsistency”. Moving away from an encyclopaedic approach to the Bible which is all too keen on listing key texts, core principles or central themes and characters, the importance of biblical texts in current, socially engaged issues has to be accounted for with attention to three interrelated aspects. The literary aspects of biblical texts require attention to the rhetoric of the argument, the narratology of stories, events and persons as much as to the text-, form-, and redaction-critical aspects of the texts. Also, the lack of proper attention to situating the texts in their social location means running the risk to avatarise them into generic and timeless maxims. In addition, far more than a record of interesting interpretative trends, reception history situates contemporary approaches to and consensus about the meaning of texts. In short, biblical and other scholars wanting to use the Bible in contemporary debates require an appropriate toolkit.

### *Escaping an Idealist Approach*

An idealist approach reduces historical events and processes to ideas, understanding *historical* developments, conflicts and influences as having been developments, conflicts, and influences of *ideas*.<sup>37</sup> Such an approach poses a threat for the understanding of the texts as well as for using them in theological reflection. This deficient methodology is still too often operationalized in a theologically determined ‘historical’ (re)construction which leads to the neglect or even negation of the mutuality between ideas and social structures.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, sociological and other critical approaches to New Testament texts, often ably assisted by ideological criticism<sup>39</sup> highlight both the origin of particular ideas and beliefs as well as their social function. It is obvious that the beliefs and convictions of early Jesus followers need to be situated and understood “in the context of their piety and the patterns of their religious devotions” (Hurtado 2003:25; cf. Johnson 1998). But, it should be added, such piety and religious patterns were not islands on their own, as religion was intimately if intricately involved with the social environment and structures – piety and religious patterns manifested within the lived social reality of people’s lives in the first century CE.<sup>40</sup> Avoiding an idealist approach may, however, for many reasons be a complicated and complex matter.

On the one hand, interpreters’ perspectives determine to what extent they account for the moment in which to read the biblical documents. It is of course a matter of identifying and understanding how, say, claims to egalitarianism functioned in the myth and rhetoric of

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<sup>37</sup> The problems and limitations of such work were pointed out already by Holmberg (1978:205-207). The closely aligned yet not quite similar history of ideas of approach has also come in for criticism (cf. Segovia 1995:276-298).

<sup>38</sup> As Holmberg explains, the problem is not with the investigation of historical phenomena which is often done carefully and diligently. It is the next step, when historical phenomena are not only traced back to theological ideas but also considered to be dependent on such ideas, where methodology becomes fated, when the “secondary reaction ... on primary, concrete phenomena in the social world ... is misinterpreted as being the structural principle of that world” (Holmberg 1978:205).

<sup>39</sup> Without pleading for a general absolution of all error, misjudgement or malice for readings and interpretations from the vantage point of “hermeneutics of suspicion” and ideological critical readings, to insist on the other hand that readings that persist in this mode are necessarily anachronistic, simplistic, and reductionist (Johnson 1998:12-29), is too simple and is a claim that probably betrays the force of the history of interpretation and its conventions more than anything else.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Punt 2013; cf. Casey 1991:16-17 on the social nature of Jewish religious identity.

Pauline churches (Kloppenborg 1996:247-63). But it is also a matter of interpretive choices. Contemporary interpreting communities need to choose the moment in which to interpret texts, choosing whether to align themselves with an authoritarian role claimed by Paul or that of dependency required of the communities addressed, but also whether the particular attitude accompanying the role is appropriate today (Polaski 2005:80-81). On the other hand, scholars have shown how modern critics have praised the supposed superiority of biblical ethics at the cost of diminishing or ignoring many similar features in ancient Near Eastern cultures, which included manumission, fixed terms of service, familial rights, and egalitarian critiques of slavery (cf. Avalos 2011).

### *Towards a new Grammar*

More than just a new toolkit, a new grammar is also crucial for the accountable and effective use of the Bible in modern debates. Biblical scholarship is generally self-reflective and self-critical. Scholars investigate and interpret biblical texts and at the same time explore the value as well as the limitations of their theories, concepts, and methodologies in their work. Older, existing theories are adjusted and new models are probed and developed (cf. Williams 2011:189). Such developments are to be expected but are too seldom accompanied by a new grammar, a new way of understanding ancient texts and historical contexts. Besides attention to Second Temple Judaism and Hellenistic culture, work on Roman imperial context and influence requires appropriate tools with which to understand networks of power, the ambivalence of the situation and people's sense of identity, the complex interrelations between the powerful and the people, to mention a few. Such notions require an appropriate vocabulary and grammar. Particularly the heightened awareness of the normalisation of power in ancient society as much as the development of a more sophisticated understanding of power as such, necessitates a new grammar.<sup>41</sup> A nuanced approach to biblical interpretation will shy away from atomised texts, theologically-idealistically construed contexts, and socially empty (emptied-out?) social locations.

### *Avoiding Anachronism and Katachronism*

An abiding danger in biblical studies is the use of modern, contemporary criteria and categories to interpret ancient texts – in a word, the menace of anachronism. The socio-historical situating of New Testament texts helps to avoid anachronism, to avoid superimposing modern ideas onto the ancient texts and contexts.<sup>42</sup> However, the reverse of the problem of anachronism often escapes attention, namely 'katachronism' or the tendency "to project ancient perspectives ... into the modern world *as if they could* be adopted now when it seems obvious they cannot" (Engberg-Pedersen 2002:109-113). Katachronism is inspired also by theological interests, and is the result of theological convictions determining the outcome of historical and literary work on texts. Acknowledging the distance between ancient text and modern interpretative context refuses the mere transfer of ancient ideas onto modern contexts. Important is the investigation of (theological) ideas generated

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<sup>41</sup> "Power is not simply what the dominant class have and the oppressed class lack. Power, Foucault prefers to say, is a strategy and the oppressed are as much a part of the network of power relations and the particular social matrix as the dominating" (Hoy 1986:134; cf. Mattingly 2011:11).

<sup>42</sup> Another danger, of course, is to use the sentiments of later documents in the NT as interpretative grid for earlier ones, e.g. using "sending of the Son" in texts such as Jn 3:17 and 1 Jn 4:9 for interpreting Paul's sentiments (e.g. Gal 4:4; cf. 1:16) is not legitimate, because the Johannine materials are of a later date and God's sending of prophets provides a ready background for the Pauline claims (Casey 1991:134).

by biblical texts, considered worthwhile, significant and even important, and worthy of scholarly effort and even defence – even though their semantic value in the past was different when compared to the present.<sup>43</sup> Awareness of the danger in this regard is not only applicable to our contemporary understanding, since katachronistic interpretations may at times be posited as valid frames for reading texts,<sup>44</sup> which as counter-measure requires awareness of its influence even upon (historical) study of texts.

### **Conclusion: On the Role of Biblical Scholars**

South Africa is one of many locations where the human dignity discourse is prominent at various levels in society; it is hardly a luxury, and the discourse informs much public opinion. The continuous if complex involvement of the Bible in the discourse is equally evident, raising various analytical, hermeneutical and ethical questions. A primary boundary to cross extends beyond the ‘ugly chasm’ between ancient text and (post)modern context, negotiating the conflicting loyalties of adherence to normative texts and the temporal and spatial conditioning of such texts. In this regard, also biblical scholars deal with conflicting loyalties concerning their involvement in discussions on human dignity which will best avoid certain posturing and practices. Gone however are the days that biblical interpretation is seen as the ground work, the foundation, the spade-work which in relay-baton style is passed on in some ostensible raw form to be processed into theology by systematic theologians. Exaggerated claims for how exegetical analyses of the Bible resolve contemporary quandaries are also best avoided, while the broader conversation and border crossings in which exegetes involve themselves include also other scholars from theology, religion and cognate fields (philosophy, psychology, ancient studies, and the like). In the end, an important aspect of biblical scholars’ work – though increasingly often not the only aspect – is, therefore, endeavouring responsibly, accountably and ethically to describe the parameters of involving biblical texts in today’s deliberations on human dignity, and to continue to stimulate further critical reflection.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Engberg-Pedersen (2002:113) argues for “breaking the backbone ... of the traditional sense of continuity between the Bible and us” as it may “open up fruitfully for a renewed reading of the Bible, though from a quite different perspective: from a position of squarely belonging in the modern world and a position that is even oriented towards the future in complete openness as to what shall count – now and in the future – as Christianity” Cf. Elliott (2002:75-91).

<sup>44</sup> One of the illuminating and enduring examples is the influence exerted on Pauline studies by the traditional approach, built upon a Lutheran understanding of Paul as conflicted individual in search of a merciful God, complete with the understanding of Second Temple Judaism as merit-based religion and oppressive understanding of the Torah. Not only were the concerns of Pauline texts carried over into later times, but the resultant construct of Pauline thought was subsequently used as primary heuristic framework for reading and interpreting Paul.

<sup>45</sup> In his discussion of NT texts’ legitimization of suffering as corroboration of legitimacy, Kelhoffer (2011) came to similar conclusions.

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