Reading and controlling the text

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ABSTRACT
It is argued that not only ‘colonialists’ or powerful establishments use the control of texts in their own interests, but that this is also done by religious groups at the other end of the power spectrum. Those who resist ‘imperialist’ or ‘colonialist’ powers, often revert to text control in order to entrench the way in which those texts are read. They manipulate the meaning of the text by curtailing alternative reading possibilities and therefore seek to wield power over the reader in order to achieve their own ends. Three examples are given: the tradition in which the Masoretic network flourished, typical Protestant use of the Bible as antidote to papal hegemony, and more recent Liberation Theology as a system of resistance to colonialist hegemony. Concluding thoughts are offered on the meaning of tolerance in this regard and the ethics of scholarly discourse pertaining to the control of texts.

A INTRODUCTION
It is a well-documented claim of the Reformation that the Roman Catholic Church dominated the faith of people by controlling their access to the text of the Bible. In his Lectures on the Epistle to the Galatians, Martin Luther assails the very idea that the church even has authority over the Bible, let alone controlling its use:

[It] is an accursed lie that the pope is the arbiter of Scripture or that the church has authority over Scripture. This is what the canonists and commentators on the Sentences have wickedly declared, on the following basis: ‘The church has approved only four gospels, and therefore there are only four. For if it had approved more, there would have been more. Since the church has the right to accept and approve as many gospels as it wishes, it follows that the church is superior to the gospels.’ … The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven — these should not be masters, judges or arbiters, but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture.

By allowing only an official version in Latin, the church restricted access to the Bible to a relatively small elite. Thus the faithful were kept dependent on the church to tell them what the text meant for their salvation and demanded from them in conducting their lives. Therefore they could be controlled in political as well as economic terms. Hegemony in this regard meant hegemony in terms of eternal salvation, a reward so high that acceptance of ecclesiastical authority seemed justifiable. But not all agreed. In the English speaking world the alternative was articulated positively by William Tyndale’s famous utterance that the Bible should be accessible even to ‘a boy that driveth the plough’ and negatively by both King Henry VIII’s unease with this idea and Cardinal Wolsey’s verdict that it is heresy, resulting in Tyndale’s execution on 6 October 1536 for translating the Bible into English. But the papal church has never conceded the principle and its claim to this authority still remains a candid acknowledgement that the church has the right to exercise control over what the Bible may mean for people.

It is perhaps an eloquent irony that the far-reaching effect of an accessible Bible in the populace was attested once Tyndale’s work impacted by becoming generally accessible. It flowed into and deeply influenced the Authorised Version and as such made the English language what it became. On the Continent Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible had a similar effect on German culture generally. It standardised the German language and exercised immense influence both on its linguistic features and on the social and cultural development of German speaking countries.

However adamant the Roman Catholic notion may be that ecclesiastical or papal authority is legitimate and necessary to determine the right reading among so many divergent interpretations of the Bible, and however convinced the Protestant alternative may be that this obstructs independent thought – the traditional bone of contention between the two mainstream Christian traditions is by no means a phenomenon limited to this debate. On the contrary, it is a major topic in the relatively recently fashioned ‘postcolonial’ discourse on the

2 This was noticed by Wencislaus Link in his justification to publish Luther’s ‘Open letter on translating’ in September 1530, applying passages from Prv 11:26 and Mt 25:26 to the papal withholding of the biblical abundance from the people: ‘The wise Solomon says in Proverbs 11: “The people curse him who withholds grain, but there is a blessing on the head of him who sells it.” This verse is actually to be understood concerning everything that can serve the common good and comfort of Christendom. This is why the master in the gospel scolds the unfaithful servant as a lazy rogue for having hidden and buried his money in the ground’.

3 Recorded in John Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs’ and published under the title ‘Actes and monuments of these latter and perillous days, touching matters of the Church’ in 1563.

4 Daniell 2003:133-159.

use or misuse of the Bible. For instance, J A Draper writes in the introduction to a volume of essays dealing with colonial control over texts: 6

In colonial and postcolonial South Africa, the relationship between text and hegemony is particularly clear, since the subjugated peoples had an entirely oral culture. … Moreover, colonial intrusion was accompanied by an officially sanctioned attempt to convert the indigenous people to a largely Protestant form of Christianity, a religion of a book. So mission was accompanied from the beginning with an attempt at widespread literacy training. However, the missionaries attempted to maintain ideological control of both text and interpretation in support of the imperial enterprise.

This claim amounts to the accusation that Protestants themselves practised the same principle that Protestantism had for centuries been censuring in the Roman Catholic tradition. Without becoming involved in the debate as to the ecclesiological merits of the papal authority vis-à-vis the Protestant Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres, I may at this stage submit the hypothesis for this paper, notably:

The observation that, despite theological, historical and contextual differences, the same fundamental phenomenon on both sides of the fence invites suspicion that the wish to exercise control over the reading and therefore understanding of the Bible may be more generally present than usually thought.

Whether the Church of Rome in an effort to maintain papal hold on the minds of people or Protestant missionaries in an effort to dictate people’s understanding of their role in a colonial system – on both counts it is a matter of harnessing the forces of the biblical text for the sake of power over the people who believe themselves in need of that text. In the light of the world-wide presence and enduring influence of both these currents, the question is justified whether there are more instances of this phenomenon in biblically oriented religion.

The classical Protestant and the latest postcolonial positions assume as self-evident that control over the text is a bad thing. They may claim to mean that manipulating the faith of people is a bad thing, but what they actually criticise, is the principle that influence is exercised over the way in which people (can) understand the biblical text. This prompts another question or, better, series of questions: Are there texts at all that do not endeavour to influence the way they are understood? Where is the divide between influencing and manipulation, between rhetoric and demagogy? How is manipulation for ‘colonialist’ or ‘imperialist’ purposes to be distinguished from other kinds of manipulation? For instance, on the level of method: Is the fixing of a Bible consisting of the Old as well as the New Testament manipulation of the text? If the definitive

6 Draper (ed.) 2004:3.
text of the Bible is the Christian canon, how can the Old Testament be read otherwise than as a Christian book? If the method to use in the theological reading of the Christian Scriptures is the canonical one, how can the Old Testament in effect be read otherwise than christologically? If the required method is ‘literary’ (whatever that may be), does it not manoeuvre the reader into excluding competitive strategies such as a whole array of historically informed readings? If it is historical-critical, does it not prescribe a paradigm that disables critical questions from other perspectives? Why should such paradigms be exempted from the suspicion of being ‘imperialist’ any more than those requiring submission to official ecclesiastical sanction or those entrenching colonialist interests?

If one hermeneutic or paradigm or method or reading is privileged, it is by definition privileged above others. A privileged reading of the Bible therefore takes place at the cost of others. This is another way of saying that one reading is placed in a dominating position vis-à-vis others, that is, it dominates or seeks to dominate others. This is not just an innocent attempt to convince readers that one strategy is better or more useful than others, but a slanting of the playing field.

## B THREE MANIPULATIVE COMPLEXES

I propose to consider three approaches or approach complexes to reading the Bible not usually associated with the concept of manipulating the text in order to control its reception. My thesis is that all of them share fundamental characteristics with what is called ‘colonial’ readings.

### 1 The Masoretic tradition

Since my intention is by no means to review a history of the text, but to adduce examples of how religious organisations took control of their Holy Scriptures in order to influence their use and pre-empt rival use that they regarded as ‘mis-use’, I shall offer a phenomenological presentation of such instances without attempting to deal with their detailed interrelationships, which would be another topic altogether.

#### a Plurality versus uniformity

The evident discrepancy between a tradition of textual plurality attested to by the Dead Sea Scrolls and the tendency to textual uniformity in evidence among scribal and Pharisaic groups at the end of the pre-Christian era has led Van der Woude to the thesis that this had to do with the faith of these groups. On the one hand he ascribes the fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls provide no sign of striving towards standardisation of the variegated textual tradition at Qumran to the circumstance that a ‘priestly authority in dogmatic matters’ existed there (Van der Woude 1992:18). On the other hand, the belief of the scribes and early rab-
bis that the Spirit of God left Israel after the death of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi\(^7\) led to the focus of their religion on what they had left, holy scriptures. This meant that a scriptural tradition that testified to God’s revelation became that revelation itself. If it is revelation, such Holy Scripture had to be a collection of exact graphic signs with permanent authority. Its authoritative quality had to be direct and simultaneous with the reader, and therefore it could be interpreted a-historically.\(^8\)

Van der Woude does not draw a parallel to the state of affairs at the Reformation, and as far as I know it has not been done by others. But the parallel seems striking. The rabbis had to standardise the text because of the theological need created by the shift from sacerdotal authority to an authoritative book requiring exposition. Protestant orthodoxy needed a standardised text to replace the pontifical authority on what Christianity means. In both cases the Book took over the function of the priestly authority. Therefore it could be interpreted at will, unless the perspective and therefore interests of the scribal or exegetical elite are safeguarded by a fixing of the tradition to such an extent that they have the instrument to wield control over how its message is received by their faith communities. The possibilities of readers to arrive at rival forms of the faith are curbed by the fixing of the text. This means that faith precedes Scripture, since the transmitting elite decide what the text may mean for the faith as such, that is, those controlling the text decide what the religion may look like of those who believe their faith to come directly from the Book.

b Masoretic techniques

1 The emerging canon of the Tanak, even in the form of a list of authoritative books,\(^9\) already has a regulative effect. As such it prepared the way for the Masoretic tradition. Especially after the advent of the codex, when the books on the list could be physically brought together in ‘one book’, the regulative function of the canon naturally strengthened its control over the Tanak as a whole. The fact that the Torah formed the basis of the Prophets, that the Historical Books were regarded as and grouped with the Prophets, that the inclusio by means of the separation motif in the first and the last books of the Scroll of the Twelve unify them, that the Five Megillot for festivals were grouped together, and the like, effectively function as interpretive directives. That is, they limit the possibilities of interpretation. For instance, the intertextual relationships of the Psalter as a collection with the Pentateuch as a unit have important implications for their theological understanding. The five books of God’s basic

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\(^8\) Goldberg 1987:1-15, from whom Van der Woude derives this insight.

revelation call for a response in the five books of human prayers as an answer to God’s word. The Torah psalms such as Psalm 119 and the very fact that the anthology is introduced by one of them centre liturgy and prayer in the light of the Torah as the mainstay of the Jewish faith. In this vein one could continue to argue that the tradition of the Book had already early on developed a momentum that only logically had to lead to the standardising of the consonantal text, its vocalising and the structuring of passages.

2 The early stages of Masoretic activity consisted of standardising the structuring of the text into books, sections, paragraphs, verses, and clauses. Since the structure of a text is essentially intertwined with its meaning, this had to deeply influence the meaning of the text. The fixing of the spelling, pronunciation, and cantillation (see below) further refined the detailed control over what happened to the text. The text itself was changed to safeguard theological principles in the $\text{חָסְטֵי}$ and directions were provided by means of $\text{תָּמִית}$ and $\text{םְתֵּנִי}^{10}$ to fix the pronunciation of problematic word forms.

All of this was ‘masoretic’ activity in the wide sense of the term – it guarded the $\text{מסורת}$, the tradition (that is, the rabbinic tradition). If we, however, also consider the Masorah in the narrower sense of the term, that is, the vast network of notes to the text, the extent to which the reading of the text was regulated becomes even more astounding. Statistical notes of all kinds, on orthography such as scriptio plena and scriptio defectiva, morphological forms, hapax legomena and the like as well as cross-references are provided in the Masora marginalis in its two forms (Masora parva and Masora magna) in the margins on the side and at the top and foot of pages. The earliest mention of marginal notes go back to Rabbi Meir in the second century CE, but the practice continued right until the time of Jacob ben Chayyim (1525). This was collected and alphabetically arranged in the Masora finalis on the basis of the mediaeval Ochla we-Ochla (cf. 1 Sm 1:9 and Gn 27:19). As this activity continued and grew, so did the purpose for which it was undertaken become more and more entrenched.

3 Two examples must suffice to illustrate the vast network superimposed on the Tanak in order to determine its interpretation down to the smallest details.$^{12}$

In Genesis 1:16 the constituents of the Masoretic text may be summarised as follows:

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$^{12}$ I derive them from an excellent and detailed survey by the Machine Assisted Translation project of the British and Foreign Bible Society, ‘The Masoretes and the punctuation of biblical Hebrew’ (BFBS 2002:22-23).
God made two categories of heavenly light:
first the two lights, big and small, for ruling day and night respectively;
second: the stars

But he Masoretic accents declare this reading to be wrong. The constituents remain the same but for the last phrase.

And God made /zaqef/

the two lights /tifhah/
great ones /atnah/

the big light /pashta/
to rule the day /zaqef/

and the small light /pashta/
to rule the night /zaqef/

and the stars /tifha/

The mathematical precision with which the Masoretes documented their constituent analyses of the Hebrew sentences is astounding. Here they decided that the natural analysis of the Hebrew syntax is not acceptable. Although the consonantal text can perfectly well be read so and can syntactically even be better
defended, there were theological reasons for the rabbis wanting to avoid the natural reading. In Psalm 136:7-9 the following occurs:

who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever; the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever; the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever

According to the psalm, both the moon (the ‘small light’ of the Creation Narrative) and the stars were made by God to rule the night. So the Masoretes had to show that the Tanak does not contradict itself, and did so by eliminating any reading that would amount to an inner conflict in the Scriptures. Therefore they applied the combination of zaqef at hl’y>L and tifha at the immediately following word to determine that ‘to rule the night’ is understood twice: ‘the small light to rule the night and the stars (to rule the night)’.

Similarly, their accents in Isaiah 40:3a ensure a specific reading. As the text stands, read without the Masoretic accents, there are two possibilities:

Either:

A voice calling: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness!’

or:

A voice calling in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord!’

The Masoretic accents mark the constituents in a definitive way, so that cannot be taken with the preceding participle and must be made part of the direct speech that follows. Therefore the Masoretic reading is necessarily at variance with any Christian understanding of it as a prophecy fulfilled in the activity of John the Baptist, who is presented as a voice calling in the wilderness of Judea to prepare the way of the Lord by doing repentance.13

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13 Cf. Mt 3:3, Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4 and, differing in the use of εὐθύνατε instead of ἐτοιμάσατε, Jn 1:23.
c  The Qaraite threat

The Masoretes had reasons for being so painstakingly accurate. Springing from the fountainhead of a book-religion in need of a regulating force, the rabbinic interpretation of Scripture was not only challenged by the rise and development of Christianity, but also by inner-Judaic developments. The Samaritan tradition had not disappeared as did the Sadducee tradition and other sacerdotally regulated sects such as the Qumran community. But it was isolated and did not really present a threat to mainstream rabbinic hegemony. On the other hand, developments in the eighth century CE did seem to present an intellectual threat at the time, thereby exacerbating the need for textual control.

When the obvious candidate for the position of Resh Galuta in Mesopotamia, Anan ben David, was bypassed by the ruling Caliph, he formed the Jewish sect of the Qaraites. In his major work,.twcmh rps, he made certain claims about Holy Scripture that again show marked parallels to what had happened earlier in Palestine and was to happen once more as a result of the sixteenth century Reformation of Christianity. He acknowledged the authority of the Hebrew Bible, but rejected the codification of tradition in the Talmud as well as the authority of the mainstream rabbinate to interpret the Scriptures on behalf of people. He even anticipated by eight centuries the alternative offered by Protestant orthodoxy in its doctrine of the claritas Scripturae, the clarity of Scripture. According to Anan, the meaning of the Bible was plain to anyone who read it. This doctrine was so central that it was used to distinguish these Jews from others. They called themselves ‘Qaraites’ from Hebrew קַרְאָה, ‘read’, and פִּסֵּרָה, ‘Scripture’. They might as well have called their denomination ‘Bible Synagogue’ in the style of the ‘Bible Churches’ that were to spring up in the Bible Belt of the New World more than a millennium later.

This brought about the same threat in principle to rabbinic Judaism that was later posed to papal Christianity by the emergence of Protestantism. Jews could now read and interpret the Bible without recourse to the rabbinic elite, which could significantly diminish and even eliminate their power to expound its meaning in terms of the הָרְאָה מַסְכִּילְתַּה, Oral Torah. The reaction enhanced Masoretic activity, of which Würthwein (1957:18) says the following:

The Karaite movement, whose influence on the intellectual life of Judaism seems to have been of great significance, led to a flowering of Masoretic activity in the West in about the years 780 to 930. This brought matters to an essentially definitive position. The location of these studies was Tiberias, and their most important exponents the family of Ben Asher.

Not only the vowels, but also the divisions within the text were revised and fixed. In addition, the punctuation system for the cantillation of Scripture was, if not invented, developed and finalised. The reading of the text in both senses
of the English word – interpretation as well as liturgical recitation – was fixed to the point of being unambiguous. The חכמי המזרח, the Lords of Tradition lived up to their name and perhaps provided the most elaborate system in cultural history of control over the possible ways in which a text can be understood. In a totally unique sense, they too had built a ‘fence around the Torah’.

It may be seen as paradoxical that fine-tuned programming of the biblical text such as this is found in the very exegetical current where the rabbis flourished with their haggadic, narrative style and juxtaposing of opinions. But it is perhaps not as surprising as one might think at first. The exegetical tradition discarded nothing. Opposing views were retained and handed down together. That could be done precisely because the Masorah became a tightly woven network by which the Book was safeguarded in the same way as the halachic fences the rabbis could build around the Torah.

d  Poetry

The examples given above have another implication as far as the poetic texts of the Tanak are concerned. Within the ‘final’ form of the Masoretic text alternatives to the traditional reading of Hebrew poetry are inhibited. One could work on the basis of other principles in poetics or linguistics and endeavour not only to re-construct ancient Israelite metre, but also to demonstrate workable literary possibilities. But on the basis of the Masoretic system for the poetic books, one must read Hebrew poetry with an accentuating metrical system.

e  Text control by the oppressed

I submit that the whole Masoretic system is congruent with its origins in the situation obtaining in Palestine shortly before and at the beginning of the Christian era. A religion that has made the transition from a priestly locus of authority to a scribal or exegetical authority, cannot but safeguard its written heritage. Whether the ideas of Written and Oral Torah emerged in the context of Jewish resistance to the colonialism of the fourth century transition of Rome to a Christian Empire or not (the Oral Torah was also committed to writing), Judaism needed not only a central Holy Book, but a safeguarded one – read and interpreted in line with the Oral Torah. An interesting aspect of this whole process in both its early and its later stages is that the Jewish tradition developed it in its resistance to ‘colonial’ powers. The Jews were thus in the role of the oppressed. If ever there was a community who for centuries – certainly during the centuries interesting us here – was marginalised and oppressed, then it is the Jewish faith community in Judea, Galilee and the eastern and western diaspora. But exactly as such they show that not only the powers that be avail

15 So Jaffee 2004:183.
themselves of control over the text in order to secure that it is understood as they want it to be understood. The underdogs, far from having recourse only to ‘orality’ as a means of resistance and self-preservation, also turn to the text as a form of control of their own destiny. Indeed, they have to use this instrument if the authoritative locus for their survival is a holy text.

2 The classical Protestant position

Since the substantiation for my hypothesis above has already provided sufficient material to document the Protestant as opposed to the Roman Catholic position, I may be brief in offering further illustrations from classical and later Protestant writings. As was the case with the early church, Protestantism also began – as the name indicates – as a protest, in the latter case against the structures of power in the Roman Catholic Church and the way the papal authority was used to monopolise the Christian message and thereby maintain dominance over people. In the beginning Protestantism was also a persecuted faith the professors of which were suppressed, prosecuted and killed for their faith no less than this was the case in early Christianity. Many of them had to flee their countries for the sake of freedom to believe the Word of God without papal dominance or ecclesiastical patronising. No wonder that these traits have remained deeply engrained in Protestant consciousness.

But in their resistance to imperialist claims, Protestants have also striven to take control of the Holy Scriptures. First, by establishing the principle of sola Scriptura, then by appropriating a new canon to make up its field of reference, and – as the Qaraites did eight centuries earlier – by determining the important passport to the free use of the text by means of the concept of the ‘plain sense’ of the Bible (claritas Scripturae) and its concomitant hermeneutical rule that parts of the biblical text can interpret other parts (Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres). These were the trappings of the appropriation of text by a resistance movement, which so elaborately and so successfully developed the system that it itself became the powerful establishment in many parts of many countries and eventually became as dominant a force as any in both ecclesiastical and political matters.

a The Heidelberg Catechism

The classical example on the Calvinist side of the Reformation would be the Heidelberg Catechism. In this exposition of reformed doctrine in the style of questions and answers, every doctrine presented in the answers is copiously backed up by collections of dicta probantia or proof-texts in the form of lists without exposition (sometimes less so, when texts seem hard to come by, for instance as far as the biblical ‘proof’ for the Holy Trinity is concerned). It is true that the proof texts were not originally supplied by the authors Zacharias

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16 Cf. Draper 2004:3.
Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, but that does not ameliorate the problem. On the contrary, it *a fortiori* exacerbates it, since it demonstrates all the more clearly that the doctrines were not formulated on the grounds of sound biblical exegesis, but were themselves the constraints for indicating how the biblical texts should be read ‘correctly’. The reformed establishment has, for instance, to such an extent brought 1 John 1:7 under its control in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that whoever questions the authenticity or the usability of the *comma Joanneum* comes under suspicion of heterodoxy or at best has to play off the back foot because of the powerful burden of proof imposed on such a person.

b A Lutheran test-case

The Lutheran use of the Bible as a collection of *dicta probantia* or dogmatic proofs, so typical of the post-Reformation orthodoxy in the works of Gerhard, Carpzov, Quenstedt and others, can probably not be better illustrated than by a much later example. In the article of Adolf Hoenecke in the first volume of *Theologische Quartalschrift*, dating from 1904 he demonstrates that the principle of classical Lutheran orthodoxy has remained the same for three centuries. Even the title makes it clear how the Bible is construed: ‘Agreement on the correct view of the authority of Scripture as the source of doctrine: The way to unity in the Church’. The Bible is an arsenal of texts containing doctrines. At the beginning of this article Hoenecke formulates the principle in unambiguous terms and immediately proceeds to put it in practice, which makes it not only enlightening to quote him at some length, but also to rest my case:

> The correct view of the authority of Scripture as the sole source of all doctrine is first of all this that God Himself gives Scripture binding authority as the Word that proceeds from His mouth.

> Regarding the authority of Scripture we must first consider its essential significance and then the proofs for it.

> As concerns the significance of scriptural authority, God commands that Scripture, since it is His Word, be considered the source of all doctrine. We are to look for doctrines about God and divine things in the Scriptures. God’s Word is the true doctrine (Ps 93:5), in contrast to all human teaching. Whoever does not hold to this Word knows nothing about divine matters (1 Tm 6:4). He also cannot

17 Hoenecke 1904:177-205. Despite the identical German name of the journal, it is not to be confused with the Roman Catholic journal that has been appearing in Tübingen since 1820. The Wisconsin Lutheran Synod began the journal under the German title in 1904 and now calls it the *Wisconsin Theological Quarterly*. 
teach anything that is good about it (Jr 8:9). God wants to instruct through the Word (Ps 32:8), and it is for the purpose of teaching that He has given the Scriptures (Ro 15:4), so that we should be instructed for our salvation (Ro 4:23-24), something that the Scriptures also are able to accomplish (2 Tm 3:15-16). God commands us to hold to the law and the testimony (Is 8:20) and to hear Moses and the prophets (Lk 16:29); besides these there is no help or counsel. And he who is of God also does this and hears the Word as that Word which alone teaches correctly, whereas the godless do the opposite (Jn 8:47). And if God expresses His pleasure over those who fear His Word (Is 66:2), this fearing consists primarily in awe at the Word as the perfect Word of the great God Himself, awe as before divine majesty, awe in which one from the outset takes care not to put one’s own word in place of the divine with the arrogant claim that God has spoken it (Jr 23:21), takes care not to want to improve the Word by adding to or removing from it (Dt 4:2; 12:32), both of which God threatens with His full wrath (Jr 23:28; Dt 12:32; cf. 13:5). Obedience to the doctrinal norm is what God demands (Ro 6:17). Paul pronounces the anathema upon those who preach a different gospel from his own, and he describes his own gospel as the one given in the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:1-3). According to all of this, Scripture has the divine authority to be the source of true doctrine.

c David Kelsey again

In several publications over the last years I have pointed out the importance of David Kelsey’s argument that biblically committed theology does not so much depend on the Bible, that is, on exegesis of the Bible in order to arrive at a theological position, but rather works the other way round. This perspective is of the utmost importance for our present topic and therefore cannot be bypassed. On the other hand I do not wish to repeat again what I have already published elsewhere and will therefore only mention the main line of thought.

Kelsey demonstrated that theologians claiming to base their theology on the Bible, actually set up a ‘holy scripture’ within the Bible by means of a creative construct which should then produce their respective theologies. Some major examples are

• From the fundamentalist and orthodox-conservative perspectives, the doctrines thought to be contained in the Bible constitute its authoritative aspect. Before even appealing to the text, one has already construed a ‘text’ – the doctrines supplied by Scripture according to conservative conviction.

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19 Kelsey 1975.
• For the twentieth century ‘Biblical Theology Movement’ the essential aspect of the Bible is its concepts, such as righteousness, covenant etc. These underlie the biblical truth to be believed. In other words, truth is a mass of theologoumena, claimed to be based on concepts perceived in the Bible.  

• For Paul Tillich the subject matter of theology consists of the ‘symbols’ of the original revelatory experience and the tradition founded upon it. Although these symbols express the original revelation, they can today generate new symbols depending on the originals. This network of symbols is thus Tillich’s Scripture.

• Rudolf Bultmann’s Scripture is yet another. He recognises in eschatological existence that which Martin Heidegger called authentic existence. The Scripture construed by Bultmann or the pattern he sees within it is therefore the ability to offer authentic existence.

These too are acts of taking control of the Bible. Its text is brought under the power of the theologian since only that which is compatible with the creative construct in question is allowed to speak theologically.

3 Liberation Theology

Although Liberation Theology is not necessarily ‘Protestant’ with a capital ‘P’, it is, so to speak, with a small ‘p’. It protests against socio-economic oppression and the political means of privileging some and subjugating others into the classes of haves and have-nots. But it does this in a similar though novel way to what we have seen above in Jewish and Protestant contexts.

Liberation Theology takes control of the biblical text by applying a hermeneutic suitable to its own ends. Commendable in this programme is the honesty with which it is done. The locus of authority for determining what the biblical text means, is declared to be neither ecclesiastico-episcopal nor the Bible

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21 Examples given by Kelsey are: G A F Knight, J Marsh, A Richardson, T F Torrance and others (cf. Kelsey 1975:31). The classic example is perhaps the sweeping use made of the concept of covenant in the theology of Walter Eichrodt ([1933/1939] 1959/1964). Other large-scale applications of this approach are to be seen in the double concept of God’s rule and communion with God, which constitutes the framework of Georg Fohrer’s theology (Fohrer 1972), and also revelation in history as the conceptual infrastructure of Gerhard von Rad’s Old Testament theology (Von Rad 1957/1960).

22 Tillich 1963:201.

23 Described and illustrated by Kelsey 1975:76-77.

24 Some of the most impressive, respectable and influential exponents of Liberation Theology in the world come from the Roman Catholic fold, e.g. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Severino Croatto and others, especially in Latin America; cf. Loader 1987:5-8.
itself as in the respective appropriations of classical Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, but to lie in the situation or context of the reader. Since we cannot read the biblical text without bias, the experience of the oppressed in their actual poverty and exploitation by the powers of the privileged establishment becomes the only legitimate vantage point from which to understand the Scriptures.25

In this system the options for understanding the Bible are clearly and explicitly limited drastically. One of the ways in which the narrowing down is taken even further, is the heavy concentration on the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.26 This brings about a dilemma. On the one hand the Bible somehow has authority, or else it would not have been important to argue from it, meaning: it would not have been important to harness the forces of the text for the purposes of a theology on behalf of oppressed communities. On the other hand the final authority is the situation of the poor, meaning: not the Bible. It is neither my purpose to discuss the strengths and the weaknesses of this hermeneutic nor to propose a possible way out of the dilemma.27 My present point is only to demonstrate that the biblical text is once again appropriated from a marginalised perspective and brought under the control of the theologians speaking for the oppressed. They determine how it should be read, therefore what is valid and therefore what the results are bound to be.

So liberation theologians have only applied the principle that erstwhile marginalised, oppressed and ‘colonialised’ communities of faith have for centuries been doing with the Bible. The same phenomenon, *mutatis mutandis*, occurs again: the potential force in the Holy Scriptures is recognised, brought under control, harnessed and steered in the service of resistance to powers experienced as oppressive and unacceptable.

C CONCLUSION

I have tried to show how the written text of the Bible becomes a tool of theologians who instrumentalise Holy Scripture for the purposes of resistance. An incidental observation (which, interesting though it is, I shall not exploit here) is that all along we have observed, not ‘the’ oppressed themselves who take control of Scripture and use it as a contra-force to those who subjugate and ‘colonialise’ them, but intellectuals who are among them or sympathise with them, be they called Masoretes, *doctores* or liberation theologians. There regu-

26 E.g. Gutierrez 1974:155-160, Croatto 1978 (a work carrying the telling title of *Exodus. A hermeneutics of freedom*).
27 Although I am of the opinion that there is such a possibility and still believe to have contributed to the cause of Liberation Theology by showing the dilemma and pointing a way out (Loader 1987).
larly seems to be a class or elite within the resisting groups who does the talk-
ing for them.

More importantly, we have seen that taking control of the Bible and what it can be made to mean is a logical phenomenon, flowing naturally from the heritage of the faith communities in question. This raises the question whether it makes sense at all to expect otherwise. In the light of the hermeneutical circle, where does theology not endeavour to bring the text under its control in order to serve its own purpose? Thinking only of the methodological battles in the field of biblical studies, the examples spring to mind one after the other. The hegemony of historical criticism in the nineteenth and the greater part of the twentieth centuries – albeit a hegemony in scholarly circles of university establishments – made itself the only legitimate strategy for reading the text. The ‘literary’ backlash responded in kind by defining its own rules for text-immanent reading and operating in resistance to historical criticism as a new and better way of extracting meaning from the text. Then came the observation of the instability of the text and the instability of meaning. Being post-
structural, everything but itself became wobbly. Again earlier currents were resisted by means of what is effectively the denial of all other possibilities of making sense of and with the text. The list can be extended, but at least one other manifestation of the phenomenon of text-control should be mentioned: scholarly jargon. The academic discourse itself is often a playground of pedan-
tics where language games are played, reference systems (with or without foot-
notes) are employed and people are intimidated by a technical jargon and forms of technical layout of the printed page – all of which to such a degree that the ethics of scholarly discourse should become a focal point of concern.

At this point the obvious conclusion would be a plea for tolerance of other readings, strategies, methods and approaches. But to me this plea does not seem very effective. It is made too generally and agreed upon too easily, despite what goes on in practice. I would submit, rather, that the point to begin is acknowl-
edgement of the phenomenon as legitimate in itself. Using the Bible and pre-
senting this use in a way to the best advantage of the theologian’s own perspec-
tive is natural and acceptable. Tolerance also entails the right to be tolerated.

This would lead to the conclusion that

- it does not suffice to only lay bare one’s own theological, philosophical and methodological presuppositions, but that spelling out the goals should complete the picture. ‘Here is my faith / here are my presupposi-
tions / here is my vantage point’ should be amplified by: ‘This is what I want to achieve / this is what I am striving for’.

- Having said that, the willingness to be convinced and the readiness to experiment should complement scholarly honesty with scholarly fair-

ness.
On these conditions taking control of Scripture, opting for approaches and presenting arguments and conclusions as best one can in promoting the convictions one has come to, are not only acceptable, but necessary for a fulfilling and engaged debate on the issues that are not for nothing issues of faith.

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