

Jesus as 'radical social prophet': An appraisal of Richard Horsley's *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987)

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I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or its part submitted it to any University for a Degree.

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**ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, Jesus and the contents of the Bible have always been thought of as exclusively concerned with spiritual and religious matters. The topic of Jesus and the social and political dimensions of the Gospel is therefore still a controversial idea for many Christians. Responses to the notion of Jesus as a social and political figure range from ignorance to avoidance and even resistance. Nevertheless scholars continue, in various ways, to explore and integrate the relationship between the religious, social and political dimensions of Jesus' words and actions.

The aim of this study is to critically evaluate the notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' as set out in Horsley's book *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987). The purpose is to establish the historical validity of this notion and to determine its significance and implications for contemporary Christian reflection, teaching and discipleship.

The study describes the development and impact of the social sciences on the interpretation of the New Testament. It also explains Horsley's presuppositions and method. An analysis of Horsley's construction of the historical, social and political context of Jesus' first century world is made. Horsley's view of the Kingdom of God is also discussed. The grammatico-historical examination of Horsley's reading of selected key biblical and extra-biblical texts forms a crucial part of the investigation. An appraisal of Horsley's notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' is made and its implications noted.

The study finds adequate grounds for seeing Jesus fulfilling the role of a 'radical social prophet' in the same manner as the Old Testament prophets. The conclusion reached is that Horsley's (1987) notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet', while inadequate to account for the theological nature and mission of Jesus, is nevertheless useful to highlight the often overlooked social and political dimensions of Jesus and the Gospels.

## OPSOMMING

Tradisioneel het Christene nog altyd die inhoud van die Bybel en veral die figuur van Jesus met die geestelike en die godsdienstige vereenselwig. Die idee dat Jesus enigsins met die maatskaplike en veral die politiek verbind sou kon word, is vir baie moderne Christene 'n omstrede aangeleentheid. Reaksie op sulke voorstelle wissel gewoonlik van onkunde tot selfs weerstand. Akademici gaan egter voort om die religiese, sosiale en politieke omvang van Jesus se woorde en dae na te vors en te integreer.

Hierdie studie het ten doel om Richard Horsley se voorstel van Jesus as 'radical social prophet', soos uiteengesit in sy boek *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987) onder die soeklig te plaas en krities te evalueer. Daar word dus gepoog om die historiese geldigheid van die voorstel te ondersoek sowel as die implikasies vir die hedendaagse Christen en kerk.

Die studie bied 'n beskrywing aan oor die ontwikkeling en impak van die Sosiale Wetenskaplike Kritiek op die interpretasie van die Nuwe Testament. Horsley se voorveronderstellings, metodes en prosedures word analiseer. Sy konstruksie van Jesus se historiese, sosiale en politieke konteks word ook ontleed. 'n Eksegetiese ondersoek van Horsley se lees van geselekteerde Bybelse en buite-Bybelse tekste word gedoen, gevolg deur 'n waardering van Horsley se voorstel en die implikasies daarvan vir die kerk.

Die gevolgtrekking wat gemaak word is dat daar voldoende gronde is vir Horsley se voorstel van Jesus as 'n 'radical social prophet', veral as sy optrede beskou word in die lig van die Ou Testamentiese profete. Hoewel bevind word dat Horsley (1987) se voorstel teologies onvoldoende is om die aard en omvang van Jesus se verlossingsmissie te beskryf, is sy idee nietemin belangrik omdat dit die sosiale en politieke dimensies van Jesus en die evangelie na vore bring - iets wat dikwels 'n leemte is by baie Nuwe-Testamentiese akademici en literatuur.

**KEY TERMS**

Radical social prophet

Social scientific criticism

Jewish history

Kingdom of God

Liberation

Resistance movements

Jubilee

Sermon on the plain

Social justice

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

The subject of Jesus and politics is difficult and has always been clouded in controversy. The general response to this topic among “traditional Christian piety” in South Africa ranged from avoidance to ignorance and even resistance.

The religiously and socially conservative evangelical churches like the English-led Church of England in South Africa (CESA) for example, chose the path of dualism, opting for a neat separation of the spiritual from the physical. These churches considered Jesus and the New Testament as almost 'exclusively' concerned with the eternal religious question of the individual and his or her relationship with God and neighbour. As a result, little reference and attention was paid to the specific social and political issues in the Bible and their bearing upon the Church (Balcomb, 2004:148-149).

Nolan (1988:5) explains the dilemma caused by this dualism in the introductory section of his book:

“In SA today the preaching of the gospel faces an unprecedented challenge...But what makes this challenge really urgent and demanding is the simple fact that the gospel has been, and is, associated with a political system that is now regarded by almost the whole world as a crime against humanity. Even more confusing and challenging is the way others have used the gospel to avoid the issue by arguing that this crime against humanity has nothing to do with God and salvation in Jesus Christ because it is a matter of politics and not religion.”

Yet it could be argued that the prevalence of these views and phenomena in many of South Africa's churches - although influenced in no small way by domestic socio-political events - may have simply reflected a much larger theological-philosophical (and ideological) trend and debate that was raging on the international stage at the time.

Räisänen (2000:41) believes the rise, dominance and widespread influence of Karl Barth's “dialectical theology” (or kerygmatic theology) during the 1920's post-war period effectively neutralized the growth of sociological exegesis and the socio-historical impulses in biblical criticism until the 1970's.

Theissen (1992:11-12) on the other hand, singles out Rudolf Bultmann's existentialist interpretation - which was apparently widely influential even among conservative exegetes

according to Wright (1996:4,10,22-23) – as having radically “internalised and individualized” (privatised) Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God. For Wright (1999:10), Bultmann’s ‘ahistorical’ reading of the gospels yielded a Christ whose words and actions “lacked the concrete and immediate socio-political contexts of first century Palestine” (Horsley, 1987:158).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it may well be these and other factors that may have prevented scholars and large sections of especially the white Reformed Evangelical Churches from seeing the radical, liberating and potentially revolutionary nature of Jesus’ words and actions, as well as their political implications for Christians in South Africa (Borg, 1994:99-100; Wannamaker, 1996:8, 16-17).

## 1.2. Problem statement

A growing number of scholars now affirm that there was a socio-political dimension to the message and activity of Jesus. The arrival of the Third Quest with its emphasis on locating Jesus within the Jewish Palestinian context (cf. Harrington, 1987), the insights and perspective brought by the entry into the discipline of interdisciplinary models and perspectives (Steggemann *et al*, 2002), the entrance of feminism and the voices from the third world have made it imperative, more than ever before, to explore the political and social dimensions of Jesus’ ministry (Borg, 1994:97, 98).

The claim that Jesus was ‘political’ goes back to the birth of the discipline of New Testament criticism over two hundred years ago when Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1778) argued that Jesus wanted to work freedom for the Jews from Roman oppression and establish an earthly messianic kingdom. According to Reimarus Jesus failed and this is reflected in his cry of dereliction. In *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967) S.G.F. Brandon followed Reimarus’ lead by arguing that Jesus sympathized with the ideals and aims of the resistance movement. His claim has not convinced scholars and this hypothesis has now been rejected by most (cf. Bammel & Moule ed. 1984, *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*).

Nevertheless, the rise and prominence of interdisciplinary models and sociological perspectives within New Testament studies has, in recent years, revived the search for a link between Jesus and his economic, social and political milieu.

Horsley & Hanson (1985) and Horsley (1987) highlighted the difficult socio-economic and

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<sup>1</sup> Theissen (1992: 11-12) notes how even those who concerned themselves with social questions during this period of dialectical theology (i.e. Ernst Lohmeyer, 1921) still invoked the ‘remoteness of the world’ of Jesus’s inner nature, the complete ‘detachment of his internal life from earthly ties, whether it takes the form of possessions or education, family or marriage, social position or country’...’But it was Rudolph Bultmann who was responsible for the neutralization of the social history impulses in form-criticism.

political conditions under Roman imperial rule. They argued that we cannot really understand Jesus without adequate knowledge of the peasantry that comprised 90% of the population of first century Palestine. Since they bore the brunt of the excesses of imperial rule, they gave impetus to the revolts and formed the base for the popular prophetic and messianic movements - movements that were motivated by an eager yearning for deliverance. It is against the background of these popular kings and their movements then, that the significance of Jesus' actions should be pondered.

Crossan (1989, 1991) and Borg (1987, 1994) both argued for the integration of the political, social and theological themes in Jesus' work. Borg points out that resistance to Rome went hand in hand with the quest for holiness, particularly in the Pharisaic agenda; Jesus opposed the entire programme with a new paradigm of holiness, characterized by mercy rather than exclusion. Crossan like Horsley sees the socio-political-religious context of Jewish Palestine as one of civil struggle between the rich and poor, between the ruling Romans and Jewish elite on the one hand, and the Jewish peasants on the other. This peasant social unrest comes to a dreadful climax in the first revolt against Rome. Crossan portrays Jesus as a champion of the oppressed classes, who challenged society by his teaching and lifestyles.

Both Oakman (1981, 1998) and Malina (2001, 2002: 3-26) have argued that Jesus wanted to establish a theocratic state. By proclaiming the kingdom of God and God as patron, Jesus was presenting solutions to existing social problems. He urged Israel to endure in the present and look forward to the forthcoming, new political theocracy where God would be Israel's patron (Malina, 2002: 3-26). Oakman's analysis of the harsh economic realities experienced by Jesus' peasant hearers and followers led him to the conclusion that the ministry of Jesus was a bid for social power i.e., "the reign of God was, so to speak, a total social programme" (Oakmann, 1981:575).

Hollenbach (1981:568-572) begins with the problem of Jesus's exorcisms and their relation to his career, asking why the public authorities were so hostile towards Jesus as a result of his exorcisms. Drawing on cross-cultural studies of possession and exorcism as well as social-psychology, Hollenbach suggests that cross-cultural evidence exists that show how colonial situations of domination nourish mental illnesses. Mental illnesses, like demon-possession, provided a socially acceptable form of oblique protest against or escape from oppressions. Moreover, accusations of madness and witchcraft were used by the socially dominant classes as a means of social control (Hollenbach, 1981:575). Applying these findings to the Gospels, Hollenbach (1981:580-583) argued that demon possession was used as a defensive strategy against the oppression of the Roman colonial situation. He concludes that Jesus' acts of exorcism threatened this social control mechanism that ensured the social stability so highly

favoured by the ruling elite. Hollenbach sees this as the main reason for the official antagonism and plot to eliminate Jesus.

But it was Richard Horsley, Professor of Arts and Religion at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, drawing on the insights of social-scientific studies, including cross-cultural anthropology and comparative studies who did most to illuminate and integrate the concrete historical and socio-political realities of first century, Roman-occupied Palestine in his interpretation of Jesus and the Gospels. Using the social sciences to reconstruct a portrait of the political and social circumstances of first century Palestine at the time of Jesus, he sees Jesus standing in the classic tradition of Israelite prophets whose fundamental concern, as he sees it, was with the social and political issues of their day. His basic thesis is that the situation was one of class struggle in which the majority rural peasant population were dominated and oppressed politically and economically by the Roman imperialists and their client elites. This situation created a 'spiral of violence' which in turn saw the rise of social bandits and popular protest movements, including Jesus. Jesus himself was a peasant whose main aim was to foment a social revolution on behalf of the peasants. He preached the Kingdom of God as a social and political rather than religious phenomenon (Horsley 1985, 1987, 1994, 2003).

Horsley has received praise for trying to interpret Jesus in relation to his social and political environment (i.e., Borg, 1994:28-30; Draper, 1994:34-35). But some have suggested that he overplays the "this-worldly" nature of Jesus concerns at the expense of the theological motifs (Witherington, 1995:150-153; Wright, 1992:156-159). In the light of these differing sentiments, how should we view Horsley's contribution?

### **1.3. Central research question**

The central research question aims to study and evaluate the notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' in Richard A. Horsley (1987) with the purpose of establishing its historical validity as well as its significance and relevance for contemporary Christian reflection, teaching and discipleship.

### **Thus, this study will investigate the following questions**

What is the historical development of relations between Theology and the Social Sciences, especially the impact of the latter on the discipline of New Testament interpretation?

What are Horsley's motivations, methods and procedures and how should we evaluate them?<sup>2</sup>

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2 Part of my evaluation will not only focus on where we should locate Horsley's in the spectrum of approaches but also include questions about the merits and demerits of his hermeneutical approach i.e. what are the principles and suppositions that undergird them and how do they influence the outcome of his findings? Are these methods comprehensive enough to capture the varied dimensions of Jesus' ministry? Can this approach do justice to the scope and nature of the biblical text? How do Horsley's findings compare with those of other scholars using the same approach as well as those using traditional methods? Is Horsley's interest purely 'sociological' or 'historical'? Is he proposing an alternative 'sociological or historical' reading that can stand by itself without reference to established

How does Horsley read the historical, social and political climate of Jesus' time, and how should we evaluate this?

How does Horsley understand the concept of the kingdom of God?

What biblical and extra-biblical historical data are there to validate or cast doubt on Horsley's (1987) notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet'?<sup>3</sup>

How does Horsley's (1987) notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' contribute to our understanding of Jesus within the historical, social and political realities of first century Palestine and of what relevance is this for contemporary theological reflection and interpretation?

#### **1.4. Central theoretical argument**

An examination of the relevant biblical and extra-biblical texts will prove that Horsley's (1987) notion of Jesus as Radical Social Prophet, while inadequate to account for the theological nature and mission of Jesus, *is* nevertheless useful to highlight the often overlooked social and political dimensions of Jesus and the Gospels.

#### **1.5. Aims**

To investigate and critically evaluate the notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' as set out in Horsley's book *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987) and to determine the significance, relevance and implications of this concept for contemporary thought and interpretation of Jesus.

**In order to achieve this aim the following objectives will be pursued:**

#### **1.6. Objectives**

- To explore the development and contribution of the social sciences towards Theology, including the impact and significance of social analysis on the discipline of New Testament Interpretation.
- To describe and explain Horsley's motivation, methodology and procedure.
- To describe and explain Horsley's reading of the historical, social and political context of Jesus' period.

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viewpoints and interpretations?

<sup>3</sup> Due to the brevity of this work and the limited space I shall only focus on a number of key selected texts used by Horsley to highlight what he perceives as Jesus' 'radical social-political' program.

- To describe and expound on Horsley's view of the kingdom of God.
- To present a grammatico-historical examination of Horsley's reading of selected key biblical and extra-biblical texts.
- To propose an appraisal of Horsley's (1987) 'concrete' approach, with particular reference to the notion of Jesus as radical social prophet and explore the significance, relevance and implications of this concept for contemporary Christian thought and interpretation of Jesus.

### **1.7. Procedure and method**

Like many African Christians in South Africa I too find myself in a process of coming to terms with a history of colonialism and oppression. Not surprisingly, the 'protest theology' and prophetic witness aspired to by Bonhoeffer (1959), Boesak (1979, 1984), Villa-Vicencio (1982), de Gruchy (1986) and Cassidy (1989) has significantly influenced my theological thinking. This study is done from within the framework of the Reformed Evangelical Tradition<sup>4</sup> and where applicable, exegesis is done according to the grammatico-historical method as well as insight drawn from historical-critical methods (Deist & Burden, 1980; Smit, 1987; Wright, 1994:xvii).<sup>5</sup>

#### **To achieve the said objectives I shall:**

- Explore the development of relations between theology and the social sciences, especially the role and significance of social analysis in biblical interpretation.
- Describe and explain Horsley's motivation, method and approach.
- Describe and explain Horsley's reading of the historical, social and political context of first century Palestine.
- Describe and explain Horsley's view of the kingdom of God?
- Do a grammatico-historical examination of the relevant key biblical and extra-biblical texts used by Horsley (1987) to justify the notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet'.
- Propose an appraisal of Horsley's (1987) 'concrete' approach, particularly with regards to the notion of Jesus as 'radical social prophet' and the implications of this for

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<sup>4</sup> The following essentials form the basis of my faith commitment, namely the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Like Wright (1994: xvii) I shall constantly bear in mind that 'historical exegesis is not simply a matter of laying out meanings of words and sentences. It involves

contemporary theological reflection and preaching.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS

#### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the definition, origins and historical development of interdisciplinary or 'sociological' (also called social scientific) approaches and exegesis.<sup>6</sup> It is meant to enable us to understand the historical, theological and social motivations that gave rise to the social scientific approaches. Also, by drawing attention to some of the pivotal moments, figures and studies that have characterized the development of these methods, we will be able to locate Horsley historically, theologically as well as methodologically.

This survey is not meant to be exhaustive nor is it an attempt to critique the social scientific approaches to biblical studies. It is simply meant to present a general overview of the subject at hand by highlighting the most important developments and influences made by the social sciences towards New Testament studies and interpretation. After all, it is those using these approaches (like Horsley etc.) that have most consistently, in recent times, tried to illuminate the historical, social and political world of the early Christians.

Starting with a brief definition of social scientific approaches to the Bible, I will proceed to describe the historical development and evolution of the social scientific criticism of the Bible in three stages. First the earliest efforts from 1807 to the 1920's, followed by a period of decline (1920's to the 1970's) and third, the revival and interest in sociological exegesis during the 1960's and 70's. The second half of the chapter will briefly highlight some of the most important innovative studies in recent times and the challenge posed by Liberationist Theologies.

#### 2.2. Defining Social Scientific Criticism

The last twenty-five years have seen the introduction of a wide variety of new methods in biblical studies. In both Old Testament and New Testament studies new approaches have been developed using theoretical models from other disciplines, such as Literary Criticism and the Social Sciences. The Social Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament, then, is part of a wider trend in biblical studies as a whole, reflecting increased diversity within the discipline and greater interdisciplinarity within the humanities and the social sciences. John Elliott offers a helpful summary of this approach:

“Social Scientific Criticism of the Bible is that phase of the exegetical task

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<sup>6</sup> I will be using the terms social scientific criticism and sociological exegesis interchangeably though I shall – for the sake of clarity and logic, specify and explain

which analyses the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of perspectives, theories, models, and research of the social sciences. As a component of the Historical Critical Method of exegesis, Social Scientific Criticism investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate between composers and audiences". (Elliott, 1983:7)

The intention is that the resources offered by the social sciences be used alongside the other methods of textual and historical criticism. This will enable a fuller and better appreciation of the Bible texts and communities within their historical, social, and cultural settings.

## **2.3. Historical development and evolution of an interdisciplinary approach**

### **2.3.1 Early attempts at social descriptions of early Christianity: 1807 to the 1920's**

In as far as the history of hermeneutics is concerned the Reformation signalled a fundamental change in hermeneutical thinking. It not only represented a rebellion against tradition and ecclesiastical authority that held a monopoly and a controlling grip on biblical interpretation; it also marked the beginning of an intense hermeneutical activity that would shape subsequent developments for generations.

One of the results of this emphasis on the independence and priority of exegesis in relation to dogma and tradition was the discovery of the historically determined nature of the Bible. This second development was decisively influenced by the emancipation spirit of the Enlightenment and the rationalism of the post-Reformation era. Therefore a critical attitude towards all forms of external authority was made possible by the discovery of the historical and therefore relative nature of ecclesiastical institutions. The implication was that the Bible should be read as a historical document. Thus began the long history of historical interpretation: textual, form, redaction, historical background and sociological or social scientific criticism, which emanates from historical criticism (Theissen, 1993:3; Räisänen, 2000:173).

Adolf Deissmann (1866-1937) was one of the earliest pioneers to attempt a sociological history of early Christianity. His work with regards to the recently discovered papyri had significant implications for understanding Paul. Deissmann showed how the newly discovered material throws light on early Christian social and religious history. The papyri offers information about village life and the excavation of cities such as Pompeii provided data about the 'Pauline cities'.

In *Light from the Ancient East* (1908) Deissmann argued that Christianity must be understood in its historical setting i.e., as a movement of the lower classes. Deissmann's *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (1927) places the apostle in his historical and geographical context and studies him more as a social being rather than a theologian.

Marxist interest on the origins of Christianity came from Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and Karl Kautsky, the Marxist historian of socialism. Kautsky's *The Foundations of Christianity* (1953) presents the first generations of Christians as 'proletarian' in character. Uneducated, oppressed and far removed from the masses of the people, their doctrine and the history of their communities were confined to oral traditions that could not be tested by outsiders. The traditions were put into writing as more educated people became Christians - therefore they are not to be taken as reliable sources. The first Christian community in Jerusalem gave expression to its proletarian character in what appears to have been the social gospel of Jesus in the communism it practiced in its earlier years. This communism was abandoned as Christianity became more conservative, attracting people from the administrative classes of the empire (Kautsky, 1953: 364-380, 448).

In America it was the Chicago school (strongly influenced by the Social Gospel) that led research into the origins of early Christianity. Their use of 'socio-historical' methods was distinctly American, with little influence from European and confessional traditions. Its major exponents Shirley Jackson Case (1872-1947) and Shailer Matthews (1863-1941) were convinced that 'all aspects of primitive Christianity, not only its external phenomena but the kerygmatic faith itself, are relative to social-cultural factors, and that no dichotomy could be made between faith and history'. Much like Wrede and others before them, the work of Case and Mathews alerted scholars to the weakness of New Testament theologies. They criticized Bultmann for not relating the theologies of Paul and John very clearly to the communities for which they wrote, with results that "one has the impression that their theologies were not really affected by the hurly-burly of early Christian life" (Malherbe, 1983:5,7).

### **2.3.2. The decline of sociological interest: 1920's to the 1970's**

From the 1920's to the 1970's, interest in the origins and social dimension of early Christianity declined dramatically in the face of the First World War. The theological answer to the crisis brought about by the devastation of the war was 'dialectical theology', a trend that signaled a desire to return to the transcendent origins of the Christian faith. The question of God became so central that the question about society paled into insignificance and listening to what the New Testament text has to say in substance took over, so that the social contexts of those texts

seemed to be of minor importance (Theissen, 1992:9; Räisänen, 2000:5).<sup>7</sup>

The failure to explore the social context in which the traditions were preserved and developed meant that Cullman's call for the exploration of the sociological dimensions to form criticism went virtually unheeded.<sup>8</sup> In practice form criticism never focused on the wider social context (as implied in the term 'sitz em leben'), but on the 'sitz em glauben', the setting in faith or life of the church. And in Bultmann, interest in the living context of biblical texts receded into the background. Theological interest is directed not so much to the life behind the texts as to the 'other-worldly' message contained in the Pauline and Johannean writings i.e., Christian faith means withdrawal from the world and has little to do with society in its concrete form. This total abrogation of society made any criticism of it superfluous (Horrel, 1999:5; Theissen, 1992:9).<sup>9</sup> Even Ernst Lohmeyer (*Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum*, 1973), one of the few who did social exegesis at that time, invoked the remoteness from the world of Jesus' inner nature, the complete detachment of his external life from every earthly tie, whether it takes the form of possession or education, family, marriage, social position or country (Theissen, 1992:12).

A brief look at the twentieth century 'quests for the historical Jesus' also reveals a lack of interest in the social world of early Christianity. Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) and Bultmann's *Jesus and the Word* (1926) as well as most of the New Questers (i.e., Ernst Fuchs, Gunther Bornkamm and Hans Conzelmann) all shared the conviction that Jesus and the Gospels were unrelated to social, political or economic questions (Green *et al*, 1992).

### **2.3.3 The revival of the sociological enterprise during the 1960's and 70's**

In the 1960's the tide began to turn as interest in the social aspects of early Christianity rose. The protests of the sixties that challenge all forms of conventional and traditional authority extended to the wider academic field, where traditional historical modes of inquiry and the axioms of previous generations were subjected to close scrutiny. As scholarship became more independent and self-confident, especially in America, it opened itself to new questions; questions frequently suggested by the emerging social scientific approaches.

The development and growth in numbers of departments of religious studies, many without religious affiliation, have contributed to this questioning. In such settings the perspective from

<sup>7</sup> Theissen (1992:11) remarks that dialectical theology (understood as the word of God by Karl Barth) carried in itself critical impulses that are critical towards society, yet it failed to develop any practical interest in a sociological clarification of theology and the church.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Cullmann (1925) insisted that form criticism would require the development of a 'special branch of Sociology' devoted to the study of the laws that govern the growth of popular tradition.

<sup>9</sup> This relativization of society as provisional and transitory was reflected in a theology that remained abstract in its social criticism and in an exegesis that was not concrete about social history either (Theissen, 1992:3).

which early Christianity is studied is no longer that of the church (Malherbe, 1993:3).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the use of new methods is a reflection of the new social setting of much of theological scholarship in secularized departments of religious studies, where the study of religion as a human phenomenon is now carried on with interdisciplinary methods (Borg, 1994:100). The discoveries of extra-biblical evidence like the Dead Sea Scrolls have also contributed to the intentional and sustained use of the social scientific methods by scholars.

Significant too for the advancement of the social sciences was the shift that had occurred in the methods of historical studies. There was a move away from the traditional approach that concentrated on the 'political and biographical' aspects in historical studies to more comprehensive historical methods that included economics, the social and the psychological. Focus was centered not so much on the 'great figures' as affecting history but rather towards a concern with communities and social relations, with popular movements and popular culture. It was history from below, not history from above (Theissen, 1992:14).

Moreover, the social turmoil on a global scale did not exempt the home societies of biblical scholars (e.g. the many proxy wars of the Cold War especially Vietnam, the radical protests and civil rights movement in America). The introduction of voices from the 'third world' and the influence of international forums such as the World Council of Churches raised the pressing issues of social justice. The rise of socially critical forms of theology such as the Theology of Hope in Europe, Liberation Theology in Latin America, Black Theology in South Africa and Feminist Theologies challenged modern theology's apparent indifference to social questions, especially in the face of the problems caused by the grossly unjust distribution of wealth between nations and individuals in the shrinking world of today, and the seemingly immovable privileged structures of power. Liberation theologians have cast doubt on the purposes and method of Traditional Theology, arguing that certain modern ideological and theological emphases supply ideological props for attitudes that are indifferent towards social and political change (Kirk, 1980:42; Thiselton, 1980:110-111).

But undoubtedly one of the major factors was the dissatisfaction with the established methods of New Testament study. To many the hermeneutical discussions of a decade or two ago became increasingly esoteric and unappealing. Representatives of the sociological enterprise voiced dissatisfaction with the predominance of theological and related concerns or an over-emphasis on a literary-historical and theological point of view to the detriment of the sociological aspects (Malherbe, 1983:2-3). Scholars of the history-of-religions school had already criticized the usual discussions of Biblical theology for giving the impression that early Christian views

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<sup>10</sup> For example Jesus research is characterized today more by interest in history rather than interest in faith. The question of the role of the kerygma is hardly raised today. Apparently, in accord with the general movement from the philosophical to the historical, even myths and miracles are approached from a historical

were produced purely by the power of thought, as though the world of ideas hovered above external history as a world of its own (Wrede, 1973:71,100). He argued that the early Christian world of ideas was very strongly conditioned by external history, citing as his prime example Paul's doctrine of 'justification by faith'. This doctrine, he suggested, had a practical origin and practical purpose and Paul would never have formed it had he not taken in hand the task of converting the Gentiles. Heikki Räisänen (2000:73) says those who apply sociological insights to the New Testament stand in this trajectory.

Scroggs (1980) spoke of 'the discipline of theology of the New Testament (the history of ideas) that operates out of a "methodological docetism" as if believers had minds and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate bodies'.<sup>11</sup> Esler (1987:2) does not reject the traditional methods of Biblical criticism but nevertheless insists that they failed to develop adequate ways of analyzing the social context within which the theology of the texts are formed and expressed, hence the need for social scientific insights.

#### **2.4. Innovative studies during the 1960's and 70's**

E. Judges' important and very influential book *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the first Century* (1960) encouraged new interest and has resulted in a number of groundbreaking publications like Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism* (1969, 1963). Theissen (1992:25) describes this work as a comprehensive explanation of Palestine in terms of the sociological process. With Hengel's work the subject of 'Hellenism and Judaism' was no longer analyzed merely as the history of ideas; it was now considered in the framework of social history too. The concept of 'Hellenism' was now understood to refer not only to the 'intellectual and spiritual' world but also to a supreme military, economic and political power.

The formation of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (1973) was another notable event that signaled the renewal of a widespread interest in the social questions of the New Testament. The group, which includes Wayne Meeks among others, focused on describing the 'social world' of early Christianity in Antioch-on-the-Orontes from its beginning until the fourth century.<sup>12</sup>

Gerhard Theissen's articles published between 1973 and 1975 are still considered among the most influential contributions to the sociology of early Christianity. These studies, which cover both the Palestinian Jesus movement and the Pauline church at Corinth, combine a detailed

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angle (Boring, 1987:341-393).

<sup>11</sup> Scroggs (1980) quoted in Wanamaker, 1996: 2.

<sup>12</sup> Many members of the group were influenced by 'symbolic anthropology' and the 'sociology of knowledge' school as developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). They believe that humans are always engaged in the construction and maintenance of 'social worlds,' which provide institutions, structures, and

and careful use of historical evidence with a creative and eclectic use of social theory. Theissen argued that the radicalism of the synoptic sayings which speak of a rootless, wandering, propertyless existence, should not be ignored. It should rather be seen as reflecting a pattern of life adopted deliberately and voluntarily by the wandering radicals. These radicals traveled around the Palestinian villages proclaiming the kingdom of God. The ethical radicalism of the sayings transmitted to us is the “radicalism of itinerants” (Theissen, 1992:33-59). Theissen’s thesis was heavily criticized by Horsley (cf. *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 1989) and Schottroff (*Not Many Powerful: Approaches to a Sociology of Early Christianity*, 1985). In spite of the criticism Horsley agrees on the importance of Theissen’s work noting: “He has led many of us to rethink a highly important branch of Christian origins” (Horsley, 1989:10).

Another groundbreaking work during this period was Robin Scroggs’ *The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movements* (1975). The book is a systematic attempt to apply the social model of a religious sect to early Christianity. In contrast to established emphasis on theological ideas, Scroggs argued that his social approach offers new perspectives from which to view the situation and concerns of the early Christians. “The church becomes, from this perspective, not a theological seminary but a group of people who have experienced the hurt of the world and the healing of communal acceptance” (Scroggs, 1980:165-66). John Gager’s book *Kingdom and Community* (1975) sketches ways in which models resulting from millenarian movements, the concept of charisma (Max Weber) and Melanesian cults undertaken by anthropologist in the 1950’s and 60’s can be applied to early Christianity.

Between the 1970’s and early 1980’s interest in this field continued to grow while an increasing number of varied publications appeared. In 1989 the Context Group, which included amongst others scholars such as Bruce Malina, John Elliott, Phillip Esler, Richard L. Rohrbaugh and Jerome Neyrey was formed. This group is dedicated to understanding and interpreting the biblical text within the context of the social and cultural world of traditional Mediterranean society. A basic motivation remains the avoidance of ethnocentric and anachronistic readings of the biblical text. Since the formation of the Context Group the question of the role that social scientific goals and methods ought to play has dominated discussions. This question is indicative of the divergent approaches of scholars in this area of research i.e., those who take the ‘social-historical’ approach (for example R.A. Horsley, W. Meeks, G. Theissen) and the ‘sociological or social scientific approach’ (most of whom belong to the Context Group).<sup>13</sup>

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patterns for human interaction.

<sup>13</sup> The former (social-historical) steers largely away from using sociological methods, concentrating on more traditional historiographic questions about the social background and practice of the early Christians. In contrast, those using the ‘sociological’ or ‘social scientific approaches’ complement the conventional historical and exegetical analysis of the Bible and its environment with an orientation whose questions and objectives, modes of analysis and processes of explanation are

## 2.5 Radical or emancipation theologies

As already stated above, the rise of socially critical forms of theology came in response to the widespread social injustices and traditional Western theology's seeming indifference to these social questions. These 'theologies' (i.e., The Theology of Hope, Liberation Theology, Black Theology, Feminist Theologies and Post-colonial Biblical Criticism) have developed what may be termed 'radical' socio-political perspectives on early Christianity and are generally concerned with human emancipation or liberation (Gottwald and Horsley, 1993; Elliott, 1994).<sup>14</sup> Even though they employ a variety of methods that go well beyond mere sociology, sociological critique of belief systems and institutional structures nevertheless lie at the heart of these approaches.

Feminist social-historical perspectives represent a form of ideology critique that seeks to expose and question the patriarchal structures of domination in both the past and present. Schüssler Fiorenza (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 1983/1995a) is one of its most prominent representatives. Fiorenza does not explicitly use social scientific methods. Rather, she creatively attempts to recover the social history of the early Christian movement, and especially of women within that movement, from behind the veil of androcentric texts and the tradition of androcentric interpretation. In Luis Schottroff (*Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*, 1986) we find both feminist social history and commitment to the cause of liberation theology i.e., the emancipation of the poor from the structures of oppression. According to feminist critique many of the interpreters have traditionally belonged to the upper or upper-middle classes, and their attention has always been concentrated on the groups to which they feel closest (Theissen, 1992:27).

Liberation theologians stress that biblical hermeneutics turns on a pre-understanding that is shaped, in turn, by praxis. They contend that theoretical knowledge, especially the philosophical values that are associated with the western bourgeoisie, distort the biblical message and obscure the rights of the text. Many of the Latin American theologians quite explicitly and consciously interpret the New Testament in terms of a pre-understanding orientated towards Marxist perspectives. The Marxist interpretation provided 'an ideological mechanism which is capable of exposing the intentions of any exegesis seeking, through the employment of pre-understanding tied to the conservative philosophical systems, to use the biblical text to defend the status quo of a pre-revolutionary situation' (Thiselton, 1980:111). The methods use by Black theologians also differs in perspective, content and style from Western theology traditionally

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guided and informed by the perspectives, methods and research of the social sciences (Elliott 1985:329).

<sup>14</sup> Horsley (2000:10) defines post-colonial biblical criticism as representing "a variety of hermeneutical approaches characterized by their political nature and ideological agenda, and whose textual politics ultimately concerns both a hermeneutic of suspicion and of retrieval or restoration". Pioneers of post-colonial criticism are from the outset also seeking to make alliances with those subjected to and seeking liberation from sexual, racial, colonial and class domination.

transmitted from Augustine to Barth. Since Black Theology stems from an environment whose impact is emotional, all theological discourse that has conceptual thought as the essential groundwork of its method is suspect. It rejects the way whites express the gospel and insists that 'unless they (whites) pay attention to the oppressed they will never understand the Gospel i.e., *Comparior ergo sum...I suffer with others, therefore I am*' (Kirk, 1975:103).

Fernando Belo's *Lecture matérialiste de l'évangile de Marc* (1974) is another example of perspective. This exegesis is 'materialist' in orientation and seeks to read biblical texts as ideological productions i.e., as products of different economic, political and ideological class struggles. A combination of Marxist-historical and structuralist literary theories is employed to illuminate the biblical literature as products of social formation with its own unique character as a written system of symbolic codes (Füssel, 1993:117,125-126).

## **2.6 Problems with the sociological approach**

The use of methods and models derived from the social sciences and their application to Jesus and the Gospels have not been without their critics. The first concerns the misuse of models. It is easy to read historical situations in the light of modern theories without asking whether or not these current models actually fit the ancient data. Scholars often choose only those groups which fit the model they wish to impose on the data and then select those aspects from Israel or the church which fit their theory. They then studiously omit aspects in both the external model and the biblical material that are not parallel (Osborne, 1997:141).

There is also a tendency to generalize so that there's no room for individual contributions. Moreover, modern sociological conclusions are not made without extensive data collected over long periods of time. In comparison the biblical data is sparse indeed and that which we have is not couched in sociological language (Barnett, 1997:20).

Another problem is the tendency to read theological statements as sociological evidence. All given aspects are explained on the basis of societal factors which amount to a form of reductionism. Furthermore, since the entire task involves searching out the societal factors behind the text, the divine element is also often neglected (Osborne, 1997:144).

## **2.7. Summary**

We introduced this by starting with a brief definition of social scientific methods pertaining to the study of the New Testament. Tracing the origins and historical development of this approach enabled us to understand the historical, theological and social motivations that gave rise to the social scientific approaches as well as locating Horsley historically, theologically and

methodologically.

Our brief survey also revealed that there is a variety of approaches taken by scholars as far as the use of social scientific methods is concerned. Horsley clearly falls within the social-historical group alongside scholars like Theissen and Meeks amongst others. It is also clear that Horsley's work reflects a radical and liberationist agenda. Like many feminist and liberation theologians he is also critical of the traditional approaches and methods used by western Protestant theologians. It is for this reason that Horsley proposes a 'concrete' social and political reading of biblical texts.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **HORSLEY'S MOTIVATION, METHOD AND APPROACH.**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

In the previous chapter we looked at the origins and development of sociological approaches within biblical studies. We learnt how the sixties and seventies provided the stimulus that saw a proliferation of these perspectives. These developments, we said, were also part of a larger resurgence of what could be called 'socially critical forms of theology'. These theologies, mainly from the 'third world', we observed, challenged the widespread social injustices as well as traditional Western theology's seeming indifference to the problems of the time.

Horsley, we saw, shares the same dissatisfaction with traditional Western theology's apparent inaction, insisting that certain theological emphases within Western theologies serve to provide the necessary ideological props for this attitude of indifference towards suffering. It is no wonder then that we find him in the forefront of those who advocate a very different approach to biblical studies - an approach that is in effect consciously and diametrically opposed to the more traditional theological approaches prominent in the field of biblical studies.

In this section I will explore Horsley's method as well as identify some of the main influences and presuppositions that underpin his interpretive approach. While this methodological exploration will focus on *Spiral of Violence* (1987) - his first major comprehensive Jesus research work and the subject of this present investigation - we will also consult some of his other works with the view to help us further clarify and illuminate his approach.

But before we venture into this I will provide a description of Horsley's critique of the traditional Western hermeneutical approaches and assumptions. This is followed by a discussion of some of the main theories and models employed in constructing the historical, social and political complexities of first century Palestine. We will conclude with a brief outline of Horsley's own procedure and some concluding observations.

#### **3.2. Critique of the traditional approaches**

In our attempt to get to grips with Horsley's method it might also prove useful to look at his critique of the more conventional traditional approaches in biblical studies. I believe this will not only help us situate him methodologically but perhaps also help us gain some insight into the underlying theoretical and ideological presuppositions that drive his programme.

### **3.2.1 Mistaken approaches and assumptions**

Since the growth and development of modern biblical studies was, until recently, largely a Western enterprise, it seems unavoidable that the discipline would reflect a Western worldview as well as its cultural biases. Some of these Western theological and doctrinal frameworks have also, perhaps unconsciously, acted as vehicles for Western political and ideological interests. One thinks of the many so-called authoritative interpretations that have often hindered or prevented alternative readings and understandings of biblical texts, especially from those in the two – third worlds. It is with this in mind that Horsley calls on modern interpreters to reconsider and critically examine some of the approaches and assumptions that are current within the field of biblical studies today.

### **3.2.2 Individualism versus the corporate**

Horsley is adamant that the West's 'cultural bias', in particular its tendency towards individualism, often plays a determinative role in theological interpretation. This, together with contemporary concerns for relevant interpretation seriously affects the selection of data and methods in the processes of investigation. The selective use of biblical facts as well as the firm focus on theological agendas is evidence of this (Horsley, 1987:151).

This narrow focus and emphasis on the individual, Horsley claims, usually happens at the expense of the broader historical references of the biblical texts. He blames Bultmann and his followers for reducing the Jewish apocalyptic understanding of a whole life-world, and of society and history as the context of people's own personal and community life to a matter of 'self-understanding'. It is this narrow 'individual' emphasis that left the broader concerns of Jesus and his followers for community life, as well as the historical context of Palestine relatively unexplored (Horsley, 1987:152).

Horsley is also critical of some scholars (who are part of the Jesus Seminar) for isolating Jesus' sayings into individual aphorisms and admonitions. By doing this, they have stripped Jesus' sayings of any literary and historical context on the basis of which their meaning can be discerned. This, Horsley observes, is just another manifestation of the cultural bias within the field of biblical studies towards individualism. Horsley also suggests that too many scholars in the West uncritically accept their culture's orientation towards individualism. This individualist mindset can also be discerned in the separation of a personal-religious and cultural dimension from the political-economic dimensions of life (Horsley, 1999:16; cf. Borg, 1994:99-100).

### 3.2.3 Ancient Jewish worldview: dualistic or holistic?

It is clear, Horsley contends, that our Western assumptions that separate religion, politics and economics have also influenced the interpretations of texts as if they dealt ‘primarily’ or ‘only’ with religious life. The result is that religion becomes a matter of individual faith and the gospels are seen almost by definition as strictly religious documents. Jesus is seen primarily as a religious teacher and his sayings are understood to address individuals in their character, attitudes and behavior. Jesus’ conflict with the ‘religious leaders’ is then also restricted to religious issues (Horsley, 1999:21; 2003:9).

Horsley blames these modern assumptions for the many ‘apolitical interpretations of the New Testament’ (Horsley, 1987:151). This dualism continues to persist despite our insight that ancient traditional societies never presupposed any separation of life into different areas. In ancient Israel Yahweh was understood as the King of Israel (e.g., Judges 8:22-23) and the high-priest was simultaneously the political head, imperial official and the principal beneficiary of the tithes and sacrifices owed to God (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.251).

### 3.2.4 Reality: idealist or concrete?

Horsley also warns against what he terms “idealist orientations and assumptions towards reality” (Horsley, 1987:153). He maintains that scholars can only be true to the meaning of biblical texts if they become more “concrete” in their reading of texts.<sup>15</sup> Once this shift is made scholars might discover that texts such as Daniel 7, which seem to describe a mythical view of reality, may actually be rooted in concrete social-historical realities. The dualism in the said texts may actually reflect the Palestinian Jewish sense of being caught in an intensely conflictual situation of oppression. Similarly the demon possession and exorcism we read about in the gospels may have to do with concrete economic, religious and political realities of the then imperial situation (Horsley, 1987:154,155).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2.5 Jewish apocalyptic: mythical or concrete?

Horsley also criticise the idea that Jesus viewed the kingdom of God as a supernatural, eschatological event that ends all things on earth (Horsley, 1987:107-171,186-187). The idea that Jesus saw himself as an apocalyptic prophet was first convincingly made by the German scholar Johannes Weiss (1972). According to Weiss, Jesus taught the imminent end of the world and of history by an abrupt incursion of God into the human scene. Jesus was not a

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis mine

modern man but a thoroughgoing apocalyptist. In Weiss' own words: "As Jesus conceived it, the Kingdom of God is a radical superworldly entity which stands in diametric opposition to this world". (Weiss, 1972:114)

Weiss' concept was later taken up and popularized by Albert Schweitzer in his famous work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). Schweitzer's analysis of the Gospels also led him to the conclusion that Jesus' message of the kingdom of God was essentially eschatological i.e., it was about the forthcoming end of the world. Based on texts like the mission discourse in Matthew 10, Schweitzer argued that Jesus actually expected the end to come before the twelve disciples return from their mission (Schweitzer, 2000: 326-327).

Horsley disputes this now generally accepted interpretation of Jesus' ministry. This interpretation, he insists, is based on a misreading of Jesus' preaching and a mistaken view of Jewish apocalypticism as essentially 'non-historical' (Horsley, 1987:157). It is a view that betrays a lack of appreciation for the unique function of apocalyptic imagery.

Advocates of this reading, says Horsley, also tend to read revelatory literature in primarily cosmic and supernatural terms (rather than political terms). This misplaced emphasis typically diverts interest away from the socio-political nature of biblical texts. Not surprisingly then, Jesus' message has often been erroneously interpreted in eschatological rather than concrete historical and socio-political terms (Horsley, 1987:157).

### **3.2.6 The Content and Orientation of the Gospels: Conflict**

In line with his preference for conflict theory Horsley points out the 'overwhelming intensity of conflict' in the gospels. Jesus not only heals and preaches in situations of conflict but actually enters into, exacerbates and even escalates them. Jesus then, Horsley claims, was not really 'innocent' and the charges against him were not 'totally false'. Jesus was not only accused of 'perverting the nation and 'stirring up the people', forbidding the payment of tribute to Caesar (Lk.23:2, 5), but also of threatening the temple (Mark 14:55-59). Thus, even our 'apologetic gospels' present to us a Jesus with a revolutionary perspective (Horsley, 1987:162-63).<sup>17</sup>

### **3.3. Horsley's approach**

The preceding section explained Horsley's preference for a 'material or concrete' rather than an 'idea' orientated reading of biblical texts. This is based on his assumption that people and

<sup>16</sup> See for example Hollenbach (1981:561-588)

<sup>17</sup> For more on Horsley's use of conflict theory see section 3.2.4 below.

movements generally act not so much or exclusively because of abstract religious and theological ideas. Rather, it is the entirety of their life experience - not just the religious but also the social, political and economic factors that govern people's thoughts and actions (Horsley, 1989:3-4). This also explains Horsley's emphasis on constructing a credible historical first century context for Jesus and his contemporaries. The rest of the section below describes and explains the apparatus employed by Horsley to achieve this 'material' reading of biblical texts.

What Horsley puts forward is what is now commonly known in biblical studies as an interdisciplinary approach. This approach draws upon the insights and findings of social historians, social scientists, anthropologists as well as cross-cultural and comparative studies. In their quest to construct a reliable historical context for interpreting Jesus, New Testament scholars like Horsley apply answers from other disciplines creatively to throw light on the background and social dimensions of biblical texts.

### **3.3.1 Josephus and Jewish history**

Apart from the Gospels, Horsley's principal source of social historical information from the period is the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus played a leading part in the revolt of the Jews against the Romans which occurred forty years after the death of Jesus and ended with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. He was taken prisoner and sent to Rome - but he so impressed his captors that they gave him an Imperial pension. This enabled him to write his detailed history of the Jewish War, in which he carefully discounted anything that would offend the Romans. But this has also raised suspicion among modern historians about some aspects of Josephus's picture of Jewish life. Horsley, however, believes he gives an accurate enough picture, even though he was writing for Roman consumption (Horsley, 1985: xviii).

Josephus' two major historical works are *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. *The Jewish War* was his first major work in which he describes the course of events leading up to the revolt, the revolt itself and its aftermath. *The Antiquities* was written afterwards and narrates the history of the Jewish people from early beginnings to the outbreak of the war in 66 CE. The other work called *Life* deals mainly with the period 66 CE and 67 CE (Grabbe 1992: 372).

### **3.3.2 Sociological and anthropological theories**

But Horsley does not just rely on Josephus. He believes that we only obtain a true picture of Jesus if we look at the social history of the time. He has tried to understand Jesus' era by looking at what happens in other peasant societies when they become subject to a greater power. As part of his analysis of the peasantry Horsley applies many of the theories and models

sociologists and anthropologists use to understand and explain the hostile and conflict ridden relations between subjected peoples and the dominant empires.

One of these is the concept of progressive stages of violence that occur in colonial and neo-colonial situations of injustice. This is based on Câmara's (1971) observation that violence builds up at three levels in a society, namely 'primary violence', the everyday effect of structurally ingrained social injustice. This generates 'secondary violence' i.e., the revolt of the oppressed which in turn provokes 'tertiary violence' - repression by the powerful to secure their privileged position (Câmara, 1971:30-41). The notion of a 'spiral of violence' is an important and a central feature of Horsley's book, and the one from which it derives its title "*Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*".<sup>18</sup>

Others whose insights and conclusions significantly influenced and shaped Horsley's overall framework, especially with regard to the 'colonial conditions' of first century Palestine include anthropologists like Peter Worsley (1957), George Balandier (1951) and Marxist historians like George Rudé (1959) and Eric Hobsbawm (1969).<sup>19</sup> Their work on modern 'colonial and peasant societies' has been widely applied by Horsley - as is apparent in the early chapters of *Spiral of Violence* (Horsley, 1987: xii).

### 3.3.2.1 Peasant studies and theory of social stratification

Adopting Rudé's 'history from below' approach and James C. Scott's work on 'peasant resistance', Horsley argues that we cannot understand Jesus in context without adequate knowledge of the peasantry, which according to Gerhard Lenski (1966) made up the largest percentage of the population.<sup>20</sup> They bore the brunt of the excesses of the imperial situation, gave impetus to the revolts and formed the base of the popular prophetic and messianic movements. Jesus spent his time moving from peasant village to village. And if we want to understand him we must understand that stratum of first century Jewish society (Horsley, 1985: xii).

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18 Hélder Pessoa Câmara was an important figure in the movement that came to be known as liberation theology in the late 1970s. He was also one of the organizers of the Latin-American Conference of Bishops that led to the birth of liberation theology in 1968

19 In *The Sociology of Black Africa: Social Dynamics in Central Africa* (1951) Balandier described the complexities of colonial situations and the relations between the colonising and colonised societies. Worsley is best known for his work *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1957). This anthropological study focussed on how the cargo cults of New Guinea provided ways of coping with the challenges brought by modernization and colonialism. George Rudé (*The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 1959) has popularized the method of analyzing history from the "bottom up" (history from below), focusing on the role played by ordinary people in revolutionary situations (as opposed to the role of the elites).

20 Cf. Horsley, 1987: 90-91; 17,329.

According to Lenski's model of 'social stratification' of ancient imperial societies the majority of the populace were peasants while the ruling class and their supporters (the retainers) were only a small minority. Power, status and privilege were the domain of the few in the upper echelons of these social hierarchies.

### 3.3.2.2 Popular movements

Horsley also discusses at length what he terms popular movements in order to understand the context of Jesus' eschatological prophecy. He broadly adopts Hill's (1979) comparative approach that stresses the similarities between the popular prophets and their movements and certain features of the Synoptic traditions.<sup>21</sup>

Hill's proposal that there were at least three distinctive types of leaders and two distinctively Israelite types of movements focused on leaders, namely, the popular messianic and popular prophetic movements is well entrenched in Horsley's work. These and other social forms were, according to Hill (1979:143-54) virtually embedded in Israelite society and culture of late second temple Palestine. It was quite likely that Jesus and his followers drew upon these forms (Horsley, 1985:131,244-259; 1986:3-27).

### 3.3.2.3 Social banditry

Horsley's work has been important in the analysis of social banditry in both biblical documents and Josephus's work (Horsley, 1979; 1981; 1985; Horsley & Hansen 1985).<sup>22</sup> It is he who first brought the work of Hobsbawm (1981) to bear upon the Gospels and Josephus, making good use of the comparative data to ask fresh questions and bring nuances to the analysis of ancient documents.<sup>23</sup> Especially helpful is his exposure of the ideological stance of Josephus and other literary elites who wrote about bandits. Horsley also analyzed the way in which social banditry fits into the larger social fabric of first century Palestine and social protests.

### 3.3.2.4 Conflict theory

Horsley views conflict theory (also known as the coercion, power, or interest model) as a more useful social science tool for analysing the 'conflict ridden situation' in which Jesus found himself than structural-functionalist theory: "Structural-functionalist social theory with its emphasis upon stable social system and minor adjustments fails to do justice to the colonial situation of first century Palestine" (Horsley, 1987:19). In other words, this approach tends to simply accept as 'givens' the social inequalities and the domination of the one group over others (Hanson & Oakman, 1998:9).

Conflict theory on the other hand, explains social systems in terms of various groups that have

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<sup>21</sup> The 'popular movements' are discussed below in Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> For Horsley's definition and view of social banditry see Chapter 4, section 4.5.3.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Hobsbawm (1969) is one of Britain's most significant historians. He has been called 'the father of bandit studies', providing the first real social analysis of

different goals and interests, and therefore use coercive tactics on each other to get their own goals realized. Each of the various groups protects the distinctive interests of its members, and relations between various groups include disagreement, strain, conflict, and force – as well as consensus and cooperation (Hanson & Oakman, 1998:9).

### **3.3.2.5 Political economy and mode of production**

Alongside this we also detect two other related concepts that are also Marxist inspired, namely political economy and mode of production (Boer, 2007:314-315). In the field of biblical studies the former locates Jesus among the heavily taxed and indebted peasants that directly challenged the temple economy and thus the very core of the native tributary mode of production.

Mode of production on the other hand, particularly the notion of a 'communitarian mode of production' has generally been associated with the Old Testament scholar and pioneer in sociological exegesis Norman Gottwald. He notes an emphasis on communitarian modes of production at various points of Israel's history whenever there were efforts at liberation - especially with the prophets and the occasional protest movements. Above all, Gottwald argues, it comes back with a vengeance in the Jesus movement - a movement that sets up a communitarian mode of production over against the remnants of the tributary mode and the newly imposed slave - based mode of production that came with the Romans (Boer, 2007:306).

## **3.4 Horsley's approach to Scripture**

Horsley's preference for an interdisciplinary approach and his reliance on Jewish social history is not an admission of complete doubt about worth of the gospels as documents for historical reconstruction. While he is an ardent advocate of the historical critical method Horsley still maintains the priority of the gospel sources as the basic starting point of any serious investigation of the Jesus movement (Horsley, 1987:vii). The following paragraphs offer only a brief description of Horsley's attitude and treatment of the primary sources i.e., the Synoptic gospels.

Horsley has not shown the same pessimistic attitude towards the gospels as scholars like Crossan (1992) and Mack (1997). These scholars who are members of the controversial Jesus Seminar have not only questioned the reliability of the Synoptic gospels but also their legitimate use as historical sources for interpreting Jesus.

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this phenomenon.

Horsley is also not persuaded by the controversial formula employed by members of the Seminar. This contentious procedure aims to create a catalogue of authentic sayings and aphorisms from which to construe a picture of Jesus. He insists that people generally do not converse in isolated sayings and maxims as is supposed by those using this approach. Communication, rather, is usually more extensive and the meaning of sayings (whether they be proverbs or parables) normally depends on the context in which they are uttered. This context also comprises the cultural tradition in which both the speaker and hearers are rooted.

Surprisingly, Horsley has gone against this trend and instead called for a return to the gospels as 'records' of those with whom Jesus communicated (Horsley, 2002:63). Instead of isolating Jesus sayings from the only context of meaning to which we have access (the gospels), we should start from those literary sources (Horsley, 1987:vii; 1989:11).

Nevertheless, Horsley's call for a return to the gospels as records, it must be understood, is controlled and limited. For example he does not use Matthew and Luke as whole gospels because they have 'redactional interests' (Horsley, 1987:260,261,264; 2003:8). On more than one occasion he speaks about original sayings that were supposedly allegorized, spiritualized and elaborated on by Jesus' early followers (Horsley, 1987:179, 182, 189, 191).

Horsley assumes the standard solution to the Synoptic Problem. According to this theory Mark was the first gospel written, while Matthew and Luke both followed Mark. In addition, both evangelists drew on a common saying source called Q, besides each having his own particular material.

Probing the Jesus sayings is done with the methods and results of a more refined form criticism. This simply means that he welcomes and includes much of the recent reflections and adjustments made to this method. Horsley boldly declares that he intends to pursue the unfulfilled promises of form criticism i.e., "the advancement and realization of a sociological perspective that explores the life situation, the social context of both the origins and transmission of Jesus' sayings and doings" (Horsley, 1987:166).

### **3.5 The limitations of sociological methods**

Horsley is not unmindful of the difficulties entailed by the application of sociological methods to ancient biblical documents. The question of evidence involves a number of problems. For example the evidence necessary for the investigation of early Christianity and its first century Jewish and Hellenistic background is quite scarce. The sources that are available are literary in nature and are not easily amenable to sociological reconstruction (Horsley, 1985:xix; Barnett,

1997:20).

Apart from the problematic nature of the evidence, there is also the question of the appropriateness of sociology as a means of historical inquiry. Horsley identifies the subject matter of the social sciences as that which is common, generic, and typical in social behavior and relationships. Critical history, however, is concerned with the exploration of discrete and specific events and phenomena (Horsley, 1994:5). The question is: "Can sociology lead to precision in the investigation of concrete historical figures and movements or does it instead obscure these elements?" (Barnett, 1997:20).

There is also the danger that the social sciences may lead to an anachronistic treatment of the subject matter under consideration. The issue here is whether or not it is permissible to apply models and categories derived from the analysis of contemporary groups to the world and thought forms of ancient Palestine. In particular, data gleaned from the study of modern religious groups which are sectarian and marginalized does not seem applicable to primitive Christian communities. All of these contemporary millennial and alienated groups display a wide variety of aims, teachings, and social locations which renders comparison with the early churches somewhat problematic (Horsley, 1994:6-7).

Another potential difficulty that he identifies is that sociology may lead to a new form of abstraction. The interest in the possibilities of social sciences for biblical studies was in part born from impatience with traditional theological and literary styles of exegeses which seemed far removed from the lives of real people. Horsley cautions that sociology can also become highly abstract when its models and categories take precedence over the data. If it is illegitimate for theological concerns to determine the course of inquiry, it is equally undesirable that social theory and methods determine the selection and interpretation of data (Horsley, 1994:8).

Despite these areas of possible difficulty, Horsley contends that sociological analysis offers the best means at present for a historical understanding of the New Testament world. The methods of the social sciences are sufficiently advanced and the data available from the time period are of such quantity as to allow for a reasonable construction of the context of the formation of the literature of the New Testament. In fact, the content of the texts seem to demand this manner of approach in that their primary focus is not formulating new theological doctrines but on creating communities in the face of a hostile and oppressive dominant culture. What is required on the part of the interpreter is a willingness to allow this content to challenge his or her own biases and points of view. The texts must not be contorted to fit into some preconceived model; instead, the investigator must engage in a genuine dialogue with the culture under consideration. How well Horsley's project fares when measured against this standard will be

discussed later in this chapter (Horsley, 1994:8).

### **3.6 Assessment and summary**

I suggested that our effort to understand Horsley might be assisted by examining his critique of the established Western approaches. It is now evident from this brief survey that Horsley almost completely rejects the methods and answers given by traditional scholarship.

His sharp critique of the conventional methods of interpretation used by Protestant and Catholic interpreters suggests a deep distrust on Horsley's part of the Western theological establishment. He points out how successive generations of biblical interpreters in the west have almost always uncritically assumed the intellectual, philosophical and cultural perspectives of their environments.

The prominence of individualistic interpretations, the controlled focus on the spiritual and theological alongside a disregard for the historical and social references in biblical texts, the modern assumption that detach the political, economic and religion spheres are all issues, Horsley claims, which reveal Western leanings and ideological interests.

It is for these reasons that he proposes an alternative method for reading the New Testament text. A key aspect of this new method will include formulating an approach that is more holistic and sensitive to the wider historical, political and socio – economic dimensions of biblical texts. For Horsley this is the only way of breaking the dominance of what he calls the 'idealist interpretations' (Horsley, 1987:3-4).

Horsley's work therefore, is marked by an engagement and close interaction in his reading of biblical texts, social history, the social sciences and a range of Marxist inspired analytical tools and models. This apparatus is used innovatively to examine, explain and construct from the most important ancient sources a plausible historical, social and political first century Palestinian context for Jesus and his followers. The emphasis on the historical and the use of social theory to highlight the material dimensions of biblical texts stems from the conviction that biblical texts are about the life situation of ordinary people.

It is also this consistent use of social history and social theory that distinguishes Horsley's work as well as others like Oakmann (1986), Crossan (1991) and Freyne (1988) from their more traditional counterparts (i.e., Sanders, 1985; Wright, 1996; Meier, 1991; Seccombe, 2002). While most of the scholars in this latter group share a similar interest in Jesus' Jewish world, they have generally been cautious about the value and use of the social sciences in interpreting

biblical texts.

## CHAPTER 4

### HORSLEY'S VIEW OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JESUS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The discussion in the previous chapter centered on Horsley's preference for an interdisciplinary approach in order to arrive at a more concrete reading of the Jesus' sayings in the gospels. This chapter describes Horsley's view of the 'original historical, social and political' environment of first century Palestine. Most of this information is located in the first part of *Spiral of Violence* (1987) and was designed to lay the historical and theoretical groundwork for the rest of the book. In other words, this part of the book is meant to act as an interpretive background setting for Jesus and his early followers.

This chapter will commence with some observations on the development and current state of context studies, particularly in relation to historical Jesus research. The rest of this chapter largely describes and explains Horsley's reading of what he sees as the 'colonial' situation that persisted during the time of Jesus. Foremost will be a presentation of the various stages of Horsley's 'spiral of violence' model, coupled with a survey of all the different forms of protest and resistance movements that emerged in response to the 'imperial' conditions. This includes the role of Israelite traditions of resistance, the popular prophetic and Messianic movements, social banditry and the activities of the Sicarii, the Zealots and the Fourth Philosophy. Brief mention will also be made of the resistance by groups of intellectuals, popular protests by the masses as well as the nature of apocalyptic texts as resistance literature in early Judaism. The chapter will then conclude with some analysis and evaluative comments of some of the key elements of Horsley's sketch of first century Palestine.

#### 4.2. Jesus in context

In recent years the social, political and economic context of Jesus and that of the early Christians has become an area of great interest and research. According to Freyne (1998:75-76) it's hard to imagine anyone these days attempting to reconstruct the career of Jesus without paying attention to these shaping factors. But this was not always the case. Traditionally, scholarship since the Reformation has placed very little value on the role and influences of the social structures and forces on the life of Jesus and the early Christian communities. The emphasis was usually on Christian dogmatics or when it comes to Jesus, the focus was on his religious personality (Arnal and Desjardins, 1997:135-136).

Today though, scholars are better placed to undertake again the quest for Jesus within a specific social and cultural world. This was made possible by the development of more critical tools and knowledge in the use of Jewish sources from the second temple period (i.e., like the writings of Josephus). Moreover, scholars now consult and evaluate not only the available literary but also archaeological evidence. Added to this was the introduction of the social sciences in developing models for understanding the social dynamics of the first century world of Jesus. All these factors have changed the perspectives from which the “search for the historical Jesus” is conducted today (Freyne, 1998:75-76).

Horsley, it was already noted in the previous chapter, condemns what he describes as the strictly theological and narrow individualistic emphasis of much Western traditional interpretations. The traditional approaches have consciously ignored the broader historical and social references of Biblical texts. This inability to consider the possible interrelationship between ideas and the concrete material and social structures within biblical texts stems from an ‘idealist bias’ and a ‘methodological doceticism’ that characterize these approaches (Horsley, 1994:3). This often results in the treatment of biblical figures and beliefs as if they are abstracted from the social, economic and political realities. Moreover, in these approaches the determining factors in historical processes are exclusively ideas. The social world is conceived of as being structured only by theological and philosophical notions (Horsley, 1994:3; Holmberg, 1980a:201). Horsley’s emphasis on the historical, social and political context of first century Palestine must be seen against the background of these criticisms.

The other issue that Horsley explicitly addresses in *Spiral* (1987:x) is the concept of ‘the Zealots’ as a key to understanding and interpreting Jesus’ words and actions. The notion of a unified resistance movement known as the Zealots, operating throughout the first century and bearing the prime responsibility for the war with Rome has been a major element in standard descriptions of first-century Jewish Palestine. Horsley is convinced that the real motivation for the ‘Zealot theory’ was ideological. Created amidst the social and political upheavals of the sixties in the West, it served as a convenient foil over-against which to portray Jesus as a sober prophet of a pacific love for one’s enemies. It was aimed at discouraging any implication that Jesus had advocated any sort of active resistance to the established order (Horsley, 1987:x). Instead of the Zealots as the prime interpretive background for Jesus, Horsley presents a picture that allows for a more complex variety of social forms and unrest as a reaction to Roman rule.

### 4.3. The colonial situation in first century Palestine.

Much analysis of the Roman Empire still rests on the belief that Rome's rule was based principally on loyalty and consensus among its subjects. Expressions of uncritical adulation of all things Roman can still be found in classical studies and popular books and are also discernible in many New Testament introductory works (Mattingly, 2011:14 ; Burge, 2009:97). The Roman Empire is presented essentially as having facilitated the early Christian mission. The Romans had fortuitously already brought many nations together into one world, which was just waiting for the word of God preached by Paul and others. The Romans had built an extensive network of roads on which such missionaries could travel and maintained the public order in which they could work.

The truth, however, is that the Roman Empire was a good deal more than a benign and enabling context for the rise of a supposedly innocuous new religious movement that became Christianity (Horsley, 2001:12). Rome was also a colonial power that kept the "Pax Romana" by means of military might, crushing any dissent and resistance with ruthless efficiency. Taxes had to be paid to Rome as well as one's local country; taxes which were used to keep Rome in luxury while her massive empire continued in relative or actual poverty (Wright, 1992:154). The situation, Horsley says, was more akin to the comments of the Caledonian chieftain quoted in Tacitus' work *Agricola* (29-38):

"The Romans are...the plunderers of the world. . . If the enemy is rich, they are rapacious; if poor they lust for dominion. Not east nor west has sated them. . . They rob, butcher, plunder, and call it empire; and where they make desolation, they call it peace."

What the Palestinian Jews were experiencing, then, was a prolonged period of political and economic exploitation - a "colonial situation". This had been their plight since the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's temple. Successive empires had subjected the Jewish people to foreign political rule and cultural imperialism. Horsley is adamant that these long-standing feelings of bitterness and the conflict which often arises in such situations of "imperial domination" must be accounted for in our historical reconstructions. They should not be reduced to mere matters of "cultural contact or acculturation"(Horsley, 1987:3-4).

Far from pretending then that, ancient Jewish Palestine or Judaism was an "independent" state (Sanders, 1993:15-32) or that Antipas' rule shielded Galilee from Roman tyranny (Freyne, 1988:

155-156), special attention should be given to the imperial situation that determined the conditions of people's lives (Horsley, 1987:3-4;1996:178).<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.4. The “spiral of violence” model

In line with his preference for conflict theory, Horsley also adopts a model that describes the progressive stages of violence in colonial and neo-colonial situations of injustice and structural violence. He believes that this ‘model’, borrowed from Câmara’s short tract *Spiral of Violence* (1971) is best suited to explain the turbulent history of first century Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

Horsley’s adaptation of this model involves a four stage sequence. The first stage is the same as Camara's, the initial act of injustice or structural violence imposed upon a subject people. The second stage involves protest and resistance, a reaction against the injustice or structural violence. The protests are often carried out through mass demonstrations or through the spontaneous outcries of a “mob” —which may appear as riots to the ruling class even when they are not violent. Whether the resistance and protest are violent or non-violent, however, they are usually taken as a challenge to the ruling groups, who respond with violence. The third stage of the spiral of violence involves repression by the established holders of power. To this Horsley adds a fourth stage, revolt. This is usually in reaction to the repression and is often characterized by a spontaneous eruption of violence by the oppressed (Horsley, 1987:24-26).

Horsley feels the use of a “conflict orientated” rather than the structural-functional model utilised by Theissen (*Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 1978) is justified. Without such an approach we cannot appreciate the internal and external conflicts and tensions of a given

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24 According to Sanders there was no official Roman presence in Galilee at all while in Judaea the official Roman presence was very small. “In place of the image of Roman soldiers patrolling the towns and villages of Palestine, forcing Jews to carry their burdens, and motivating shopkeepers and farmers to cater to their tastes, we should think of a few Roman soldiers, banded together, living in or around one city, with only very small outposts occupying forts in potentially hostile territory. Effective rule was in the hands of local aristocrats and elders (Sanders, 1993:27).”

Sean Freyne in his earlier work especially, concluded that the social world of Galilee consisted primarily of peasant villages, with cities lying on the perimeter: “Horizons were limited because the rhythm of life was determined by the seasons and so there was no sense of unrest or frustration” (Freyne 1980:195). According to Freyne Galilee was a quiet rural, isolated area to which the rule of Antipas brought stability and protection against “direct Roman intervention” (1988b:154-156). However, his recent work shows him shifting closer to Horsley’s position with regard to the presence of social conflict and tensions in Galilee. He too now argues that Herod Antipas’ building program and new economy increased land tenancy, debts and general social unrest to the point of provoking social banditry (Freyne, 2004).

Secombe (2003:203-204) too argues against a revolutionary atmosphere in Galilee during the Herodian period - at least until the outbreak of war with Rome in AD 66: “Our best guide to social conditions in Galilee in the twenties and thirties of the first century are the gospels. They would surely have preserved hints of civil disruption on such a scale had it existed...While the two Herod’s were in power, and without a messianic leader, such hopes had to be kept in proportion - easier when life was prosperous.”

Cf. Paul Barnett, “Under Tiberius All Was Quite”, NTS 21 (1974-75), 564-71.

25 Câmara observed that violence builds up at three levels in a society. Primary violence is the everyday effect of structurally ingrained social injustice. This generates secondary violence - the revolt of the oppressed. That in turn provokes tertiary violence - repression by the powerful to secure their privileged position. And so the spiral of violence tightens.

society - especially those of Roman occupied first century Palestine. The result is that its genuine historical character will remain unknown (Horsley, 1989:156-158).<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.4.1. Protest and resistance against injustice and violence

Primary violence - the first stage - is the everyday effect of structurally ingrained social injustice. Horsley says the Romans who controlled first century Palestine habitually made use of massive force and violence in which whole populations were either slaughtered or enslaved. The aim was often to punish or to avenge, and to terrify into subjection the people they colonised. The Roman general Cassius' enslavement of 30,000 people in and around Tarichaeae (Magdala) in 53-52 BCE (Josephus *War* 1.180) is just one example of a general trend that is also attested even in the writings of Roman historians like Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.51.56; 2.21) and Cassius Dio (67.4.6) (Horsley, 2003:29).<sup>27</sup>

The result of this was hostility towards the imperial regime and its client ruler Herod, who brutally conquered, ruled and exploited the land with Roman help. Horsley has repeatedly argued that by the time of Herod the Great, taxation had become triple layered—including tithes to Jerusalem and double taxes to Rome and to the Herodians (Horsley, 1996:11-12, 76-85, 90, 119-123; Wright, 1992:154). He points to Josephus (Josephus *Ant.* 14.202-203) who cites a decree of Julius Caesar which reads:

“Caesar has ruled that the Jews shall pay every year a tax for the city of the Jerusalemites, Joppa excluded, except in the seventh year, which they call the sabbatical year, because in this time they neither take fruit from the trees nor do they sow. And in the second year they shall hand over the tribute at Sidon, consisting of one fourth the crops sown, and in addition they shall also pay tithes to Hyrcanus and his sons, just as they paid to their forefathers.”<sup>28</sup>

Horsley says that it is this exploitation of the peasants from multiple tax burdens that caused much of the poverty, hunger and despair that we read about in gospel texts such as Luke 6:20-22.

<sup>26</sup> An important side effect is that a structuralist-functional construal of a society lacks an apprehension of the concrete situation of actual people. This is due in part, Horsley contends, to this method's inherently conservative bias. He argues that this approach concentrates on the maintenance and stability of the society rather than upon the aspirations and needs of the people who constitute them (Horsley, 1985: XX; 1989:9-10).

<sup>27</sup> Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.51.56; 2.21) tells of how Germanicus slaughtered the general populace across the Rhine...“for fifty miles around he wasted the country with sword and flame...” and when the Nasamones revolted, Domitian simply had them eradicated.

<sup>28</sup> Josephus also mentions Jewish complaints against Herod the Great for investing much of the tribute extracted from his realm into developing the cities and enhancing the economies of foreigners instead of their own. Herod is said to have “crippled the cities in his own dominion” while he embellished those of other nations, lavishing the lifeblood of Judea on foreign communities (Josephus *War* 2.85; cf., *Ant.* 17.306-307). This brought their once prosperous people into dire financial straits (Josephus *Ant.* 17.307).

The natural response to these injustices was hardly quiet submission, nor is it right to presume that first century Palestine became a 'hotbed of zealot activity'. Rather, the evidence suggests the presence of various forms of non-violent protests and renewal movements, alongside some outbreaks of violent resistance against Roman oppression and provocation (Horsley, 1987:31).

#### **4.4.2 The various forms of protest: Israelite traditions of resistance**

Moving on to the second stage of the spiral of violence, Horsley discusses the various forms of protest (violent and non-violent) adopted by the different groups and resistance movements. He goes on to show how the first century world inhabited by Jesus was one that was marked by protest and resistance against various Roman oppressions and provocations. The presence and the persistence of these protests, according to Horsley, are to a certain extent understandable given the prominence in Israelite memory and traditions of resistance towards alien rulers and oppression. Some of the major Jewish sacred festivals for example were not just about the celebration of annual natural agricultural cycles. In fact, these "religious" festivals like the Passover were actually celebrations that commemorated God's acts of deliverance on behalf of his people. It's no surprise that tensions always seemed to boil over during these Passover festivals as the emotions and aspirations for freedom from foreign rule are heightened at this time (Josephus *War* 2.226; Mark 14:2; Matthew 26:5). Israel's religion itself then provided the impetus for such resistance. In this intense imperial situation Israel's religion also functioned as an expression of "real distress" (Horsley, 1987:35).

##### **4.4.2.1 Popular prophetic and popular messianic movements**

The popular prophetic movements were another type of non-violent protest against Imperial injustice. The revolts that erupted in Galilee, Perea, and Judea all took a social-religious form that is called popular "Messianic movements". Theissen (1978:45) pointed to certain critical factors in Galilee that were conducive to such movements and could have led to it being messianic in character (Josephus *War* 2.56-65; *Ant* 17.271-85). He believes many people in Galilean society had become marginalized for political, social or religious reasons. These were people such as over-taxed fisherman, tax-collectors, harlots, the diseased, tenant farmers and day labourers. Messianic movements characteristically drew such marginalized people to build a cohesive resistance to the status quo.

Horsley notes how in each case the rebels acclaimed or "anointed" one of their number as "king" to lead them in their struggle for independence from oppressive rule. These movements, according to Horsley, all arose in the countryside among the peasantry and their elected "kings" or "messiahs" were all men of humble origins. Like several other prophetic figures who led their

followers out into the wilderness in anticipation of new divine acts of deliverance, Theudas “led the masses to follow him to the Jordan River,” stating that “at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage” (Josephus *Ant.* 20.97). In similar fashion, “a man from Egypt,” claiming that he was a prophet, led his followers up to the Mount of Olives, “asserting that at his command Jerusalem’s walls would fall down,” providing them an entrance into the city (Josephus *Ant.* 20.169-70; cf. Josephus *War* 2.259-62). Some ten years later Simon bar Giora led the largest messianic movement in fighting and resisting the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 69-70. These mid-first-century prophetic movements were informed by and patterned after the formative acts of liberation and entry into the land in which Israel had been formed as a people (Horsley, 1987:52-53; 2003:49).

The fact that several such movements occurred in the mid-first century among the Judean peasants shows how many of the peasants in different regions of the countryside yearned, like the Israelites of old in Egypt, for liberation from foreign bondage. Although not historically “successful” in the long run, these popular messianic movements are highly significant for what they indicate about how the Judean and Galilean people refused to succumb to the “new world order” that Rome imposed on Palestine (Horsley, 2003:49-51).

#### **4.4.2.2 Social banditry**

Scholars believe that the combination of economic exploitation, debt and loss of land that plunged many peasants into destitution led to an increase in banditry in first century Palestine (Applebaum, 1977:378; Isaac, 1984:179). For Horsley however, these phenomena should be treated as separate from that of other criminals.

Adopting Hobsbawm’s (1959) model of “social banditry”, Horsley reckons that these acts of banditry constituted another form of resistance against Roman imperial rule.<sup>29</sup> These brigands (or *lestai*, not to be confused with the “Zealots”) were peasants resisting unjust treatment by the authorities. Desperate for justice, they took matters into their hands, “righting the wrongs” themselves. While they did resist injustice personally, they were not revolutionaries (thinking they could become the occasion for other peasants to resist). Horsley further suggests that the Jewish brigands were supported by poor villagers at personal risk (Josephus *War* 2.228-229; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 20:113-114; 2.253). The bandits were important symbols of resistance against injustice and often provided occasions for peasants to resist themselves (Josephus *Ant.* 14.159,

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29 Eric Hobsbawm was the first to define and explain social banditry as a special form of primitive protest and a phenomenon in its own right. He developed a sociological model against which ancient and modern rebellions could be compared and analyzed in order to explain some of the characteristics of socio-political popular protest. In this model he makes a distinction between the activities of mere robber-criminals and social bandits whom he categorizes as a separate sociological phenomenon arising as a result of clearly defined historical and socio-economic circumstances (Hobsbawm 1959: 5).

167-168; Josephus *War* 1.204-209) (Horsley, 1987:38-39).

Hobsbawm's model, however, has been criticized by scholars like Anton Blok. Blok (1972:496-502) wrote that very few bandits were in fact genuine figures of social protest. He considered bandit myths to be flawed as a method of explaining the social bandit as an expression of peasant social protest. In the light of the criticism by Blok of Hobsbawm's model, Wright (1996:157) has questioned the usefulness of this theory as a support for Horsley's argument.

Wright is also convinced that there was widespread banditry of various sorts in the Palestine of Jesus' day. He thinks Horsley is right to highlight the social context of the various movements. There are, however, reservations about the application of social theories based on other times and places. Contrary to Horsley, Wright (1996:159) thinks that "some but not all of the banditry was supported for some but not all of the time by some but not all peasants". Wright also notes that Horsley is wrong to insist that, in speaking of the kingdom, Jesus must have been aligning himself with the peasant aspirations that may have led some within that class to support the bandits. Jesus, Wright insists, cannot be pinned down that easily (Wright, 1996:159).

#### **4.4.2.3 The "Sicarii"**

Horsley (1987:39) identifies another group called the *sicarii* or "daggerman" which appeared around 50-60 CE. This different type of brigand (not be confused with the Zealots) constituted the only form of resistance that was politically conscious. Their activities included assassinations and kidnappings of members of the aristocracy and high priestly families (cf. Josephus *War* 2.253). Horsley (1987:41) insists that this is different from the actions and aims of those in the "Fourth philosophy" who opposed the payment of tribute. The "terrorist" activities of the "sicarii" caused anxiety among the elite who resorted to hiring personal bodyguards and militia. All of this, Horsley suggests, probably helped precipitate a revolutionary situation (Horsley, 1987:43).

#### **4.4.3 Imperial repression**

The third stage of the spiral involves reaction from the authorities. According to Horsley, the resistance was usually met with massive violence and terror by the Romans. The large scale crucifixions, the burning and enslaving of whole villages were meant to discourage any challenge to Roman power (Josephus *Ant.* 14.129; Josephus *War* 1.180) and to encourage the swift payment of tribute to Rome (Josephus *Ant.* 14. 272-275; Josephus *War* 1.219-220; Josephus *War* 2.66-75; Josephus *Ant.* 17.288-295). Similarly Herod, the Roman client king also ruled his kingdom with an iron fist and dealt ruthlessly with any opposition (Josephus *Ant.*

15.291; 15.295; 15:366-368) (Horsley, 1987:43-44).

The frequent and often indiscriminate and disproportional use of force, the decimation and burning of entire villages and towns, the sweeping killings, the crucifixion of thousands of people and the brutal reprisals by Roman procurators like Varus, Festus, Felix and Cumanus clearly contributed to the escalation of the spiral of violence.

#### 4.4.4 The Revolt

In most cases the punitive and repressive measures by the authorities would bring an end to the spiral. However, there are instances when it progressed to the fourth stage – revolt. An example of this is when Rome occupied Palestine during the first century. Josephus records three such cases of revolt: 66 CE., 70 CE. and 132-135 CE. For Horsley two of these revolts provide a significant framing for the ministry of Jesus since they came roughly thirty-five years before and after his ministry respectively. Horsley says both of the events show how the spiral of violence had escalated into popular rebellions. They are the outcome of cumulative effects of the long-standing oppressive and repressive Imperial situation created by the Roman Empire (Horsley, 1987:49).<sup>30</sup>

Horsley also finds the causes of the 66-70 CE revolt in the long-range spiral of oppression, resistance and repression. According to Horsley's reading of Josephus the violent actions of the Roman governor Florus (Josephus *War* 2.280-283), his plans to extract funds from the temple treasury and his disproportionate use of force on the unarmed mob led to acts of active resistance (Josephus *War* 2.293-338). This eventually led to the rise of a militant group of priests who insisted upon stopping the "loyal" sacrifices to the emperor. Most historians agree that this act by the militant priests laid the foundation for the war.

#### 4.5. The Zealot movement

Horsley, following Morton Smith (1971), has in a number of articles and publications also argued against the existence of a movement called the Zealots during the time of Jesus. This view - which is still widely held within New Testament circles - was first put forward by Martin Hengel.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Horsley sees the immediate reasons for the insurrections of 4 B.C.E. as Archelaus' unwillingness to act on the promise of justice for the victims of his deceased father Herod (Josephus *Ant.* 17.201-204, 206-208; *War* 2.5-7), his failure to release political prisoners as well as reducing special taxes (*Ant.* 17.204-205; *War* 2.4) and his eventual inept and forceful response at the Passover uprising (Josephus *War* 2.11-13; *Ant.* 17.215-218).

<sup>31</sup> Duvenage (172-73) is perhaps a typical example of those who view the Zealots as a group with a well-defined ideology that operated throughout the first century and led the whole nation into a catastrophic war with Rome: "Dit is daarom geregtig om te beweer dat hulle tot 'n groot mate verantwoordelik was om oor jare heen daardie atmosfeer in Palestina te skep wat gelei het tot Joods-Romeinse oorlog. Gedurende die oorlog was hulle baie aktief. In daardie tyd het hulle opgetree onder die naam van Sicariers vanwee die sica of dolk wat hulle onder die kleren wegsteek en in hulle aanvalle kon gebruik. Teen die middel van die eerste eeu na Christus, het die groep onder leiding van 'n agitator uit Egipte tot 4000 aangegroeï (Handelinge 21:38)...Met die verwoesting van Jerusalem in 70 n.C. het die Selotebeweging nog nie finaal van die toneel verdwyn nie. Twee en sestig jaar later onder keiser Hadrianus het dit tot 'n tweede opstand teen die Romeinse gesag in Palestina gekom. Aan die spits van die opstandsbeweging het Bar Kochba gestaan en hy en sy volgelinge was besiel met dieselfde ideale as in die eerste eeu n.C. Met die uiteindelike ondergang van die Joodse nasionale strewing het die Selote ook finaal van die toneel verdwyn."

The Zealots, Hengel (1975:5) wrote, “formed a relatively exclusive and unified movement with its own distinctive religious views and...had a crucial influence on the history of Palestinian Judaism in the decisive period between 6 and 70 A.D”.<sup>32</sup> Those who take this position argue that Judas's sect of revolutionaries was called the Zealots and the war was a Zealot movement, because zeal for the law - rooting out from the land all idolaters - was the paradigm for the revolt against Rome. This view, Horsley insists, is based on a false premise since neither the Fourth Philosophy nor the Zealots proper originated until the middle of the Jewish revolt in 67-68 CE. Hengel simply lumped together a number of disparate incidents and activities of groups, such as brigand bands, and the terrorist sicarii.

Horsley maintains that the Zealots were not a religious “sect” or “philosophy” which advocated violent resistance to Roman rule. They did not start with an ideal of zeal and then seek to implement it uncompromisingly. They were not a group of the intelligentsia who championed the cause of the common people. Such categories, Horsley cautions, might well fit some of the other groupings (i.e., the Hasidim or Fourth Philosophy or the Sicarii). There is no evidence, however, that link the Zealots directly with any of these other groups (Horsley, 1985:334-348).

The Zealots were largely former villagers from northwest Judaea. When the Roman re-conquest of the country made their traditional way of life impossible, they formed brigand groups in the countryside. Then as the Romans advanced, they fled to Jerusalem and formed their coalition and called themselves “Zealots”. In a series of clashes and struggle for control of the city they prevailed. In the end though, the Zealots as a small coalition was weakened by infighting (Josephus *War* 4.130; cf. 4.419-439; *War* 4.138-150) (Horsley, 1987:56-57; 1986:190).

According to Wright, Horsley has succeeded in showing that the cause of the war was not due to the work of a single organized and long-standing Jewish resistance movement, but rather came about through the confluence of many streams. Nevertheless, Horsley's claim about the demise of “the Zealots” concept is premature and his suggestion that the real impetus for revolution came from social rather than theological factors is mistaken. Wright says this antithesis between the theological and social motivations is alien, especially for a culture like that of first-century Judaism (Wright, 1992:179).

Despite Horsley's arguments, Wright still maintains that there were, throughout the first century, many movements which laid claim to the tradition of active “zeal”, a tradition that went back through the Maccabees to the memory of Phineas and Elijah (Wright, 1992:180). Smallwood (1976:154) concurs, “Even though the title Zealot was apparently not taken by Judas' sect or by

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<sup>32</sup> See also Hengel's *Victory over Violence* (1973) and *Christ and Power* (1974).

the terrorists, the Zealots were inspired by the same attitude to the Law, the same dream of the recovery of independence, and the same hostility to foreign domination and hence to Jewish collaboration with Rome, which was rooted in the tradition of Jewish nationalism going back to the days of the Maccabees.”

According to Goodman, Horsley has not yet shown that Hengel was wrong to conflate all the evidence that refer to Jewish resistance to Rome and to apply it all to the Zealot movement. Horsley has shown only that it is not necessary to conflate it, and that interesting consequences result from a decision not to do so (Goodman, 1992:534-535).

#### **4.6 The resistance of Intellectuals**

To further his case for a Jewish resistance that was more varied and complex - rather than viewing the entire period of first century Palestine as a hotbed of revolutionary violence – Horsley gives more examples of several non-violent protests and organized resistance by the various scribal groups during the first century of Roman imperial rule in Judea.

He discusses the martyrdom of the two Torah scholars Judas ben Sariphaes and Mattathias ben Margalus. Herod the Great had them burnt alive after they conspired with their students to tear down the golden eagle he erected over a portal of the temple – an act considered by Jews as a violation of the Torah (Josephus *War* 1.648-655; Josephus *Ant.* 17.149-167). In their subsequent martyrdom the two scholars became symbols for further popular protest against Herodian rule (Horsley, 1987:71-72).

#### **4.7 The Fourth Philosophy**

The most significant action by a group of scribes against imperial rule, Horsley claims, was led by the “Fourth Philosophy”.<sup>33</sup> Following the imposition of Roman “direct rule” over Judea in 6 CE and with it the burden of tribute, Judas of Gamla, the teacher and Saddok the Pharisee organized resistance (Josephus *War* 2.118). Insisting that, since they owed exclusive loyalty to God as their Lord and Master, they boycotted the payment of tribute - which to them meant acknowledging Caesar as lord. These scribes, inspired by the visions in Daniel 7-12, were willing to suffer in the confidence that God would vindicate them<sup>34</sup> (Horsley 1987:84, 87-89).

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33 There was also a “fourth philosophy,” a generic grouping of those who resisted Rome violently (*Ant.* 18.1.6). This group did not reflect the mainstream of Jewish faith, for they represent barely 5 percent of the Jewish population (Burge, 2009:63).

34 According to Josephus the scribes taught “that such a tax assessment amounted to slavery, pure and simple, and urged the people to claim their freedom. If successful, they argued, the Judeans would have paved the way for good fortune; if they were defeated in their quest, they would at least have honour and glory for their high ideals. Furthermore, God would eagerly join in promoting the success of their plans, especially if they did not shrink from the slaughter that might come upon them. Josephus (*Ant.* 18.4-5, 23) also writes how they (The Fourth Philosophy) “agree with the views of the Pharisees in everything except their unconquerable passion for freedom, since they take God as their only leader and master. They shrug off submitting to unusual forms of death and stand firm in the face of torture of relatives and friends, all for refusing to call any man master”.

#### 4.8 Popular mass protests

Horsley also notes the frequent riots that occurred, especially during religious festivals, as another important form of protest against the imperial situation. The “crowds” feature prominently in Josephus and play an important role in the gospels, especially in the final days of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem.

Following the death of Herod the Great in 4 CE there were protests against the rule of his son Archeleus. In 48-52 CE it was the crowds who protested against the Roman governor Cumanus’ army standards. According to Horsley these protests were non-violent until the crowds were provoked by the use of force. Both these protest events occurred during the Passover festival. Horsley also notes that the protesting crowds did not challenge the system or the rulers. They merely appealed to the rulers to correct the abuses of the system. (Josephus *War.* 2.225; Josephus *Ant.* 17.215-218) (Horsley 1987:91-95,98).

While the Roman governors had always been careful not to offend Jewish religious sensitivities, there had been incidents such as Pilate’s introduction of Roman standards with Caesars’ image that drove the Jews to outbursts (Josephus *Ant.* 18.56). Horsley thinks that the real offence lay in the fact that these images represented a direct challenge to the ultimate sovereignty of their God (Horsley, 1987:100, 102-103). Because Pilate eventually relented in this case, these highly disciplined and non-violent popular protests were successful. The second protest against Pilate (over the use of funds from the temple treasury) was less successful because of its violent suppression (Josephus *War* 2.175-177). Another popular protest over the destruction of a Torah scroll by a Roman soldier also illustrates the non-violent response of the Jews to the imperial situation (Josephus *War* 2.230-231; Josephus *Ant.* 20.113-114) (Horsley, 1987:104-105, 107). Soon after the removal of Pilate there was another peaceful protest and appeal by Jewish ruling groups - this time for the Roman general Vitallus not to proceed with the deployment of military standards on their soil (Josephus *Ant.* 18.121-122).

But the largest and most widespread protest since the introduction of direct Roman rule was against the emperor Gaius’ (Caligula) for erecting a statue of Zeus in the Jewish temple (Josephus *Ant.* 18.261-263). By and large the Jewish people had submitted to Roman political rule. Yet, Horsley notes, there remained a point of resistance, one that appears at a religious level but is not separable from the political dimension of the whole Imperial situation. This violation by Gaius brought Caesar’s rule in direct confrontation with God’s ultimate rule; indeed seemed to totally replace the rule of God with that of Caesar claiming to be God. This protest was spontaneous and massive but also non-violent (Josephus *Ant.* 18.271; 18.264, 267-269) (Horsley, 1987:114-116).

#### **4.9 The apocalyptic orientation of early Judaism**

Horsley (1987:121-145) also challenges what he sees as doctrinally driven notions of apocalyptic that describe “end time” scenarios or cosmic catastrophes. The failure to appreciate the distinctiveness of apocalyptic literature, especially its symbolic nature within specific political and social historical circumstances, has resulted in its alienation from history.

Jewish apocalyptic, Horsley contends, is actually concretely historical and symbolizes God’s redemptive or judgmental action. According to the apocalyptic perspective, God’s salvation was seen as taking place simultaneously in heaven and on earth. The redemption of the people and defeat of Israel’s enemies were portrayed as happening simultaneously in both heaven and earth. The broader or ‘higher’ significance of the earthly events is seen in the struggle between God and his angels e.g. Michael and superhuman demonic forces or the imperial oppressors (Daniel 7- 8; 10-11). Jewish apocalyptic then, is grounded in history. It describes in symbolic fashion the religio-political opposition between the people (and or the faithful righteous) on the one hand, and the oppressive regime (the wicked and apostate rulers) on the other.

The apocalyptically minded Jews were particularly conscious of the history of the great divine acts of deliverance from foreign bondage and domestic exploitation. The ‘new heavens and new earth’ expressed the knowledge that God who still controlled history, would again institute justice and freedom from oppression. This is what motivated the people to endure and even to resist the establishment in the Imperial situation of first century Palestine (Horsley, 1987:143-144).

#### **4.10 Assessment**

This chapter focused on Horsley's reconstruction of the historical, social and economic conditions that prevailed during the first century CE, the era that forms the backdrop for the study of the historical Jesus. It is particularly this area of Horsley's work and his insight into Jewish and Greco-Roman history that has made him a significant voice in recent years. He is one of the first to make systematic use of the social sciences, especially peasant studies, in analyzing the different movements in first century Palestine. His use of sociological studies of social unrest to highlight the range of social and ideological factors that were operative during this period in Palestine has substantially contributed to our understanding of the first century Jewish world.

#### 4.10.1 The importance of a historical and holistic context

Horsley's insistence on understanding the broader historical and socio-political dynamics of this is borne out of a desire to avoid what scholars call "idealistic" interpretations of Biblical texts, a feature that marks many of the older traditional interpretations. This is certainly a valid concern. The need to move away from "narrowly religious" or "exclusively theological" interpretations to a more "realistic" presentation of the origins and life of the Jesus movement and the early Christians is something that has been echoed by others. Wright (1992:169) example states: "Any suggestion, even by implication, that Jews led untroubled lives to discuss the finer points of dogmatic theology must be rejected." Matters of Jewish identity and loyalty had pressing social, economic and political dimensions as well as cultural and theological ones.

Borg's (1991:5) critical reflections on Sanders's (1985) work expresses well this lack of integration of the historical, theological and social dimensions of first century Judaism. Sanders is usually praised for seeking to place Jesus firmly within his Jewish social world yet he (Jesus) ends up having very little to do with it. His relationship to it is abstract and confined merely to the world of ideas i.e., "the ideas of Jewish restoration theology and the Jewish law understood as covenant nomism". The impression is given that Jesus is not very interested in the 'historical direction' of his people or about the shape of Jewish life.<sup>35</sup>

The same sentiment is expressed by Esler in *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*. While one must certainly account for the religious motivations of the evangelists, he states, it is "unrealistic to expect to be able to appreciate the purely religious dimension of Luke-Acts apart from an understanding of the social and political realities of the community for which it was composed" (Esler, 1987:2). In South Africa van Rensburg (2000:567) proposed a move away from the old "kultuur agtergrond" (cultural background) studies approach to a context orientated approach i.e., one that accounts and integrates in a more dynamic way all the religious, social and politically elements in Biblical texts.

It is clear then, in the light of this, that there is a need for an approach that is able to account for the dialectical relationship and interaction between religion and society, so that a more coherent picture of the context for the origins of early Christianity emerges. Horsley's "relational approach" is an attempt to do just that and must be welcomed.

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<sup>35</sup> Borg goes on to say that for Sanders "it is Jesus' ideas about eschatology and his acting out his convictions about a new temple that get him in trouble. Indeed, Jesus is so unconcerned about his social world that he is curiously other-worldly, or perhaps better, next-worldly" (Borg, 5:1991).

#### 4.10.2 The limits of social analysis and models

However, the emphasis on a comprehensive and holistic context does not have to end in the replacement of the 'religious' with the 'social' - something of which Horsley seems to be guilty. Although he calls for the integration of all the dimensions, one is often left with the impression that it is the socio-economic features that really matter since they enjoy much more prominence in his construction. At one point Horsley for example castigates those who portray the protests during the second temple period as basically religious by nature, arguing that the lack of protest from prominent religious leaders, even in the face of direct threats to the cultic life proves the inadequacy of this view. Horsley goes on to say that the focus on the particular *prima-facie* religious may divert attention from the 'deeper tensions' - the structural conflicts and the resultant concrete distress (i.e., the social and the economic issues) of which the religious protests were the expressions (Horsley, 1987:120).

It may well be the case, as Horsley suggests, that the particular religious issues and the provocations that occasioned the popular protests were expressions of a larger and deeper conflict between Roman Imperial rule and the subject Jews. The problem with this view is that it diminishes the "religious aspects" which are a fundamental part of Jewish life. The Marxist bias of Horsley's model reduces the role of religion to merely an aspect of "the superstructure" of society (Freyne, 2000c:19). From this perspective matters of morality, religion and metaphysics no longer retain any semblance of independence but are seen as merely the outcome of economic and social factors.

Freyne (2000c:19-20) is particularly critical of this aspect of Horsley's work. Freyne thinks this weakness has to do with Horsley's choice and application of a conflictual model. A more flexible understanding of the role of popular religion, rather than that based on class distinctions, Freyne suggests, would do more justice to the ancient Biblical sources. Had Horsley been inclined to see first century Palestinian society through the lens of a structural-functionalist model in addition to the conflictual one he has employed, he might well have viewed the social role of religion in a more favourable light (Freyne, 2000c:20).

Another aspect of Horsley's method that deserves mention is his focus on "the silent majority or peasantry". This too is surely a welcome perspective. In focusing on the peasant movements, popular leaders and common traditions, Horsley helped and encouraged Biblical studies to recover a dimension of first century Palestine that was long neglected by scholars biased toward the literate movements such as Pharisaism and the Qumran community. Questions have been asked though, especially concerning the lack of differentiation in the use of the term "peasants". For example it is not always clear whether Horsley is referring to landless peasants,

marginal landholders, reasonably secure small farmers or those with larger holdings. Borg (1988:137) notes that...“the difference between a landless peasant, living by day-labour or begging, and a more prosperous farmer still able to live a respectable life of conventional wisdom centred on family and property was considerable. One had a stake in the status quo, the other not”.

Whether Horsley' account and focus has achieved the required "balance" is open to question. Some have questioned his almost blanket exclusion of the “literate” groups, especially the Pharisees. Horsley's categorical denial of the role played by sections of the Pharisees and aristocrats in revolutionary activities despite the evidence seems arbitrary and may be suggestive of his bias against these groups. Wright (1992:185-195; 210) rejects this bias and points to the involvement of “at least some Pharisees and, eventually, even some aristocrats”. The charge of this being simply the substitution of one perspective from "above" by another from "below" can be avoided with a more balanced approach.

#### **4.10.3 The oppressiveness of Roman rule**

Traditionally orientated scholars like Wright (1992; 1996) and Witherington (1990) have generally shown more interest in unearthing the religious thought-world, aspirations, and the basic religious life orientation of the Jewish people of first century Palestine. Thus, these scholars view the religious aspects and dynamics of first century Judaism as fundamental to an understanding of that world.

Horsley, as was previously stated, focuses his attention more on the material conditions, particularly on how the Imperial situation impacted upon the lives of ordinary Jewish people during this period of time. Uncovering how the prevailing political and economic and power relations were structured is therefore, in Horsley's view, crucial to an understanding of the groups and events that emerged during first century Palestine.

One of the key aspects that emerge from Horsley's argument is the belief that turmoil is the crucial feature of Jewish society. His theoretical model i.e., the “colonial situation”, explains the central role of turmoil and the spiral then explains how the turmoil escalates. Goodman (1987), unlike Horsley, rejects the use of models based on the study of modern European revolutions or Marxist theories as inappropriate. He believes the valid model is located in the world of Josephus i.e., within the Roman Imperial situation.

Goodman identifies the failure of the local ruling class to fulfill its role as mediator between Rome and the Jewish people as the most important reason for the revolt. Yet he too cites in his

reading of Josephus a series of events suggesting a history of Roman brutality and oppression which dates back to the arrival of Pompey in 63 CE. The hostility caused by this first unhappy contact - between the Jews and the might of the late-republican Rome - was to be compounded in the following century by the actions and policies of successive Roman emperors, generals and procurators (Goodman, 1987:7-14).

While some like Borg (1984), Crossan (1991) and even Wright (1992) by and large accept Horsley's sketch of this period, others doubt the depictions of oppression to the point of a constant atmosphere of revolutionary fervour.<sup>36</sup> Barnett (1975:566-571) for example takes Tacitus' statement "under Tiberius all was quiet" almost at face value, arguing for a relatively peaceful and stable period.<sup>37</sup> But as Wright pointed out, Tacitus' statement should not be taken too literally. He simply meant that there was no major uprising, war or border struggle with some of the other major states in the region like Parthia. The evidence actually shows that not only under Tiberius but also under Augustus, Gaius, Claudius and Nero a potential atmosphere for revolt was ever present in varying degrees (Wright, 1992:172).

Sanders, as already alluded to earlier, is very critical of Horsley's depiction of first century Palestine as a place in constant crisis. One of his arguments for a period of stability is the relative independence of the Jewish state from Imperial control (Sanders, 1993:31). Sanders's assertion that Rome governed the region remotely, leaving for the most part matters in the hands of loyal local rulers, however, is contradicted by Richard Alston. In his study on the presence and role of the Roman army and its auxiliaries in Palestine, Alston (1995:87) found that "every aspect of civilian life was, in some measure, under the control of the Roman military".<sup>38</sup>

Sanders also denies claims about excessive taxation. The Romans, he argues, took local conditions into account, and taxation was not especially oppressive before the revolt (1992:157-161). But as Collins (2003:359) observes, Sanders's argument is largely relative since the burden on the people in other parts of the empire was just as heavy. The outbreak of revolts and rebellions against Rome in Gaul (12 CE) and in Cilicia (36 CE) were also ignited by the introduction of regular tax assessments (Goodman, 1987:11n.38). In addition many have noted Tacitus's recording of a complaint against the tax burden in 17 CE: "During the same time, on the deaths of Antiochus and Philopator, kings respectively of the Commageni and Cilicians,

<sup>36</sup> Although Wright is the most critical, especially because of Horsley's failure to account for the religious motivations that inspired the resistance against Rome.

<sup>37</sup> Barnett (1975:564, 571) sees a division between the first century 44-66 CE (which can be characterized as a period of revolutionary activity) while the earlier period (6-44 CE) was basically free from "revolutionary" activity. Although the potential for revolution existed in the early period, good government helped ensure that it was a period of relative quite as reported by Tacitus (Hist.9).

<sup>38</sup> According to Alston (1995:87) the Roman army revealed "an institution involved in local and city administration; economic life – especially the collection and control of taxes; security, with the attempts to control the porous borders of the empire; and internal justice, acting as magistrate in village, town and city disputes over a wide range of civilian life".

these nations became excited, a majority desiring Roman rule, some, that of their kings. The provinces too of Syria and Judæa, exhausted by their burdens, implored a reduction of tribute (*Ann.* 2.42).” Moreover, as noted by Josephus (*War* 2.273), there was a steady increase in taxes under Nero and an extraordinary levy under the procurator Albinus in the early sixties.

Sanders’s views of moderate taxation under imperial Rome do not reflect the evidence in the available sources as noted above. While the Romans may not have viewed themselves or their policies and taxes as oppressive, it is clear that those under their yoke saw things differently. The fact of the matter is that there was most probably an economic ‘bottom line’ for the Roman Imperial government. It was costly (as it is with modern states) to keep and maintain such a huge army and administration. This surely influenced decisions relating to conquest and to disposal strategies adopted with regard to conquered lands and natural resources (Collins, 2003:360).

Even if the effects of Imperial rule were not invariably negative for the subject peoples and may have brought about increased economic opportunities, it seems clear from Josephus's records that there was a systematic Imperial policy and ideology in place for the systematic exploitation of conquered territories, resources, and the peoples through the taking of censuses, taxes, land surveys and the exploitation of mines. The interest of Rome came first, and policy was directed towards the advancement of the wealth and power of the Empire (Mattingly, 2011: 270-272).

The perception of Roman rule in the first century as a matter of *philanthropia* as described by Titus (Josephus *War* 6.333-336) is not a view that was shared by many of its subjects. Rather, Roman rule for the Jews during the first century meant oppression in every possible way – militarily, economically, politically, cultural and religiously (Wright, 1992:154). The evidence then seems to suggest that Horsley's starting point, namely that Palestine was a place of turmoil and social, political and religious oppression under Roman rule is in total agreement with the view presented by Josephus.

#### **4.11 Summary**

This chapter focused on describing Horsley's view of the “original historical, social and political” environment of first century Palestine. This is part of Horsley's concrete approach and must be seen as a reaction against the “idealist” portraits which have marked many of the old traditional studies.

For Horsley, it was noted, the “colonial” situation created by the onset of Roman imperial rule provides the most plausible setting for all that happens during the first century. In this situation

the central conflict was not between the Zealots and Rome, but between the Jewish ruling groups and the Romans on the one side and the Jewish peasantry on the other. The turmoil, Horsley argued, had a much broader base than a single resistance movement, and expressed itself in a variety of movements.

Despite its short-comings Horsley paints a far more compelling picture of first-century Jewish social history than those presented in many of the standard textbooks. His careful analysis and reading of Josephus has certainly cast doubt on the traditional scholarly picture of the first century Jewish revolutionaries as a small sect of Zealots who drew a reluctant nation into war with Rome. More significantly, Horsley's picture also poses a challenge to those who see the Zealots as a foil for Jesus, when in fact Jesus should be compared and contrasted with a wide range of popular figures and movements of his time.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **HORSLEY'S VIEW OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter offered a brief description and analysis of Horsley's reading of the social and political context of the first century Jewish world of Jesus and his disciples. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and explain His view of the kingdom of God. This is another important step that will help clarify Horsley's ideas and thoughts regarding the life and aims of Jesus. More often than not a scholar's view of the kingdom of God determines to a large extent, their readings of the gospels. In other words, the scholar's portrait of Jesus is generally closely related to his or her understanding of the concept of the kingdom of God. Horsley is no different in this regard.

The first aspect to be explained is Horsley's view of the kingdom of God as a non-eschatological concept. This is followed by a look at his view of the kingdom of God as the liberating acts of God. The third aspect concerns Horsley's view of the kingdom as something which focuses on the spiritual and material needs of people. The idea of the kingdom of God as a political metaphor and symbol comes next, followed lastly by Horsley's view of the kingdom as a term to describe Jesus' mission of restoration and renewal. But before describing Horsley's view of the kingdom a brief look at the history of the scholarly debate concerning the meaning of the term may be appropriate.

#### **5. 2. The kingdom of God: A brief history of the modern debate**

Recognition of the centrality of the kingdom of God in the gospels is a fairly recent thing. Given the importance of the term in the life and work of Jesus, its absence from the theological discussions and writings of many of the early theologians seems most peculiar and is still a puzzle for many (van Wyk, 2003:6).

Historically, within the South African context this lack of attention to such an important theme in Jesus' preaching may have been the result of what Botha (2009:1) describes as the "general reticence" towards historical Jesus research in South Africa. The country's troubled social and political history coupled with the general suspicion towards critical historiography may also have contributed to this void in New Testament studies

Historically, within Reformed Protestantism worldwide it was the theology of the "covenant" rather than that of the "kingdom" that dominated the discussions. It was only with the coming of the "Aufklärung" or Enlightenment, that the topic of the kingdom of God gained any sense of

prominence within New Testament studies (van Wyk, 2003:9).

Today though, it is widely agreed that Jesus' authentic message centered on the kingdom of God (Joubert, 1993:91). Vermes (1993:20) points to the frequency of the term in Jesus' language while Jeremias speaks of the *basilea* as the central theme of the public proclamation of Jesus (Jeremias, 1971:99; 1971:96). But while there is now universal agreement on the centrality of the kingdom of God in Jesus' proclamation, there is also widespread disagreement about the content and meaning of the term.

The modern history of this debate began in all earnestness with the work of Albrecht Ritschl and his son-in-law Johannes Weiss (van Wyk, 2003:9). Ritschl, influenced by Immanuel Kant's idealistic philosophy, conceived of the kingdom of God in primarily ethical terms as the organization of redeemed humanity, whose actions are inspired by love. For Ritschl and his followers, such as Adolf von Harnack, the essence of Christianity lay in certain general principles taught by Jesus – principles such as “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all people” (Green et al, 1992).

Weiss, Ritschl's son-in-law, however did not share the idealism of his father-in-law and teacher. Three years after Ritschl's death, Weiss published his ideas in a little booklet called *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (1892). This work not only marked a distinct break from the ideas of his teacher but also with all previous attempts to explain the kingdom of God as a phenomenon within history. Instead, Weiss proposed that Jesus' teachings of the kingdom of God be seen against the background of ancient Jewish apocalyptic. All modern ideas, Weiss insisted “even in their subtlest forms, must be eliminated from it; when this is done, we arrive at a kingdom that is wholly future, as is indeed implied by the petition in the Lord's Prayer, Thy kingdom come” (Weiss in Schweitzer, 2000:199).

Jesus, Weiss maintained, does not establish the kingdom nor does he exercise any Messianic function but like others simply waited for God to bring about the kingdom by supernatural means. If God and only God brings it in, then this kingdom had nothing to do with any earthly political expectation: “To hope for the kingdom in the transcendental sense as Jesus attaches to it, and to raise a revolution, are two things as different as fire and water” (Weiss in Schweitzer, 2000:200).

Schweitzer, full of praise for Weiss, accepted and defended the thesis that Jesus' preaching was essentially eschatological. But he went further than Weiss. In his landmark work *Das Messianitäts und Leidensgeheimnis* (1901) and especially in *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906) Schweitzer interpreted not only Jesus' teaching (as Weiss had done), but also Jesus' whole

ministry in consistently eschatological terms. He understands Jesus as an apocalyptic figure who expected the end to come during the mission of the Twelve (Mark 6:7–13 par.)(Schweitzer, 2000:315).

Most of the debates around the concept of the kingdom of God have ever since been dominated by reactions against Weiss and Schweitzer's wholly futuristic and apocalyptic eschatology. C.H Dodd (1936) was one of the first to launch a credible challenge to Weiss and Schweitzer with his realized eschatology. In his book *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935), Dodd interpreted the word "ἤγγικεν" (*come near*) in Mark 1:15 in light of the word "ἔφθασεν" (*has come upon*) in Matthew 12:28 (par. Luke 11:20). He argued that the decisive event occurred in the coming of Jesus. The healings, particularly the casting out of demons, were proof that in Jesus' person and works, God had dealt the decisive blow to the kingdom of Satan. The kingdom, therefore, in Dodd's view, was a wholly present reality (Green *et al*, 1992).<sup>39</sup>

The other reaction to Schweitzer's 'consistent eschatology' came from Rudolph Bultmann. Rather than denying Schweitzer's conclusion about the meaning of the kingdom, as Dodd had done, Bultmann puts the historical Jesus off limits and demythologizes the teaching of the kingdom i.e, Jesus' invitation becomes a call for existential commitment now. Partly in reaction to the supra-historical school of Bultmann, and partly in an attempt to deal fairly with both future and present sayings of the kingdom of God, a mediating position arose after the Second World War. Werner George Kümmel's work (*Promise and Fulfillment*, 1957) presented the most cogent argument for this position and helped establish it in the scholarly world. Both George Ladd (*The Presence of the Future*, 1974) and Hermann Ridderbos (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, 1976) who wrote in the early sixties considered this "already/not yet kingdom" position as an "emerging consensus" among scholars.

More recently another very influential voice, E.P. Sanders, (*Jesus and Judaism*, 1985) took Schweitzer's lead and argued that Jesus was an eschatological prophet standing in the tradition of Jewish restoration theology. Jesus believed that the promises to Israel would soon be fulfilled: the eschatological restoration of Israel was at hand. Its completion in the near future would be brought about by a dramatic intervention by God, not by any human political effort. This imminent intervention would involve the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the coming of a new (or renewed) temple (Borg, 1994:3-5).

In some ways, Wright's view in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1999) also marks a revival of

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39 van Eck gives the following explanation of Dodd's view: "Jesus het die koninkryk as praesenties verstaan, en van simboliese en metaforiese taal (sy gelykenisse) gebruik gemaak om aan te toon dat die koninkryk reeds aangebreek het. Jesus se verwysing na die koninkryk in simboliese (apokalipties-eskatologiese) taal is egter nie deur die vroeë kerk verstaan nie, en Jesus se apokaliptiese taal is gebruik om hulle eie verstaan van die eskatologie tot uitdrukking te bring" (van Eck, 2008:569).

Schweitzer's eschatological model. Jesus believed he was sent to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth and so focused his message on last or end things. But different to Schweitzer, Wright suggests that Jesus did not proclaim the imminent end of the world, if by "world" one means the space-time continuum. Rather, Jesus proclaimed the end of a world - the world of early Judaism, which was centered on the Herodian temple, its hierarchy, retainers and scribes, who expounded the Torah, and a land-centered approach to Jewish life. History and the world would continue, albeit a renewed world, and a new age of human life (Wright, 1996:208-209).

It has already been noted that much of the discussion generated by the theme of the kingdom was in response to the so-called "eschatological consensus" that followed due to Schweitzer's devastating thesis. One of the earliest respondents to challenge this eschatological view of Jesus was William Wrede (*Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, 1907). Schweitzer (2003:330) described Wrede's approach to the gospels as "thorough-going skepticism". Wrede claimed that little can be known of Jesus from the gospels, except that he was a non-apocalyptic Galilean teacher or prophet who did and said some striking things and was eventually executed. The gospels give us primarily the concerns of the early church. Mark's gospel, according to Wrede, is therefore a theologically motivated fiction, devised within an early church that had already substantially altered direction away from Jesus' own agenda (Wright, 1996 21).

Wright (1996:21) helpfully distinguished and divided modern scholarship engaged in critical writing about Jesus along two main highways. He speaks humourously of these two distinct positions as the "Wredestrassen" (referring to those who follow Wrede's non-eschatological view of the kingdom) and the "Schweitzerstrassen" (those who follow Schweitzer's eschatological view). Wright placed scholars like Borg (1984), Crossan (1991) and Horsley (1987) on the "Wredestrassen". In Wright's view these scholars share the same basic assumptions towards the gospels as Wrede i.e., they all see Jesus as a non-eschatological figure.

### 5.3. Horsley's view of the kingdom of God

Horsley agrees with most scholars about the centrality of the kingdom of God in the gospels, noting that Jesus' preaching and action centered around the presence of the kingdom (e.g., Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20; Luke 17:21). He based much of his understanding of it on the work done by Norman Perrin (Horsley, 1987:167, 339). Perrin, considered as one of the foremost practitioners of the form critical method, wrote numerous articles on Jesus' teachings, including three major books: *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (1963), *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (1967) and *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (1976).<sup>40</sup>

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40 In *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (1967), Perrin presented and defended a method for Jesus research based on the insights of form criticism. Here he consistently applied the three form-critical propositions of dissimilarity, coherence, and multiple attestation in order to arrive at authentic Jesus material. The

### 5.3.1 The kingdom of God is non-eschatological

Jesus, Horsley (1987:168) asserts, did not expect the imminent end of the world to come in his generation. The kingdom of God and related symbols do not refer to the last, “final eschatological” and “all transforming act” of God. The whole concept of “the End” or “eschaton” is misleading and its continued use merely perpetuates many of the interpretative errors (Horsley, 1987:168).

The role of eschatological expectation in popular Jewish ideology has been exaggerated since the time of Schweitzer. Such expectations Horsley maintains, played almost no role in the hopes of the vast majority of Jewish peasants. Horsley apparently found no evidence of expectation for an eschatological prophet in the available sources. What he did find is evidence of populist streams of prophets and others patterned after the great liberators of early Israelites like Moses and Joshua. “The issue for Jesus’ contemporaries was apparently less one of theological ideas or eschatological expectations (as so often posed by New Testament scholarship) than one of concrete socio-historical phenomena.” (Horsley, 1985:435)

Horsley thinks that Jesus’ contemporaries saw him not as an eschatological prophet but rather like one of the prophets of old – figures like Elijah or Jeremiah. It was also these prophetic figures who provided Jesus with a model for his ministry. According to Horsley it was not so much their teaching regarding the eschaton that Jesus took from these prophets of old but their emphasis on God’s promise of deliverance to the people (Horsley, 1985:460-61).

Horsley also agrees with Perrin’s (1967:173-185) form-critical conclusions suggesting that there is no exegetical basis for affirming that Jesus had an imminent eschatology. The sayings about the Son of Man coming on the clouds in Mark 13:26; 14:62 and Daniel 7:13 are symbols of the vindication of the persecuted or suffering righteous.<sup>41</sup> The word eschatology was traditionally understood as referring to teaching about the last things, specifically to history’s consummation and the events directly associated with it. However, Horsley disputes this traditional emphasis and reinterprets the word completely.

God’s action in the coming of the kingdom, Horsley insists, would be final not in the sense of “last” but in sense of “finally!” or “at last” (Horsley, 1987:168). The emphasis here is not on the temporal futuristic end of the world sense. Rather, the focus is on the decisiveness of the

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rigorous application of the criterion of dissimilarity led him to conclude that all the features of the message of Jesus in the gospels which have parallels in Judaism or the early church must of necessity be rejected as secondary formulations. Perrin (1967:16) finds “no single pericope anywhere in the gospels, the present purpose of which is to preserve a historical reminiscence of the earthly Jesus”.

<sup>41</sup> Perrin’s investigation of the “apocalyptic Son of Man sayings” led him to conclude that there was no Jewish conception of a coming Son of Man. The picture of a mysterious figure coming to power was used by Daniel simply to express the reward of the Maccabean martyrs. It follows from the above that Jesus could not have spoken of the coming of the Son of man, either in reference to himself or in reference to an eschatological figure other than himself (Perrin, 1967:197). The apocalyptic Son of man sayings in the gospel tradition are all products of the early church. At the most, Jesus could have used the picture of the Son of Man from Daniel 7:13 to express the concept of a future vindication of his ministry and of man’s proper response to it (Perrin, 1967:185).

moment, which is world changing.

The kingdom of God is also not about an “all transforming act” of God but part of a process in which social-political-religious relations are being transformed. It involves continuing action by God as well as response and participation by the people (Horsley, 1987:168-169).

Horsley is not the only one who has challenged the long established consensus on biblical eschatology. Recently Malina (2002:50-53) also raised objections to the traditional definitions of words like eschatology and apocalyptic. He is especially critical of what he terms the “modern assumptions” of time (i.e. linear time) that underlie the use of these terms. It’s also worth mentioning that most of these scholars work with the tools and perspectives provided by the new literary and sociological approaches.

### **5.3.2 The kingdom of God is the liberating action of God**

According to Horsley the kingdom of God is not to be understood as some “realm” existing in some place such as “heaven” (kingdom of heaven simply being the Jewish manner of speaking about the kingdom of God without using the divine name).

While he welcomes the emphasis on the kingdom of God as God's rule or ruling as an important corrective, he nevertheless still considers this as too “vague” and “general” and “neutral”. In other words, these terms lack precision. The reason for this is that Horsley believes that there is something far more dynamic about the use of the term in biblical literature. Moreover, Horsley reckons, these definitions don’t do justice to the active, the engaged and partial nature of this concept in the biblical literature.<sup>42</sup>

More precisely, for Horsley, the kingdom of God means the use of power in mighty deeds to liberate, establish or protect the people in difficult historical circumstances like in the Exodus (15:1-18) from bondage in Egypt. Remembering the great historical acts of liberation, the prophets and the apocalyptic visionaries symbolized God's future liberation actions in terms analogous to those of past events (Horsley, 1987:168).

### **5.3.3 The kingdom of God is People-Centred**

While traditional interpretations tend to focus on the “divine source of the kingdom” Horsley puts

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42 Gustav Dalman (1898) is credited for making the subtle distinction between the kingdom of God as “reign” rather than “realm.” Employing the insights of philology he demonstrated the dynamic character of the kingdom of God expressions in Judaism and the New Testament. Dalman also came to the conclusion that the idea of kingdom of God has no territorial or geographical reference. Rather, the idea expresses dynamically the kingly rule of God.

the spotlight on the recipients of the kingdom of God. For Ladd "*malkuth*" primarily has "the dynamic rather than the concrete meaning". It refers first to a reign or rule and only secondarily to the realm over which a reign is exercised (Ladd, 1974:46). It is not about a realm or a people but God's reign. Thus the kingdom of God is essentially the kingdom of "God" - the emphasis being on the second part of the phrase. For Ridderbos the great future announced by Jesus is considered entirely from the standpoint of the divine kingship of God. The idea of the coming of the kingdom is pre-eminently the idea of the kingly self-assertion of God and of his coming to the world to reveal his royal majesty, power and right (Ridderbos, 1976:19).

For Horsley, however, Jesus' manifestation of the presence of the kingdom of God was about the welfare of people. It was about the needs and desires of the people. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God concentrates on the implications of the kingdom for people's lives. The traditional focus on "God or the divine source" of the kingdom is based on the misleading assumption that the religious dimension can be separated from the rest of life (Horsley, 1987: 69).

Horsley (1987:191) goes even as far as saying that "in the earliest gospel traditions of the preaching of Jesus there is little or no concern directly with God." In his proclamation of the kingdom of God, Jesus rarely refers to God as king. He refers to God primarily as "Father." While some sayings like Mark 8:38 (which Horsley suggests are relatively late) portray the "Father" in heavenly glory surrounded by the angels in royal splendour, Horsley believes "the dominant tone is more that of the accessible (and very anthropomorphic) figure who feeds the birds, clothes the flowers, and cares for his people, and whose mercy is to be imitated (Luke 12:22-31; 6:36).

Again Horsley (1987:170) urges that the kingdom of God not be thought of as a "state of blissful rest in static beatitude or a state secured for the redeemed. If the focus is directed to the active and concrete elements of the kingdom, then Jesus' kingdom language is about the active enjoyment of individual life and social life; about social interaction such as feasting. The saving activity of God brings wholeness to individual persons. Yet, says Horsley (1987:170), "this personal wholeness does not stand in contrast to the restoration of society". Rather, it goes together with the renewal and transformation of the social, economic and political spheres life

In the preaching and action of Jesus then, including the "kingdom of God" sayings and references to God as Father, the focus is almost always on the people, and the concern is not abstract or even primarily religious. The concern is with the people's concrete circumstances, both somatic and psychic, both material and spiritual. The political symbol of the kingdom of God as his central message, and the healing of bodies as well as souls, confirm that Jesus was

concerned with the whole of life in all its dimensions (Horsley, 1987:153).

#### **5.3.4 The kingdom of God is a political metaphor and symbol.**

The kingdom of God includes the social, economic and political substances of human relations as willed by God. Before it was spiritualized, salvation (*soteria*) meant the peace or *Pax Romana* provided by the divine Hellenistic or Roman emperor for his subjects. But for Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries these blessings of social and political life would be provided by God as King, not by the emperor. The kingdom of God would provide an alternative social and political dispensation (Horsley, 1987:170).

The kingdom of God is Jesus' comprehensive term for the blessings of salvation. But these blessings include the social and political dimensions. Unlike modern western thinking, the first century Jews never thought of the religious as separate from the social and political dimensions. Horsley is adamant that in the gospels the focus on community life and political-economic affairs are inseparable and are part of living under the will and the kingdom of God. The stories of the Gospels are both political and religious.

In *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (2001) Horsley suggests that the dominant plot involves Jesus as a Moses- and Elijah-like prophet leading a renewal of Israel in its village communities over and against its Jerusalem and Roman rulers, who stand under God's judgment. What is often missed by modern readers is that politics is embedded in the Israelite tradition that is represented in particular episodes in Mark's gospel. For Horsley an example of this is Jesus' Jeremiah-like prophetic demonstration enacting God's condemnation of the Temple. He also notes a dramatic, escalating, political conflict in the story, particularly once Jesus marches into Jerusalem. Jesus' prophetic demonstration and prophetic condemnations of the Temple and high-priestly rulers would have resulted in arrest and imprisonment or execution under any client regime and imperial overlord. The crucifixion of Jesus, which later became the central symbol of the Christian faith, was in Mark's story the Roman method of execution reserved for leaders of insurrection against the imperial order (Horsley, 2001:99-119). In the end, according to Horsley (2001:102), the evidence suggests that it was no mistake that Jesus was put to death as a political threat. His message and his actions were a threat to the governing class of first century Palestine because they implied a revolutionary transformation of the existing socio-political order. If this is so, then the Gospel of Mark, for example, cannot simply be reduced to a religious category such as a textbook on discipleship. God's activity was therefore political and so was Jesus' preaching of that activity.

The implication for the prevailing imperial situation was obvious (Horsley, 1987:170).<sup>43</sup>

### **5.3.5 The kingdom of God is about the renewal of Israel**

The kingdom of God for Jesus, Horsley (1987:193) says, not only meant that God was bringing the old order to an end but was also renewing and restoring the people of Israel. Far from being primarily a 'teacher of timeless truths', Jesus worked in the villages and towns of Galilee ministering to the lost sheep of Israel.

This renewal of the life of the people involved the renewal of the fundamental social-political form of traditional peasant life, the village. This implied a break with the old traditional patriarchal forms of leadership (that had either broken down or become oppressive) and an acceptance of new "familial" and egalitarian relations free from exploitative authority figures (Horsley, 1987:231-244).

With the kingdom now at hand, Jesus also catalyzed this renewal by encouraging the people to enter into a new spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance (even with their local enemies). Jesus encouraged this kind of response among the people because of the economic pressures most of them faced (Horsley, 1987:247-254). Thus, in this context of dire economic circumstances, Jesus' words about "love for enemies" (Luke 6:27) are not those of one who stands above the turmoil of his day. These words by Jesus do not imply an "apolitical pacific stance", nor are they meant to offer sober counsel of nonresistance to evil or the Roman oppressors. Rather, these words by Jesus suggest a social revolutionary principle insofar as the love of enemies would transform local social-economic relations. This in turn would lead to a sense of solidarity and unity among the people in the face of those who oppress them (Horsley, 1987:255-284).

## **5.4 Assessment**

### **5.4.1. The historical nature of the kingdom**

Horsley is clearly keen to stress the historical, this-worldly nature of Jesus' preaching and teaching of the kingdom. The kingdom of God Jesus spoke about was not an entirely other-worldly phenomenon that is removed from the realities of this life. For Horsley the kingdom of God Jesus preached about was concerned with the immediate present of the people and the immediate future that flowed out of that present, much like the message of the prophets of the Old Testament.

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<sup>43</sup> van Aarde' & Boshoff (2005:1131) also suggest that the idea of the kingdom of God be viewed as an apocalyptic alternative to the Pax Romana. The kingdom

Horsley's focus on the historical and this-worldly nature of the kingdom of God is certainly a welcome emphasis. Traditionally, within the discipline of biblical studies as well as at a popular level there has been an overemphasis on the divinity of Jesus, often at the expense of his humanity. McGovern traces this pre-occupation with the metaphysical back to the influence of Greek philosophical categories of God on Christianity. Accordingly, God came to be thought of as eternal, unchangeable, and outside of human history. Consequently, theology said little about God's role in history apart from the one moment of the incarnation (McGovern, 1993:75). This extreme emphasis on the cosmic Christ alone yielded images of a Christ devoid of any connection with history. It led to a Christ who has only to do with spiritual matters but had little or nothing to do with the historical, concrete, existential human being. It produced a functional docetism in much of the Christology of western Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

These misconceptions still continue in many churches and sections of contemporary Christianity. Wright (1992:60-61) says even those that claim to take the Bible most seriously have often made nonsense of any attempt to read especially the gospel stories literally and historically. For some Christians the only worthwhile truth in the gospels is the death and resurrection of Christ. It would have been sufficient for them if Jesus had been born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, and risen again three days later (Wright, 1996:13-14). Whatever events, actions and words Jesus spoke prior to his death matter little. In this sense then, Horsley's focus in bringing to the fore a "Christ from below" by placing Jesus squarely within his first century historical milieu, is a welcomed corrective.

#### **5.4.2. The kingdom of God as both spiritual and social**

The emphasis on the centrality and predominance of God in the kingdom has already been noted above in the writings of scholars like Ridderbos and Ladd. Ridderbos's (1962:19-20) assertion that "the coming of the kingdom for Jesus meant first of all the display of the divine glory" cannot be disputed. Thus there is an argument to be made for the theocentric character of the kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, Sobrino (1978:41) is surely right in noting that many of the references to the kingdom of God are mentioned in relation to something that God is doing and not just as an abstract concept. Sobrino goes on to say that to be experientially meaningful, God must be

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of God came to replace the Pax Romana and this replacement took form in the kerygma of Jesus Christ.

44 Bultman's demythologizing program is especially to blame for these Christological errors.

Docetism (from the Greek *δοκέω* *dokēō*, "to seem") is the belief that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion; that is, Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die. This belief is most commonly attributed to the Gnostics, many of whom believed that matter was evil, and as a result God would not take on a material body (Green *et al.*, 1992).

related to something i.e, God and kingdom, God and nearness, God and his will. Sobrino (1993: 82) says for Jesus, it was God in his relationship to human history through the kingdom. In fact, all the various traditions of Judaism conceive of God in some unique relationship to human history. The Exodus tradition relates God to history through liberation from oppression. The prophetic traditions relate God to history through the establishment of justice. The apocalyptic traditions relate God to history through eschatological renewal. The wisdom traditions relate God to history by creation. The traditions of the silent God relate him to history through the sin and suffering of the world. So these views do not see God simply as “God in and for God,” but always in a unique relationship to human history. As a Jew, the Jesus of the Gospels draws on these traditions to establish his vision of the kingdom. Thus God's active rule and his being are inseparable.

The theocentric emphasis on the kingdom of God need not exclude a concern for people's physical needs. Similarly, a focus on the physical and material needs of people, as Horsley (1987:169-170) asserts, must not deny or ignore the 'theocentric' focus and 'spiritual' dimensions of the kingdom.

Kaylor (1994:194-203) who builds much of his portrait on Horsley's work maintains a good balance and accounts very well for both elements in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer. He notes how the first part of the prayer, with its use of *abba*, shows Jesus' great intimacy with God. It also shows that Jesus expected his disciples also to have such closeness to the Father. However, says Kaylor (1994:182), this closeness to God did not cause Jesus to lose his focus or concern for people and their needs; hence the prayer speaks of the provision of bread and the forgiveness of debts.

Furthermore, the call for God to vindicate or “hallow” his own name is a call, much like that of the prophets, for God to eliminate injustice and oppression and to reestablish “shalom”, among God's people (Ezekiel 34:25-31). The plea to bring in the kingdom and will of God on earth as in heaven is eschatological in character and shows that such concerns did not rule out a passionate desire that the hungry be fed and the burdened relieved. Jesus' piety is not divorced from his concern for the community of God and its physical as well as spiritual and social well-being (Kaylor, 1994:201-203).

#### **5.4.3. The kingdom of God and politics**

Similarly Horsley's focus on the political and social nature of the kingdom, especially his insistence on the interrelationship between the political, social and religious spheres in the first century world of Jesus is an important corrective. Many 'Christian' readings of the gospels often

screen out the political overtones of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom (Wright, 1992:149). While 'politics' in the contemporary western world is often thought to have nothing to do with religion, such a distinction would have puzzled many in the ancient world (Wright, 1996:221).

Wright (1996:223) thinks most of the redefinitions (of the kingdom) offered in modern scholarship would have been simply irrelevant in the first century world of Jesus and his contemporaries..."Inner peace of mind would not enable one to eke out a living under heavy taxation...Jewish hope was concrete, specific, focused on the people as a whole. If Pilate was still governing Judea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing the Torah properly, then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come." Wright says these tangible, this-worldly points of reference (the strength of those who present Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary) are all-important.

Spiritual issues concern not merely [the] internal, private, and individual relationship between a person and God. The spiritual also governs interpersonal and community relations. Jesus was political in the same way the pre-exilic prophets in general were political. He believed that God's blessing of the people depended on their manifesting in the political sphere the justice God required of covenant people (Kaylor, 1994:4).<sup>45</sup>

Even if one does not agree with everything Horsley says, there is much to be affirmed in the perspective that his work brings to the topic of Jesus' view of the kingdom. One cannot engage with Horsley's work and still retain doubt that Jesus was political and was at least subversive.

#### **5.4.4. An over-realized eschatology**

However, questions have been asked about Horsley's perceived overemphasis on Jesus' concern with the this-worldly aspects of the kingdom. While Horsley is certainly right in bringing to fore the social and material dimensions he also consistently minimizes the spiritual aspects of the kingdom in Jesus' preaching. He tends to collapse the theological and religious aspects into the social and political. The theological or ideological conflicts portrayed in the gospel literature are all reduced to concrete social conflicts between groups with different economic interests. Thus the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is one between the interests of local

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45 Wright further states that..."to speak of the kingdom of this god does not, therefore, mean that one is slipping into a dualistic mode of thought, or imagining that the event which is to come would be related only marginally or tangentially to space-time events. This kingdom was not a timeless truth, nor an abstract ethical ideal, nor the coming end of the space-time universe. Nor did the phrase itself denote a community, though it would connote the birth of a new community. It would denote, rather, the action of the covenant god, within Israel's history, to restore her fortunes, to bring to an end the bitter period of exile, and to defeat, through her, the evil that ruled the whole world" (1992:307).

Galilean communities and the “central governing authorities,” a group that includes Sadducees, scribes, and Pharisees - all lumped into the category of “retainers,” or supporters of the ruling authority of the temple-state. This reductionism seems to stem from Horsley’s over-reliance on conflict theory. Horsley himself has admitted these limitations in the appendix of his book *Sociology of the Jesus Movement* (1994:156-165). Horsley's model and approach, therefore lacks the ability to accommodate and balance the social as well as the theological aspects in the biblical texts.

Wright puts this tendency to ignore the religious dimensions in the texts down to Horsley's failure to understand the fundamentally religious nature of the first century Jewish worldview shared by Jesus and his contemporaries: “It was precisely Jesus’ commitment to the story and praxis of the kingdom - as thoroughly a “theological” idea as there could be - that gave him the vision and basic imagery with which to challenge his hearers to action that could not but have implications at every level of their lives” (Wright, 1996:296). Just because Jesus’ ministry had a social component does not mean it was not theological also.

Moreover, Horsley, in accordance with his bias for a this-worldly interpretation of the kingdom of God, dismisses all the references to future apocalyptic events. The heavily debated “future” or “apocalyptic” “son of man” sayings, Horsley (1987:175) argues, appear to have been original expressions of confidence in divine vindication and judgment, or even, more broadly, of full deliverance. He insists that there is no evidence that points to a transcendent divine redeemer-figure called “the son of man”. While the evangelists and early Christians may have understood the “son of man” to be Jesus, the sayings themselves do not indicate that the “son of man” refers to Jesus (Horsley, 1987:175-176). The “son of man” sayings are of crucial importance to those who argue for an apocalyptic eschatological understanding of Jesus. Horsley’s discrediting and questioning of the authenticity of these sayings means the exegetical foundations of the eschatological case for Jesus disappears.

#### **5.4.5. Theological reductionism**

Apart from denying all the futurist elements in Jesus' apocalyptic and eschatological sayings Horsley also reinterprets them in entirely earthly terms i.e., as denoting political struggles. Horsley is correct in pointing out that Israel’s apocalyptic hope has been grossly misunderstood by many scholars who have alienated it from history. As Wright (1992:300) puts it: “What Israel hoped for was not an end to this space-time universe, but the end of her exile under foreign domination.” Apocalyptic language about the sun darkening and the stars falling from the sky are vivid metaphors, not literal expectations. The purpose of the language is not to describe the

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end of history, but to invest historical events with their theological meaning, to convey the importance of “earth-shattering” events. While Wright highlights the theological importance and significance of Jesus’ apocalyptic sayings, Horsley interprets them entirely as this-worldly and political i.e, as offering hope to an oppressed people in history. Jesus is only viewed in relation to and in continuity with his own people’s worldview and situation as a colonized and oppressed peasantry. In doing this Horsley limits Jesus’ manifestation of the kingdom of God to the social realm and away from anything that relates to the cross or any future judgment. Too much of the religious aspect is lost in an overemphasis on the notion that the kingdom is fully here, fully now and not future at all.

### **5.5 Summary**

This chapter looked at Horsley’s view of the kingdom of God. It was noted that Horsley’s view of the kingdom is essentially non-eschatological. It was not a spiritualized heaven but the use of power to liberate in a social-historical way. It is a power understood to be already present and active among the people with whom Jesus associated. It therefore addressed people’s “real” and not just their spiritual needs. Horsley’s strengths, it was observed, lie in his emphasis on understanding the kingdom of God concept historically, especially in terms of its social and material dimensions. This however, was done at the expense of the theological dimensions of the biblical texts - which is unfortunate and unnecessary. A more balanced approach would have done more justice to both the theological as well as the social dimensions of the biblical text.

## CHAPTER 6

### EXEGESIS OF SELECTED PASSAGES

#### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described Horsley's view and interpretation of the term, kingdom of God. We saw that a dominant feature of this view is his primarily this-worldly understanding of the kingdom of God. Here, the emphasis is not so much on the future eschatological heavenly nature of the kingdom but on its immediate presence. For Horsely, Jesus' actions and vision of the kingdom mediate God's future into the structures and experiences of his own time and people. The kingdom was centered on the needs of people; it had a social impact.

This chapter will examine a selection of relevant biblical texts that serves as Horsley's basis for his thesis of seeing Jesus as radical social prophet. According to Horsley Jesus was not only concerned with "spiritual" matters and the forgiveness of "individual sins". When Jesus' words and ministry are situated against the background of a turbulent economic, social, political and religious first century Palestine (as sketched in chapter 4 above), then logic dictates that he be viewed as a social prophet<sup>46</sup> This is particularly true if we take into account that Jesus basically stood in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets who publicly condemned the social exploitation and neglect of the poor and vulnerable. Jesus, like the prophets of old, does not just oppose the existing religious status quo but also the social, political and economic arrangements which kept the majority of people in poverty. He was conscious of his society's inequalities and publicly identified with the poor.

Horsley sees in the gospel tradition a general orientation towards the poor and a condemnation of the wealthy: "Whether it be the blessings of the kingdom now at hand or in a number of summarizing statements Jesus offered the kingdom to the poor especially while at the same time pronouncing prophetic woes against the wealthy" (Horsley, 1987: 248).

But is there evidence for this kind of "social and political" reading of the Gospel texts or is Horsley simply imposing his own agenda and meaning onto these texts? Since the gospel texts are essentially "theological" should they not rather be viewed as they have traditionally been seen i.e., in "religious and spiritual" terms? And what about those who suggest that any one-sided emphasis in interpretation is inadequate because of the failure to account for both the spiritual as well as social element in these texts?

The two main texts chosen for this investigation are taken from Luke's Gospel, although the

relevant parallel texts in the other Gospels will be consulted. Those who are familiar with liberationist interpretations of the Gospels will find the choice of Luke not surprising at all. Luke's apparent concern for issues of wealth and poverty is now a widely accepted fact among biblical scholars (Green, 1994:60). Indeed, Horsley (1987:248-255) cites these very same texts as evidence that Jesus' concern and activities went beyond the merely "spiritual."

Hence, this chapter will commence with an exegesis of the Nazareth Sermon in Luke 4 and in particular vv18-19. Next in line will be Luke's version of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-38). Since most of the texts under scrutiny are filled with quotations and themes from the book of Isaiah, a brief examination of some relevant themes as well as the original background of the texts under scrutiny seems appropriate to help facilitate a correct understanding. Because of the limitations of this thesis a full treatment of these texts is simply impossible. Exegesis and analysis will therefore center only on the relevant passages.

The best place to start is with the original context of Luke 4:18-19, which is a conflated text taken from Isaiah 61 and 58. Once again due to the limits of this thesis as well as space this Isaianic excursion will be brief and focused on the key themes and phrases in the passage. One of these themes concerns the nature and identity of the "poor".

## **6.2. The poor in Isaiah**

### **6.2.1. Poor as a broad definition for Isaiah**

The words "poor" and "rich" are mostly seen as economic and social terms for the modern reader, but in the Bible they actually refer to a mixture of social, economic, political and religious dimensions. In Isaiah it does not only refer to a lack of material things but seems to encapsulate a wide array of weaknesses, hardships, oppressions, and afflictions.

The prophet Isaiah describes God's concern for the poor, the needy, the lowly, the meek, the weak, the weary, the feeble, the fatherless, the widow, the oppressed, the afflicted, the captive, the bound, the prisoners, the outcasts, the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute.

The word for poor used in Isaiah 61:1 is *ānāwīm*. This term is used to describe those in the succeeding phrases (vv, 1b-3) who are being delivered i.e. the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners and mourners. The same list of misfortunes occurs in Isaiah 29: 18-19 (the deaf, blind, and poor), 35:5-7 (the blind, deaf, lame, the mute) and Isaiah 42:7 (the blind and prisoners).

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<sup>46</sup> The intent of this chapter is not to determine the authenticity of these sayings, but rather to inquire whether Horsley's interpretation of them is sustainable.

Jacques Dupont's study *Les Béatitudes* (1969) led him to conclude that the first three beatitudes should be taken together as envisaging the same type of people. He argued that the poor, the hungry, and the mourning in the New Testament should be compared with other similar lists in the Old Testament mentioning the contrite, the sojourner, the broken-hearted, the widow and orphan, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and so on (Green, 1994:59-68). The term poor is also linked with the naked, the hungry, the mourning as one group in Isaiah 61:1-6 and Job 24:2-12. It is also associated with other forms of misery, especially nakedness (Ezekiel 18:7, 16; Job 22:7; Tobit 1:17; 4:16).

Thus, the deaf, dumb, blind, lame, poor, broken-hearted, captives and downtrodden are simply different ways of referring to the poor and the oppressed. In Isaiah "poor" is a broad term that summarizes a broad range of weaknesses, oppressions, and afflictions.

Since *ānāwīm* is a general word for the afflicted, many shades of definition also abound. *Ānāwa* is an adjective meaning poor, oppressed, afflicted, humble. Moses in the Old Testament is the prototype of the humble man before God and other human beings (Numbers 12:3), but he was not poor or low in rank.

What's important to observe in the use of these words in the Old Testament is how often physical affliction is closely tied to spiritual affliction, as in Psalms 22:24. In many instances external affliction engenders inner affliction issuing in a cry to God for help (Psalms 25:16; 34:6; 69:29). God's people are frequently described as afflicted (Psalm 68:10) but He does not forget them (Psalm 9:18; 74:19). God has pity on them, saves and delivers them (Isaiah 49:13; Psalms 34:6; 35:10).

Scholars believe that the word "poor" had undergone a subtle semantic change. While the social connotation remained, the terms for "poor" (*āni* and *ānāwīm*) had taken on a deeper religious meaning, resulting in new spiritual vigour and a theological as well as existential answer to the perennial human condition of poverty (Liu, 1986:44).

Thorner (1904:1) speaks of the genesis and growth of the Hebrew conception of Poor and Rich as having passed through different evolutionary stages..."from their original etymological signification to the figurative sense in which they were later used, and the ethical and religious connotation they received, more especially in the later Psalms". The term that had originally described the material and physical aspect of the objects they represent had later (as a result of social changes and the evolution of Hebrew theology) come to stand for new conceptions. *ānāwīm* became synonymous with pious, good, righteous while *ānāwīm* with wicked, godless, oppressive. This then explains why the word *ānāwīm* (meek and humble poor) took on over time

a religious sense in the language and vocabulary of the prophets. While the word still carried sociological referents it was now given a broader religious meaning.

The poor then, being in a lowly position, look to God for help. As the experience of poverty leads the *ānāwīm* to submit themselves to God and his word, they are closer to God than their rich compatriots (Liu, 1986:40-44). A good illustration of this can be seen in Mark 12:41-44 where Jesus commends the poor widow for giving to the Temple what she needed for subsistence living. Here in this incident one can see reflected the typical conviction of the Old Testament believers (especially the psalmists) that the poor are likely to be more open to God than are the great and powerful.

### 6.2.2. Poverty and social injustice in Isaiah

In the Old Testament Yahweh is described as the Saviour of those having real needs. He was the King and regarded as the *ānāwīm* of the poor. YHWH's very nature is to do justice to the poor. Since He is the King of Israel, his actions are those of the protector of the oppressed.

The laws concerning the protection of the poor and underprivileged expressed his divine will. These laws can be found in Exodus 20:22-23, 33, in the Deuteronomic law (Deuteronomy 12-16) as well as in the Holiness Code in Leviticus (Lv. 17-26). There are also many examples in the Psalm that state the protection that Yahweh gives to the poor (Psalm 9:9-19; 18:12-18; 18:28; 76:9-10; 147:6; 149:3-4 etc). Psalm 68:5-6 describes him as 'Father of the fatherless, protector of the widows' who 'leads out the prisoners to prosperity.' Psalm 146:7-8 describes his actions in terms similar to Luke:

[God] executes justice for the oppressed  
 who gives food to the hungry  
 The Lord sets the prisoners free  
 The Lord opens the eye of the blind  
 The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down

Yahweh's response to the poor and needy is concrete liberation, feeding the poor, freeing prisoners, executing justice on this earth (Topel, 2001:75).

There can be no question about the prophet Isaiah's concern with issues of socioeconomic i.e., material poverty. Of all the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah, together with the prophet Amos most condemns the socio-economic injustices in Israel, and so understands poverty as a man-made evil to be overcome (1:15-26; 3:12-24; 5:8-23; 10:1-4; 32:1-20; 35:5-10). Isaiah frequently highlights the hardship inflicted on the poor from external sources, which is why his

solutions to the problems of poverty are regularly tied to justice and righteousness. We see in Isaiah that the forms of poverty God works against are those that have been dealt by oppression, deprivation, theft, or imprisonment, or by some weakness beyond the individual's control, such as being a widow, fatherless, lame, or mute.

Isaiah 3:14 presents a situation where social anarchy promotes the economic exploitation of the poor and the robbery of their possessions. The prophet rebukes the elders and princes for “devouring the vineyards of the poor and for taking the spoil of the poor into their own houses” (Isaiah 3:14-15). He also confronts those who accumulate silver and gold and treasures and horses and chariots (Isaiah 2:7). In Isaiah 10:1-2 woes are pronounced on “those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!” Although the situation in Isaiah 14:30 is not clear, the parallel of “*dallim*” and “*ebyonim*” (both translated by *ptochoi*) and the evocation of Yahweh as the King Protector of the poor points strongly to concrete economic poverty (Topel, 2001: 74).

Furthermore, as Jan van der Ploeg and J. David Pleins (1992) demonstrated, the Hebrew words for poverty (even *ānāwim*, a cognate of *āni*) connote socioeconomic poverty, referring to those who are unjustly oppressed, and so are hungry, naked and in danger of death. *Ani* especially contains the nature of being economically exploited and destitute (Topel, 2001:73).

### 6.2.3. The poor in Isaiah 40-66

Perhaps the most significant use of *āni* in the prophets occurs in Isaiah 40–66. Here *āni* is almost used exclusively (Isaiah 41:17 being the exception). In this part of the book the prophetic notion of the “oppressed poor” is reshaped and applied to the sufferings of the exiles in Babylon. According to the earlier prophets, Israel and Judah were judged for their exploitation of others, i.e., for making others *āni*. In Second Isaiah, the entire nation has endured divine judgment, and through its captivity in Babylon, Israel as a whole has become *āni* i.e. “poor and oppressed” (Pleins, 1992).

The prophet seeks to explain the implications of this new phase in the community's historical experience. He assures the despondent people that the wrath of God against Jerusalem is temporary (Isaiah 51:21; 54:11; cf. 48:9–10). The community will not remain in captivity forever and Yahweh's judgment will eventually give way to a new exodus and liberation (e.g., Isaiah 43:16–20; 63:9–13). In light of these promises the people are called upon to continue to trust and hope in God amid the hardships and oppression brought on by the exile (Isaiah 49:17; cf. 51:12–14, 22–23). God takes note of and will assist the nation that has suffered political and

economic oppression at the hands of the Babylonian empire.

While the use of *ānī* in second Isaiah is somewhat more abstract than previous prophetic usage, it continues to contain concrete aspects (41:17; 58:7). It is clear though that the prophet of Second Isaiah has expanded the concrete character of the term. This, however, does not negate the fact that Second Isaiah's concept of poverty has, as its point of reference the general and concrete situation of political and economic oppression (Pleins, 1992).

### **6.3. The setting of Isaiah 61**

Isaiah 61 is found in the corpus of material that is generally considered post-exilic (Isaiah 56-66). The post-exilic community found themselves in great distress. They were relatively few in number compared with the strong enemy nations that surrounded them. Their cities were in desolation and the city walls were not built. The picture presented describes a state of widespread devastation and poverty in which people were not yet able to rebuild their homeland. Phrases like "to comfort all who mourn" seem to suggest a post-exilic situation and the speaker is specially commissioned to provide comfort for the despondent people (Liu, 1986:58-59).

#### **6.3.1. The enigmatic agent of Yahweh**

Isaiah 61 introduces an enigmatic figure whose mission and role is to act as a liberator and benefactor. This authorized agent of Isaiah 61 has a prophetic role of condemning violence and injustice as well as being a champion and advocate for the poor and powerless. He seems to be of royal character ("anointed" Isaiah 61:1a). Therefore he bears the authority of an all-powerful supreme being to carry out his mission and issue a proclamation of emancipation to the captives (Liu, 1986:111,113).

There are strong affinities between the roles of the "Anointed One" in Isaiah 61 and the role of the herald of good tidings found in Second Isaiah (e.g., Isaiah 40:9; 41:27; 52:7). Bradley (2007:181) suggests that, in taking up the language used by the Servant of Second Isaiah to comfort the Babylonian exiles, the enigmatic figure or prophet of 61:1 performs the same ministry – only this time to the post-exilic community in Palestine.

#### **6.3.2. The ministry of Yahweh's agent**

The prophet is described as being sent by God "to herald good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Yahweh's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn"

(61:1-2). According to Bradley (2007:481) many interpreters view the recipients of this ministry primarily as those who are suffering from socioeconomic oppression. Those whom the writer designates as “poor” are those who are financially destitute and unable to lift themselves out of their poverty. As already alluded to above, this situation more often than not results from unjust social structures that allow the wealthy and powerful to take advantage of the poor (cf. Isaiah 3:14; 10:2; Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4-6). Likewise, “the brokenhearted” are often understood in a similar manner as the poor i.e., as those who are without hope because of their situation.

The socioeconomic aspect of this ministry is most clearly in view in the second set of infinitives: “to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” The liberty that is proclaimed is for those who have been sold into indentured service because of debts. The absence of a Jewish monarchy in post-exilic Palestine presumably created a situation where those who controlled the temple system enjoyed an enormous amount of socioeconomic power. It is this imbalance of power and the resulting exploitation that underlie the declarations in Isaiah 61:1-3.40 (Bradley, 2007:482).<sup>47</sup>

Many interpreters, however, including a number of those who still hold that the primary background of the passage is socioeconomic in nature, have also noted that there are religious dimensions to these descriptions of the recipients. Blenkinsopp (2003:224) notes that “By the time of writing...the terms in question (*ānāwim*, *āniyyim*) had acquired a broader and specifically religious connotation without losing their basic sense of economic deprivation, marginalization, and exploitation.” This religious dimension of the poor is seen throughout the Psalms (e.g. Psalms 22:27; 69:33; 72:2, 4, 12; 109:16, 22) and shows up in a later portion of Third Isaiah (66:2). Similarly, God is especially close to the brokenhearted (Psalms 34:18; 51:19) and the binding of the brokenhearted is something that God does when he restores Jerusalem and gathers the exiles (Psalm 147:3) (Bradley, 2007:482).

It was observed earlier that the prophetic figure of Isaiah 61 conceived of himself, his community, and his mission in terms that are drawn from Second Isaiah. Yet, says Bradley (2007:181), the notion that the prophet has simply transferred prophecies concerning the release from exile to the righting of a non-ideal socioeconomic situation in the post-exilic period is only partially correct. Third Isaiah also perceived a theological continuity between Israel’s situation and his own situation. In post-exilic Israel the same kinds of sins that led them into exile in the first place (cf. Isaiah 5) were widely practiced. Debt-slavery, the metaphor for exile in Second Isaiah, was a concrete problem in the prophet’s own post-exilic situation.

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<sup>47</sup> A minority of interpreters holds that these terms refer not to an inner-community conflict between the powerful and the oppressed but to the entire Jewish community under foreign rule (Bradley, 2007:482).

Bradley (2007:487) also argues that Third Isaiah saw a typological relationship between his situation and the setting of previous Hebrew texts that recount Israel's enslavement in Egypt and their captivity in Babylon. The author of Third Isaiah does not seem to see the situation in post-exilic Palestine as appreciably better than the situation in Babylon. In both cases Israel remains "shackled" because of sin and in both Israel awaits deliverance by Yahweh.

Bradley (2007:488) further notes that the prescriptions for the jubilee year have been eschatologized. By employing a typological relationship between the individual Israelite of Leviticus 25 and the entire postexilic community, Third Isaiah has moved the concept of the jubilee from a legal prescription to a prophetic-theological concept whereby the jubilee is indicative of eschatological deliverance, the same kind of hermeneutical move found in other Second Temple texts. Wright concurs but maintains that the jubilee could still function to justify ethical challenges for human justice to the oppressed in the present. At the level of fairly explicit allusion and implicit influence, says Wright (2006:301-302), the jubilee serves both as a symbol of future hope and also as an ethical demand in the present.

## **6.4 Exegeses of Luke 4:16-21**

### **6.4.1 The text: Luke 4:16-21**

16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

### **6.4.2 The setting of Luke 4:18-19**

Luke 4: 18-19 is part of the dramatic account of Jesus' return to his hometown, where on the Sabbath he proclaims a message of grace (4:22) which was met with rejection by the people of Nazareth. Many have highlighted the programmatic significance of the Nazareth pericope in the Gospel of Luke i.e., Jesus' quotation of the Isaianic prophecies it is said, presents a charter and programme mandate for everything that follows. As Luke has shaped his narrative then, the

ministry of Jesus in Nazareth at the outset of his public ministry is of central importance to the Gospel as whole, and thus also to Luke-Acts. It defines to a significant extent the nature of Jesus' ministry (Green, 1997:207).

Most commentators recognize that the combined prophetic texts of Isaiah 58:6; 61:1–2 quoted by Jesus' were inspired by Jubilee themes. It is the dominant motif in Luke 4:18-19 (now declared by Jesus as fulfilled). This is evidenced by the repeated use of the term "release" and completed by the classic Jubilee phrase "the Year of the Lord's favour". The term "release" (*aphesis*) represents the primary theological and verbal connection with the Levitical proclamation of Jubilee. Horsley describes the biblical Jubilee as a time for the cancellation of debts, releasing of prisoners and the returning of people to their family inheritance as provided for in Leviticus 25. In other words the offer of a new life made possible by the chance to start over "economically."

It must be said at the outset that Horsley does not engage in any detailed verse by verse exegesis of the texts that will be examined below. This could be attributed to his interest and orientation and aim of unfolding the concrete social realities "behind the text" rather than the theological meaning of it. Horsley seems to be suggesting this when he states that in discussing texts related to the "poor" one should assume that Jesus' preaching and practice referred to the several inseparable areas of life. This interpretative principle Horsley (1987:249) insists, is crucial unless a particular passage gives a clear indication that "primarily or only a religious" dimension is intended

Horsley (1987:250-251) notes that a careful comparison of Luke 4:18-19 with Isaiah 61:1-2 shows that a clear principle of inclusion and exclusion was involved well before Luke's use of the tradition. Included from Isaiah 61:1-2 were the clauses "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind..." and "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Excluded from Isaiah 61:1-2 were the clauses about "binding up the brokenhearted" and "comforting all who mourn," along with that about God's "day of vengeance." Substituted from Isaiah, 58:6d was the clause "to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

Horsley sees this hermeneutical development as an important clue to how Luke understood Jesus' ministry. Significant for him are the three clauses referring to the liberation of the poor and prisoners that were supplemented from elsewhere in Isaiah (58:6d) by another reference to release of the oppressed. This leads Horsley (1987:251) to conclude "that someone very early made a selection of clauses from Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6 to point out precisely the ways in which

Jesus' practice and preaching were fulfilling long-standing expectation for social-economic liberation".

### 6.4.3. The year of Jubilee

According to Seccombe (2000:159-160) it is not known for how long the jubilee lasted as a social phenomenon in Israel. He suspects the jubilee became "impractical". The invasions and deportations that plagued Israelite society in the eighth and sixth centuries would have made the determination of land ownership difficult. Nevertheless, the jubilee did survive as a future expectation when God would act to restore the fortunes of his people. This "great jubilee" would be a time for the forgiveness of sin. It would also mean the return from exile, the destruction of all the oppressive powers and the restoration of the people's lands. There's even evidence for this view among the Qumranites (11Q Melchizedek) and other Jews of the first century.

Horsley (1987:521) thinks it unlikely that Jesus called for or proclaimed the implementation of the explicit provisions of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25. However, he does find evidence in Josephus that suggests concrete expectations of "jubilee" by the Jews at the time of Jesus. He believes this should provide a context for investigating how concretely Jesus speaks about forgiving debts.

Horsley (1987:252) also claims that the seventh or sabbatical year as a fallow year for the fields was officially organized and practiced. The observance of the sabbatical fallow year was a serious factor in the outcome of a war (Josephus *Ant.* 12.378; 13.234; 14.475; 15.7). It had to be taken into account in the Romans demand for tribute (Josephus *Ant.* 14.202, 206). The sabbatical year sometimes had disastrous effects for marginal peasant households especially when it occurred during a crisis such as a war or drought (as was the case in 47-48 CE). This led to severe famine, dramatic escalation in indebtedness, and loss of land.

Furthermore, says Horsley (1987:252), the sabbatical cancellation of debts was taken seriously enough to require legal accommodation. The creation of the *prosbul* suggests the lawyers and apparently priestly establishment took the provision in the Torah seriously enough to use this legal device in order to avoid actually implementing the provisions of the sabbatical year i.e., the cancellation of debts.

Horsley (1987:253) says even though it is doubtful that the wealthy and powerful would have backed official observance of the provisions of Leviticus 25, there is evidence in Josephus that the cancellation of debts and the release of prisoners remained alive as a popular hope or yearning. An example of this "revolutionary" implementation of the provisions of the Torah was

during the great revolt against Rome which indicates that these hopes could inspire action. At that time the popular forces set fire to the public archives in order to destroy the money-lenders' bonds and to prevent the recovery of debts. This they did in order to "win over a host of grateful debtors and to cause a rising of the poor against the rich" (Josephus War 2.426-427). The intensity of the yearning for debt-relief and the serious scope of popular indebtedness is further attested by Simon bar Giora's "proclamation of liberty for slaves and rewards for the free" (Josephus War 4.508), a phrase that points to the release of debt slaves according to the ideal derived from the Torah (Exodus 21:2-6; Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Leviticus 25:39-43) and kept alive in prophetic expectations (e.g., Isaiah 61:1-2) (Horsley, 1987:252-253).

Thus, for Horsley (1987:251), the jubilee Jesus spoke of had little to do with the "spiritual forgiveness of sin" or some future eschatological expectation. Rather, he finds in Josephus evidence of concrete examples that indicate an intense longing for debt relief and the release of prisoners during the first century. Against this background Jesus' talk of jubilee has to do with that popular hope and yearning for social-economic liberation. Jubilee was for Jesus very much a social and economic institution. Jesus taught his followers and the communities to which he ministered to the importance of not holding grudges but to forgive each other's debts.

Horsley's (1987:251) interpretation of the Jesus' Nazareth sermon is clearly orientated towards seeing jubilee phenomena in concrete social terms rather than in theological terms. In fact, he says the Lord's Prayer must also be seen in precisely in these concrete terms: "release for us [forgive us] our debts, as we have released [forgiven] our debtors." He interprets the term *οφειδῶν* (debts) as referring to one's economic or other legal obligations (e.g., Matthew 18:24-33; Luke 7:41; 16:5.7). The verb *φημι* (as well as the *φειςις*) means "release" and is the same term as that used for the "release" of captives and the "setting at liberty" of the oppressed in Luke 4:18 (Isaiah 61:1; 58:6). Horsley says the fact that this petition occurs in the context of a prayer for the kingdom alongside the petition concerning bread confirms the concreteness of the reference (Horsley, 1987:254).

#### **6.4.4 Assessment**

Horsley's reading of Jesus' Nazareth sermon in concrete terms is meant to present an alternative to the traditional interpretations. The traditional interpretations have either ignored or downplayed the historical and concrete dimensions of this text. This underplaying, it is said, springs from a desire on the part of interpreters to preserve certain dogmatic and theological views on the nature of biblical texts.

One example of this traditional tendency to ignore the historical and social dimensions of this

text is seen in Geldenhuys (1988). While one would not want to dispute his theological treatment of this text, one cannot but help notice what amounts to be an “overemphasis” on the “spiritual” nature of the contents of the text. Geldenhuys (1988:168) writes concerning Jesus ministry according to Luke 4:81:

”God had sent Him to heal those who were broken-hearted and found themselves in spiritual distress; to proclaim deliverance to those who were captives to the power of sin and in spiritual wretchedness; to give back to the spiritually blind the power of sight; to cause those who were downcast and inwardly bruised to go forward in triumph; and thus to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” i.e. to announce the Messianic age-the period ushered in by His appearance, in which God will grant His salvation to His people.”

In his exegesis no mention is made of anything that has to do with the literal or social aspects of the text. One is left with the impression that Jesus simply used words like “poor”, “brokenhearted,” “release” and so forth merely as spiritual metaphors without any reference to anything concrete at all. Such an abstract, almost allegorical reading of a key Lucan text is inadequate, especially in the light of Luke’s consistent portrayal of Jesus as one who cares and ministers to the physical needs of the poor in his Gospel. Horsley’s protest must be seen against the background of this type of reading.

Furthermore, Geldenhuys’s reading also ignores Jesus’ “deliberate” insertion of Isaiah 58:6 - an act which, according to Wright (1996:295), appears to encourage a reading beyond the metaphorical and eschatological dimensions. This phrase with its distinctly social profile stands in the context of prophetic criticism of the social discrepancies in Judah i.e., of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. In this context, the “oppressed” or “bruised” or “broken victims” of Isaiah 58:6 were the economically ruined, those who had become bonded slaves and had no hope of ever again escaping from the throttling grip of poverty. Only a Jubilee, a “year of the Lord’s favor”, could provide them with a way out of their misery. There is no reason to think that Jesus would have thought of it very differently.

Luke, says Hertig (1989:vii), will not allow us to interpret this jubilee language as “flowery metaphors or spiritual allegories.” Jesus fulfilled the Jubilee that he proclaimed. His radical mission was the very mission of God found in the Old Testament proclamation of Jubilee. Hertig adds that Jesus’ mission is presented in Luke as holistic in four aspects:

It is both proclaimed and enacted.

It is both spiritual and physical.  
 It is both for Israel and the nations  
 It is both present and eschatological.

Horsley, therefore, is right in highlighting the historical context and the concrete character of Jesus' words. Horsley's downplaying and even denial of the theological and spiritual dimensions of the text, however, makes him just as vulnerable to the charge of reductionism as those whom he criticizes. He too has failed to adequately account for and integrate both the theological and social dimensions of these texts in a manner that reflects their holistically orientated first century biblical worldview.

Sloan (1977:178) expresses this interrelationship and integrated nature between the "spiritual" and "literal" well in his discussion on the meaning of the word *aphesis* in Jesus' sermon. He pointed out that Jesus' use of the word for "release," *aphesis*, carries both the sense of spiritual forgiveness of sin and also literal and financial remission of actual debts. Thus, the original jubilee background of economic release has been preserved in Jesus' challenge concerning ethical response to the kingdom of God. If we are to pray the Lord's Prayer, "release for us our debts," we must be willing to release others from theirs.

Sloan (1977:55-58) further suggests that Leviticus 25 does not separate the ceremonial and social elements of jubilee. There is in fact an inextricable relationship between the two. He adds that "it is precisely in the performing of the prescribed acts of social restoration, release, and redemption that the cultus of the jubilee is fulfilled".

As far as the identity of the "poor" is concerned, Horsley (1987:225) correctly notes that Jesus' message is not addressed to those who merely suffer from spiritual poverty or only those who stand as humble supplicants before God. Rather, the "poor" refer to the destitute as a type of people somewhat parallel to the blind, cripples, and such; or more likely it is a general term including the blind, cripples, and all others who are oppressed, desperate, hopeless, and unable to defend and perhaps to support themselves.

"Poor", it seems is a broad statement for Jesus as it was for Isaiah. Jesus, following the Old Testament use of the word "poor", uses the expression "good news to the poor" as a summary statement for the more concrete examples that follow in Luke 4:18. "Recovering of sight" is good news for the poor who are blind, "release for the poor" for those who are in fetters or oppressed. A similar structure can be seen in the Beatitudes. The summary statement is "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). The other beatitudes are specific examples of the more general opening statement (Green, 1994:68).

The term “poor” also functions as a heading for similar lists of weak ones in Luke 14:13, 21 and 16:20, 22. In each case, “poor” stands at the head of the list, except in 7:22. Jesus’ answer to John the Baptist in Luke 7 exhibits the same broad definition: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up; the poor have good news preached to them” (v.22). Here, it appears in the final, emphatic position. As such it interprets and is amplified by the others (Green, 1994:68).

These texts then should not be over-spiritualized, so that the poor cease to be a point of focus. Traditional interpretations have too often ignored the sociological element in this description. This description by Jesus applies because it is the “poor” in general who sense their need in the greatest way and, as a result respond most directly and honestly to Jesus. They characterize concretely the person in need. Their material deprivation often translates into spiritual sensitivity, humility and responsiveness to God’s message of hope. The message is offered to them and they tend to be the most responsive to it (Bock, 1994:408).

It is also important that the images of Luke 4 not be treated as individual promises and broken up from each other so that one isolates social elements from spiritual elements. Bock (1994:400) is right in saying the imagery operates as a unit, picturing the totality of Jesus’ deliverance. All the images have to do with the comprehensiveness of Jesus’ message and the hope that he offers people. Thus, any attempt to underplay the spiritual connection in deference to more sociological emphases as Horsley does, is to break up these categories. In doing this, Horsley contradicts his own integrationist and holistic approach. Esler (1987:183) says the Lucan Jesus promises to alleviate the extreme physical deprivation suffered by the beggars, the blind, the lame, the imprisoned and so forth, without, however, ignoring the spiritual aspects of salvation.

It is not a matter of deciding between a spiritual and a material meaning, for both can be included as appropriate. If the Exodus was God’s idea of redemption, the jubilee was God’s idea of restoration. Both are equally holistic. That is, the jubilee is concerned for the whole range of a person’s social and economic need. However, it cannot be understood and practiced without attention to the theological and spiritual principles that are intrinsic to it (Wright, 2006:290).

The religious and theological language and dimensions that are so fundamental to the biblical jubilee notion simply cannot be screened out. The jubilee took its name from the great ram’s horn called a “jobel” which was blown on the Day of Atonement (at the end of the forty-ninth year) to announce the beginning of the jubilee. As Seccombe (2000:159) notes:...”the

commencement of the jubilee on the Day of Atonement established a connection between God's forgiveness of the people's sins, the release of slaves, cancellation of debts, and the restoration of land to its proper owners". There is a theological dimension here that is impossible to ignore or to explain in "purely sociological categories."

As far as Jesus' audience is concerned, the picture should also not be pressed in exclusively material or sociological terms. The history of Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 61 shows that by the first century this text was seen to picture the dawning of the new eschatological age. That this interpretation of the passage also continued in rabbinic Judaism suggests that this interpretation is old and deeply rooted in the tradition. Thus, when one cited Isaiah 61, the audience would think immediately of the coming of God's new age of salvation. Jesus proclaims himself to be the bearer of this new age (Seccombe (2000:159). The audience is not described in purely socio-political terms. What is in view is both a spiritual and social transformation in a new community. Jubilee, then, has implications both for the present and future. It is a programme relevant to the present structures as well to the future dawning of a new age.

For Seccombe (2003:161; 163), Jesus declared nothing less than the long-awaited restoration of Israel: "...the end of Gentile domination, of satanic domination, the gathering of the dispersed exiles and the destruction of all oppressive structures - political, social, economic and spiritual - in an ultimate jubilee of divine forgiveness and reconciliation."

Jubilee, then, is ceremonial and eschatological as well as socially relevant. But there is also a spiritual element of faith tied to jubilee. Only faith in the provision of Yahweh could allow people to let the land lie fallow for a full year. Only faith could meet the jubilee demands for detachment from material things through the release of property and slaves (Hertig, 1989:24).

According to Sharon Ringe (1985:32) the jubilee affirms two things. The first is that God is sovereign over Israel, both in actual fact and in eschatological hope. The second is that the structures of economic and social life must embody the people's affirmation of God's sovereignty. God's reign and humankind's liberation go hand in hand. Therefore, in that sense jubilee was to be a joyous response of Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Leviticus 25:28). Israel was to institutionalize the kind of grace that God had given to them. Jubilee portrays the biblical vision of spiritual and social integration. There are no two separate compartments for religion and economics.

## 6.5 Exegesis of Luke 6:20-26

### 6.5.1 The text: 6:20-26

20 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

22 “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!

23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

26 “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

### 6.5.2. The setting of the sermon

Luke's account of the beatitudes, also known as the ‘Sermon on the Plain’ is found in the sixth chapter of his Gospel. It is a much shorter version than the more popular “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew’s Gospel. Concerning the two different texts Marshall (1987: 243) writes: “It is generally accepted that one basic piece of tradition underlies the two sermons and that both evangelists (and possibly their predecessors in the transmission of the material) have expanded it and modeled it in accord with their own purposes”. Luke though, may have preserved the core sermon from Q relatively intact, while Matthew has augmented it greatly (Blomberg, 1997:245).

It is obvious that the Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16-30) paves the way for the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel. There are also clear verbal and conceptual parallels that tie both sermons from Luke 4 and 6 together with Isaiah 61:1-3 and 58:6-10. The opening announcement of the kingdom message that good news comes to the poor (*οἱ πτωχοί*) has its parallel in the first beatitude in which Jesus declares a blessing on the poor who belong to the kingdom of God (4:18; 6:20; Isaiah 61:1). Thus both sermons start with the poor as the point of reference in as far as the preaching of the good news is concerned.

The language and thought content of the sermon reflects that of Isaiah 61. Those who “hunger” (Luke 6:21) can be recognized in Isaiah 61:5, 6 (even 58:6-7). The third beatitude referring to “you who weep” (6:21b) is clearly linked to Isaiah 61:2, “to comfort all who mourn”. Furthermore

the promise of future laughter (6:21) in the third beatitude and the summons to “rejoice in that day” (6:23) parallel the mood of Isaiah 61:3 which speaks of “the oil of gladness” and “a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair”. The motifs of eschatological release (jubilee) and reversal are clearly dominant in both Isaiah and Luke (Sloan, 1977:107).

Sloan (1977:123-27) observes how the focus of the Lucan Beatitudes on the externally afflicted has their point of reference in the first beatitude, the “poor”. This means that Luke's account is “completely consistent with the metaphor of jubilee in Isaiah 61:1f” since there will be a coming release (deliverance) from external difficulties for the oppressed, i.e. an “eschatological reversal of fortunes”.

### **6.5.3. Horsley's view of the Sermon on the Plain**

According to Horsley the beatitudes in Luke 6:20-21, although principally an announcement of blessings, also indicate those to whom Jesus directed his ministry. They show either directly or by memory that Jesus offered the kingdom to the poor as opposed to the wealthy (Luke 6:24-25a).

Horsley's assumption that Jesus' preaching and practice referred to the several inseparable areas of life was already referred to earlier in this chapter. This interpretative principle, Horsley insists, is crucial unless a particular passage gives a clear indication that “primarily or only a religious” dimension is intended. This is especially so in view of passages such as the beatitudes, which according to him may already have been somewhat “spiritualized” in the Gospels (Horsley, 1987:249).

Nevertheless, although Matthew has spiritualized his account there's no real contradiction with Luke's account (Horsley, 1987:225). Horsley believes Matthew's more spiritualized wording does not significantly change the meaning from that of the more original form in Luke 6:20-21 and Q. He sees Matthew's use of the term “poor” as a general reference to those who are actually struggling for existence. These poor also include, or at least overlap with “the hungry” and “the mournful”. Hence, according to Horsley, the blessings of the kingdom here are promised to the concretely, economically poor and hungry.

The second beatitude is also addressed to those who would have been in state of poverty: “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied” (v21). Matthew differs from Luke in adding “and thirsts after righteousness” after “hunger”. Horsley (1987:253) suggests that the words “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are potentially more inclusive than “the hungry”. Underlying the “hunger for righteousness” or rather “justice” (in a peasant ethos in

which most peasant families have a subsistence living at best) would have been, directly or indirectly, the experience of or anxiety about physical hunger (Horsley, 1987:249).

Horsley (1987:250) says that even if Matthew's "poor in spirit" was inspired by the ideology of the *ānāwim*, it still refers to a community that is relatively poor, and would highlight the reality of the poor to whom Jesus promised the kingdom. Sociologically Horsley (1987:225-226) places the "poor" of Luke 6:20 and 7:22 in the context of an oppressed and suffering Jewish peasantry. More narrowly the term also refers to those absolutely destitute because they have lost all means of living. He believes these passages provide indirect evidence for the identity of the followers of Jesus, as well as an indication of the social context in which Jesus' ministry and nascent movement took shape: that is, among the common people or peasantry

#### 6.5.4 Assessment

The question whether or not Jesus was referring here to the spiritually poor or the physically poor has dominated discussions on the beatitudes for many years. The Greek word employed by Luke is *πτωχός*, a term that referred to someone not just below the poverty line but 'utterly destitute'. In the Septuagint, *πτωχός* often translates the Hebrew *ānāwim*, which we discussed earlier in conjunction with Isaiah 61:1. In that setting, *πτωχός* is not merely a socioeconomic term, but also has spiritual content, as its attachment to other ideas in the context makes clear (Blomberg, 1999:128).

The second and third beatitudes deal with some of the consequences of being among the poor: 'hunger and sadness'. The poor and the hungry are often paired in the Old Testament (Isaiah. 32:6-7; 58:6-7, 9-10; Ezekiel 18:7, 16). They are also often addressed in comforting terms (Psalms 37: 16-19; 107:9; 132:15; 146:7; Isaiah 49:9-10; 55:1-2). Bock (1994:575) notes that it is important to understand "the hungry" as having both "socioeconomic and religious overtones". The removal of either element usually results in interpretive errors.

The background of often equating the 'pious' and the 'poor' most probably accounts for the difference between Luke's "you who are poor" (Luke 6:20) and Matthew's "the poor in spirit" (Matthew. 5:3). Most scholars agree that there is no significant disagreement between the two evangelists in regard to the description of the "poor". Rather the variation in wording reflects their 'different emphasis' of a term that had both a material and a spiritual dimension to it (Blomberg, 1999:128).

On the use of *πτωχός* in the context of Luke 6, Guelich (1982:67-72) notes that while the term *πτωχός* is exclusively socioeconomic in Greek literature, its association with the kingdom of

God in 6:20 brings in an eschatological flavor that shows it does not merely repeat the pure Greek sense. Furthermore, *πτωχός* translates six Hebrew terms, the most common being *ʾāni* (poor), which has both socioeconomic and religious connotations that suggest a reference to the pious poor, who look to and depend on God (Psalms 14:6; 22:24; 25:16).

The term is best taken as a general description, rather than as a specific sociological reference. Guelich's (1982:69) summary definition is helpful: "The poor in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socio-economic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supplying of their needs and vindication." Both elements are consistently present, although *ʾānāwīm* does place more stress on the latter (Bock, 1994:574).

Horsley is right to note that the poor in Luke often stand in favorable contrast to the rich (1:52-53; 16:19-31). Luke 19: 1-10 seems to qualify the negative portrait of the rich (so also 7:1- 10). In this passage Zaccheus is received by Jesus and pictured as blessed by God because he now has become fair in his tax gathering, has given restitution for his wrong, and has become generous with his wealth. Thus, contrary to Horsley's somewhat blanket distinctions of rich and poor, Luke 19 shows that Jesus sees these groups not as absolute, impregnable categories.

Also, a closer reading of 6:20 in its context shows that the religious relationship is not missing. Jesus addresses the disciples who are persecuted because of the Son of Man (6:22). When this is placed next to Luke's first reference to the poor in 4:18 in terms of Isaiah 61:1, then a spiritual dimension for the poor in 6:20 is guaranteed (Bock, 1994:574). Moreover, verses 22 and 23 show that Luke definitely saw a spiritual alongside the material component to those whom Jesus blesses in his beatitudes: "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man" (Blomberg, 1999:129). It is clear here that Jesus' message and benefits are not given *carte-blanc* to the poor, but are related to their developing a proper response to him. A strictly material and political interpretation of these verses ignores this crucial spiritual element.

On the other hand, it is significant that the poor get singled out as a particularly appropriate audience for the gospel. The "poor" in Luke 6:20 then, is a broad statement for Jesus just as it was for Isaiah. The term is the same one used back in chapter four (verse 18). The summary statement here is "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). The other beatitudes are specific examples of the more general opening statement. Thus the "poor" are blessed not because it is a blessing to be poor. The cry of the "poor" is answered by the kingdom of God, which brings hope and the end of all misery. The "poor" are blessed - that is, congratulated since their misfortune causes them to perceive God more clearly and to

respond to God's will. Their need constitutes a prerequisite for the kingdom. Broer (1980:120) speaks about “a state of mind that exists among the poor”. The poor are almost always “poor in spirit”; the poor in spirit are almost always the “poor”.

Although the identity of the rich in Luke's woes has not received the same amount of attention as the poor, the attempts to define Luke's poor may be enhanced by looking at the identity of the “rich”. The Old Testament term for rich *āšir* conveys the idea of fatness, abundance, plenty. The root-idea emphasizes especially the physical aspect of the rich man as fat, well-fed; one who shines with prosperity. *Πλούσιοι*, the word used here for the rich is used 53 times in the LXX and translates the Hebrew *āšir*.

Topel (2001:116) says whether the attitude is approving or condemnatory, the word always refers to the economically rich. He notes that there's no LXX use of *πλούσιοι* meaning “spiritually wealthy”, nor does the adjective refer to God's enemies without reference to economic status. It seems fair to say then that if someone was rich, they had a surplus of goods. Conversely, if someone was poor, then they were lacking in material means. Jesus therefore must have been speaking to and directing his words at those living in some type of physical poverty. The stark contrasting language and imagery of the blessings and woes certainly makes sense from this perspective.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) is perhaps the best example of the beatitude and woe of Luke 6:20, 24 (Pilgrim, 1981:115). In this parable Lazarus is called *πτωχός* and is graphically described as so poor that he is starving. But it is Lazarus the “poor man” who will be rewarded eschatologically in the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man will be forever in torment. The reason is that the rich have had their reward on this earth: those who are poor now will be rich later (16:25). The good news to the poor is that they will ultimately share an eternal reward. But Luke also implies the other face of the good news to the poor: if the rich listened to Moses and the prophets (16:29), or to John the Baptist (3:10-11), or to Jesus (6:20:14:13), they would share their riches with the poor, thus alleviating their poverty already, in this life (Topel, 2001:79).

James (5:1-6) also uses the “woes” against the *πλούσιοι*, the wealthy landowners who failed to pay the subsistence wages of the largely poor day labourers. The matter here is clearly one of social injustice and concrete poverty.

It seems best then to heed the warning by Bruner (1987:135): “If we say that blessed are the poor in spirit means blessed are the rich too, if they act humbly”, we have spiritualized the text. On the other hand, if we say “blessed are the poor” means “poor people are happy people, “we

have secularized the text. Jesus said something incorporating Matthew's spirituality and Luke's sociality with the best of each".

## 6.6. Summary

The aim of this chapter was to establish whether there was any evidence for a "social and political" reading of Jesus' words and ministry. In other words, is it legitimate for Horsley argue for Jesus as a radical social prophet on the basis of the texts examined above?

In order to answer that question the brief examination of the relevant Isaianic texts revealed the following. The "poor" in the book of Isaiah are not only those who suffer from "religious and spiritual" poverty, nor does it refer exclusively to "social" and "economic" oppression. The "poor" in Isaiah are those who suffer from all kinds of physical and spiritual weaknesses, hardships and afflictions. Suffering is a common feature that permeates the experience of the poor described not only in Isaiah but the whole of the Old Testament.

The much debated word *anawim* is a general word with varying shades of meaning. An exclusively religious interpretation of this word can only be maintained by denying the often physical and material afflictions that often accompany it. Indeed this interrelationship between the physical and spiritual dimensions of suffering is a common feature of ancient Hebrew Old Testament words.

It seems then that in the Old Testament there's often a connection between material need and physical weakness and a spiritual recognition of one's need for God's help. The poor being in a lowly position due to some kind of affliction or oppression may look to God for help. As the experience of poverty lead the *anawim* to submit to God and His Word, they are closer to God than their rich compatriots (Liu, 1986:44). Similarly, there is a connection between accumulating wealth and spiritual pride, which God resolutely opposes (see, e.g., Isaiah 2:6-22).

In the book of Isaiah the theme of poverty, especially poverty that was brought on through acts of injustice and other forms of oppression, form an important part of the prophet's critique of Israelite society. God is not only described as the King but also the Saviour, protector and guardian of the "poor", the weak and those subjected to all forms of oppression and injustice.

In Isaiah 61 that role is fulfilled by the Lord's Anointed One who, amidst the despair and tragedy of post-exilic Israel, brings good news to the destitute poor, the oppressed and those imprisoned because of prevailing injustices. Though in this passage the poor are viewed primarily in social and economic terms, there are also religious aspects and dimensions at play

in their description.

In Luke's Gospel that role of comforter and herald of the good news is fulfilled by Jesus. He too offers the kingdom to the "poor" in the present and promises that there will be an ultimate eschatological reversal of roles. Jesus' offer of the kingdom to the poor posed a radical challenge to the conventional norms of a society that had relegated the poor and marginalized to the periphery. It is to these "little ones" that he reached out to and it is among them that he performs wonders and healing miracles.

Jesus ministered to the needs of the whole person. Any one-sided emphasis will simply lead to major interpretive errors. The fact of the matter is that the ancient biblical worldview did not discriminate between the different areas of life in the same way modern people do. The separation of the different spheres of life is a modern phenomenon that is thoroughly alien to the "holistic" worldview of Jesus' day. The only way to do justice to these texts then, is to interpret them holistically in a way that integrates the theological and the historical, the spiritual as well as the social.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter will summarize and highlight some of the major conclusions made in the previous chapters. It will also look at the challenges and the implications Horsley's work poses for theology, the Church and Christian discipleship.

The aim of this study was to examine and critically assess Horsley's presentation of Jesus as 'radical social prophet'. In other words, looking at whether there is enough evidence in the available biblical and extra biblical sources for seeing Jesus as radical social prophet.

The study began with a historical survey on the origins and historical development of the sociological or social scientific method. The purpose of this was not only to enable us to appreciate the social, historical and theological motivations that gave rise to the sociological exegesis of the Bible but also to locate and situate the origins and background of Horsley's method.

We saw how this method arose out of protest against the dominance of theological and related concerns that undermined the sociological aspects of biblical texts. Here we noted that proponents of the sociological method, including Horsley, believe that it offered the prospects for a better appreciation of the historical, social, and cultural setting of the bible figures.

The third chapter sought to explore Horsley's method and presuppositions. This investigation revealed Horsley's total rejection of the established conventional approaches used by traditional scholarship. He opts for an interdisciplinary approach that would yield a more holistic picture of the different dimensions of the biblical texts.

Chapter four naturally followed on from the discussion of Horsley's preference for an interdisciplinary method in chapter three. Here the focus turned to Horsley's construction of the historical, social and economic conditions that prevailed during the first century CE. Horsley, who has done more work in this area of New Testament studies than most scholars and has made a huge contribution to our understanding of the first century Jewish world, has shown convincingly that Jesus lived in a society with some pressing social, economic and political matters. This desperate situation, according to Horsley, was created by the onset of Roman 'colonial', imperial rule in first century Palestine. Jesus then, was concerned with the historical direction of the Jewish nation – so much so that he died the death of one who supposedly posed a political

threat to the imperial authorities. Horsley's work in this area has highlighted the importance for current approaches to account for the dialectical relationship and interaction between religion and society, so that a more coherent picture of the context for the origins of early Christianity would emerge.

In chapter five Horsley's view of the kingdom of God came under the spotlight. It was noted that Horsley sees the kingdom as essentially non-eschatological. It was not a spiritualized heaven but the use of power to liberate in a social-historical way. The kingdom of God Jesus spoke about was not other-worldly but rather a historical affair that was intimately connected to the realities of this life. Horsley's focus on placing Jesus squarely within his first century historical milieu is a welcome corrective to the many exclusively and narrowly focused religious readings on Jesus' life and ministry.

This part of the study has also highlighted the importance of balancing the spiritual character of the kingdom with the physical and material concerns. Jesus' piety is not divorced from his concern for the material well-being of people.

Another important aspect that Horsley has consistently and adequately established is the interrelationship and embeddedness of religion, politics and economics. In Jesus' day spirituality was not a private matter but a very public one. This however, was done at the expense of the theological dimensions of the biblical texts - which is unfortunate and unnecessary. Perhaps a more balanced approach would have done more justice to both the theological and the social dimensions of the biblical text.

In chapter six an examination of a selection of relevant biblical texts that served as Horsley's basis for his thesis on seeing Jesus as radical social prophet was made. Horsley's fundamental argument from the Lucan texts was that Jesus offered the kingdom to the poor and at the same time condemned the rich and powerful. Like the prophets of old Jesus opposed the existing religious, political and economic arrangements which kept the majority of people in poverty. Jesus' teaching and practice of the kingdom was counter cultural and subversive of the *status quo*.

The "poor", it was observed, cannot be treated as mere 'spiritual metaphors' or as a purely 'sociological grouping'. It is a broad term that includes both sociological as well as spiritual elements. The Jubilee text in Luke 4.18 portrays the biblical vision of spiritual and social integration. It is concerned with the whole range of a person's social, economic and spiritual need. It cannot be understood and practiced without attention to its theological and spiritual principles that are intrinsic to it.

This study has found that there certainly is adequate grounds for seeing Jesus fulfilling the role of a “radical social prophet” in the same manner as the Old Testament prophets. This is especially evident when one takes into account Jesus’ words and pronouncements in that highly charged atmosphere of first century Palestine. Far from seeing him as merely concerned with spiritual matters and the forgiveness of individual sins, Jesus should rather be seen as being in line with his own Old Testament Jewish traditions and great figures that condemned the exploitation and neglect of the poor and vulnerable.

However, Horsley’s proposal and presentation of Jesus’ role as social prophet lacks that religious and theological edge that surely must be part of any attempt to describe the role and life of the man from Nazareth. This study then reveals that Horsley’s notion of Jesus as radical social prophet is incomplete since it fails to account for the theological nature and mission of Jesus.

While Horsley is certainly right in bringing to fore the social and material dimensions he also consistently minimizes the spiritual aspects of the kingdom in Jesus’ preaching. Just because Jesus’ ministry had a social component does not mean it was not theological also. Horsley’s limiting of Jesus’ manifestation of the kingdom of God to the social realm and the exclusion of the religious clearly goes against the overwhelming biblical evidence.

Nevertheless, Horsley’s portrait of Jesus merits greater attention since it can serve as a “corrective” to a long history of traditional Christianity and theological scholarship that has abstracted Jesus from his historical and social Jewish background. Its usefulness lies in its emphasis on the economic, social and political dimensions of Jesus and the Gospels.

## **7.2. Implications for Christian living and discipleship**

### **7.2.1. The challenge to scholarship**

It is easy to dismiss Horsley and other liberationist proponents as Marxists communists who reduce the gospel to sociology, economics or politics. However it may be more fruitful to adopt an open and listening attitude. While there is nothing wrong with respecting and preserving one’s traditions and confessions, there is a danger that they limit serious inquiry of the biblical texts. Therefore, it is always helpful to rather pay attention and reflect on viewpoints that are different from our own tradition or culture.

Horsley’s picture does not appeal very much to those who have a high regard for theology and for the Bible as the Word of God. The failure of his sociological method to account for the

human experience of the transcendent is evident in his construction. Nevertheless, Horsley's work has raised some very important and pertinent questions for both scholars of theology and ordinary Christians to ponder. One of these is Horsley's charge that there are some strands of theology that have uncritically assumed some of the values and ideals of their environment and culture without reflecting on the implications of doing this. This calls for self-reflection and self-examination of one's own presuppositions, not so that they fit in with Horsley's project but rather with Scripture.

One of the points laboured by Horsley is the need for approaches that more holistically integrate the historical, theological and social dimensions of the biblical texts. This is a valid point and questions must be asked whether the current set of hermeneutical tools used by scholarship is adequate to capture all the dimensions of the biblical texts. This is important as it will help Christians to apply the Bible more faithfully to all the dimensions of life. But there are also other implications to be drawn from this study of Horsley's work.

### **7.2.2 The importance of the historical Jesus.**

While it is important to state clearly the gospel truth about the divinity of Christ it is equally important to emphasize his humanity. Jesus was a real historical figure who lived at a specific time in a specific context. The Bible is not just a theological but also a historical document. Christianity then is a historical religion. The failure to acknowledge and respect this fact can lead to a form of 'docetic' Christianity as well as other dubious interpretations of Jesus' life and ministry.

### **7.2.3 Dissolving the secular-sacred divide**

The biblical world inhabited by Jesus and his followers did not separate religion and politics. The Bible does not compartmentalize them. The whole of life was lived before God, and God was also involved in affairs of state as affairs of the heart. This is another important aspect that must be brought home to modern Christians, especially the west, with its long Enlightenment secular history and values.

Jesus was certainly concerned about spiritual matters such as sin and salvation. However, it is important to recognize that for Jesus and the Jews of his day sin and salvation were not merely personal and private matters. They understood that it is sin that has created oppressive social and political conditions in the world, and Jesus was certainly concerned about those conditions. Salvation for Jesus was not simply a private, personal affair - it had very definite social and political implications.

#### **7.2.4 A holistic view of the kingdom of God**

Contemporary Christianity needs to cultivate a holistic understanding of the kingdom. This means that we must overcome the errors that see the kingdom of God as something that is completely other-worldly and entirely spiritual without any earthly relevance. In Jesus' understanding the kingdom of God was a far bigger concept - this point has been made repeatedly.

The kingdom of God is far more than simply the attainment of 'personal glory' in a future heaven. It is his dynamic rule that breaks into human history through Jesus, confronting, combating and overcoming evil, spreading the wholeness of personal and communal well-being, taking possession of his people in total blessing and total demand (Stott, 1984:28). The church, therefore, is meant to be the Kingdom community, a model of what human community looks like when it comes under the rule of God, and a challenging alternative to secular society. The future consummation of the kingdom will mean the renewal of the universe and the eradication of sin, pain, futility, disease and death. As Stott (1984:28) puts it, "salvation is a big concept; we have no liberty to reduce it".

#### **7.2.5 Social justice for the poor**

It is clear from this study that God hates injustice and oppression everywhere and that he loves and promotes justice everywhere. We have seen this in Jesus' ministry and actions. If this is God's will and desire, then modern day Christianity should never be found in a place where it blesses or promotes injustice and oppression.

There should be no attempt made to exclude the Lordship of Christ from certain areas of life. God's concerns are all embracing. He is not only the God of the "sacred" but also the "secular"; not only the God who justifies but also the God of social justice. We must not attempt to narrow down his interests to fit in with ours. We should simply follow in his footsteps and imitate him here on earth.

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