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Missional insights on socio-political realities, religious vulnerability, and the choice of Barabbas

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Author:
Ignatius W. Ferreira[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Missiology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Ignatius Ferreira,
naas.ferreira@nwu.ac.za

This article presents a missional perspective on the complex interplay between socio-political realities, religious vulnerability and the formation of political ideologies among Western Christians, drawing insights from the biblical narrative of the choice of Barabbas at Jesus's trial. In today's world, Western Christians are confronted with numerous socio-political challenges that can compromise their spiritual discernment, leading to religious delusion and, potentially, the adoption of politicised ideologies. Through a deep dive into the Jewish choice of Barabbas over Jesus, we seek to unravel the underlying dynamics. By examining the socio-political context of Roman occupation and Jewish societal pressures, we illuminate how these external factors influenced the religious vulnerability of the Jewish people. Furthermore, we explore how this vulnerability manifested in the decision to prefer Barabbas, a figure representing worldly resistance, over Jesus Christ, the embodiment of divine grace. From a missional perspective, we reflect on the implications of this historical event for contemporary Western Christian engagement with socio-political issues. We argue that understanding the delicate interplay between socio-political context, religious vulnerability and political ideology is essential for Western Christians seeking to embody the transformative mission of Christ in today's world.

Contribution: This article contributes to missional theology by offering insights into how believers can navigate socio-political complexities with spiritual discernment and faithful witness.

Keywords: Christendom; missio Dei; Barabbas; Religious delusion; religion and politics; socio political vulnerability.

Introduction

Religious vulnerability of God's chosen people (The Jews – Israel) during the first coming of Jesus Christ

This article[1] is written from a Reformed Biblical perspective. To truly affirm the Bible as God's revelation and deepen our understanding of Jesus Christ, it is essential to engage with the historical narrative of God's redemptive interaction with humanity as recorded in Scripture (Jn 3:16). The Bible reveals the divine story, particularly through God's chosen people, Israel, and invites us to explore the socio-political realities that shaped key moments in Old Testament history. However, the Bible provides limited details on the socio-political landscape of Jewish history between the Babylonian exile (586–539 BCE) and the Roman occupation during Jesus' earthly ministry. Therefore, a concise overview of this period is vital for a fuller grasp of the context into which Jesus Christ was born, in which he lived, taught and carried out his redemptive work until his ultimate trail and crucifixion.

Taking note of the contemporary pursuit of understanding the 'historical Jesus', this article is not questioning His existence in any way but is rather seeking a deeper knowledge of him to enrich our Christian discipleship. It is of the utmost importance to understand the socio-political dimensions of Jesus' message and ministry to fully appreciate the significance of his life and teachings (Borg 1995:962; Wright 2002:2).

From Babylonian exile to Roman occupation

The Babylonian exile and Persian period

The socio-political context of Jesus' ministry can be traced back to the Babylonian exile (586–539 BCE), a period that significantly transformed Jewish culture and religious life.

1.This article is part of a broader study entitled: God's transformational engagement with His chosen people for the sake of His global mission. It was delivered as an article at the International Association of Mission Studies [IAMS] Africa Regional Conference in Stellenbosch, South Africa in August 2024.

Following Cyrus, the Great's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, he allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ez 1:1–10:14). This era witnessed a revival of Jewish religious practices, the compilation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and an increasing aspiration for political autonomy.

The Hellenistic period

In 333 BCE, Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia introduced Hellenistic[2] influences that reshaped Jewish culture. After his death, Palestine came under the control of the Seleucid Empire.[3] In 168 BCE, King Antiochus IV's efforts to impose Greek culture led to the desecration of the Temple and a prohibition on Jewish practices. The successful Jewish revolt led by the Hasmonean family (Maccabees) (Knight 2024) symbolised hopes for independence and became a powerful emblem of resistance.

The Hasmonean rule

The Hasmonean period (142–163 BCE) ushered in Jewish autonomy and cultural revival, with early rulers promoting Jewish identity and prosperity. However, later Hasmonean rulers adopted Hellenistic practices, leading to internal divisions and marginalising traditional religious authorities. This disillusionment deepened the longing for a leader who would secure enduring freedom.

Roman intervention and Herodian rule

Rome's intervention in 63 BCE, followed by Herod the Great's[4] rule as Rome's appointed king, exacerbated Jewish discontent. Although Herod expanded the Temple, his harsh rule fuelled resentment. After his death, direct Roman governance intensified oppression, culminating in severe rule by prefects such as Pontius Pilate. This ongoing political turmoil and dissatisfaction with earthly rulers set the stage for 1st-century Jewish hopes for a Messiah – a divinely anointed leader who would deliver them from oppression and restore Israel's sovereignty.

Socio-political context of 1st-century Jewish society

The socio-political landscape of 1st-century Judaism (Sanders & Pelikan 2024), particularly during the latter part of the Second Temple Period (63 BCE – 70 CE), was profoundly influenced by the harsh realities of Roman occupation, internal Jewish divisions and conflicts among various Jewish sects. This era, characterised by oppression and volatility, intensified the Jewish people's aspirations for liberation and

2. Hellenism is the term generally used by historians to refer to the period from the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.E.) to the death of Cleopatra and the incorporation of Egypt in the Roman Empire in 30 B.C.E. … Hellenisation is used with reference to Judea, Persia, etc. to indicate the penetration of elements of Greek civilisation into territories, which though subject to Greco-Macedonian rule for a certain period of time, preserved their national culture with conspicuous success. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hellenism-2.

3. The Seleucid Empire was a major centre of Hellenistic culture, which maintained the pre-eminence of Greek customs and manners over the indigenous cultures of the Middle East. https://www.britannica.com/place/Seleucid-Empire.

4. https://www.livescience.com/64962-king-herod.html.

their hopes for a revolutionary Messiah.[5] In Theo-political terms, this period represented the 'fullness of time' (Eph 1:10) for the advent of Jesus Christ. First-century Palestine was moving towards a boiling point.

Economic and social structure

First-century Palestine functioned as an agrarian, peasant society with a significant wealth disparity (Borg 1995:966). Most of the Jewish population lived in poverty, burdened by heavy taxation and land rentals imposed by a wealthy elite, including the Herodian court and priestly aristocracy (Borg 1995:967). This exploitative system extracted wealth from labouring masses, transferring it to the urban elite who did not engage in agricultural work. Consequently, common people faced immense hardship under this oppressive economic order, creating intense social tension.

Class conflict and social fragmentation

Class conflict intensified as urban elites, particularly wealthy Jewish landowners and priestly families based in Jerusalem, augmented their wealth through exploitative practices such as tithing and Temple taxation. These powerful families, often aligned with high priestly rulers and economically intertwined with the Temple, exacerbated the peasants' plight. This growing disparity fuelled frustration among common people, transforming their desire for justice into a simmering revolutionary potential.

The role of the temple

The Temple in Jerusalem served not only as the centre of Jewish worship but also as an economic powerhouse. Controlled by high priestly families elevated by Herod, the Temple was central to an economic system that benefited the aristocracy at the expense of common people (Borg 1995:980). These wealthy families, closely allied with Roman authorities, maintained their influence by exploiting their own people (Horsley 1986:176), increasing resentment and division within Jewish society. Many perceived the Temple as a symbol of both spiritual sanctity and economic oppression.

Political alliances and internal divisions

The alliance between the Jewish aristocracy and Roman authorities solidified a socio-political context characterised by oppression and division. The Sadducees, aligned with the priestly aristocracy, supported the status quo, while other groups such as the Pharisees – although not formally political – often represented more popular interests. As competing factions vied for influence, divisions within Jewish society deepened because of both political and religious tensions.

5. According to Neusner, we need to resist all temptation to assume a coherent messianology in Early Judaism (eds. Neusner, Green & Frerichs 1987:227). First Century Palestine Jews held many, often mutually exclusive ideas and beliefs, regarding the Messiah. There was no developed and set messianology ready to be used in Christological didache and kerygma (ed. Neusner et al. 1987:248).

Religious diversity and sectarianism

Amidst this tense environment emerged a rich diversity of religious expressions reflecting distinct responses to Roman rule and internal Jewish divisions (Casey 1997:316):

- **Pharisees:** Approximately 6000 Pharisees[6] wielded indirect influence through the Sanhedrin by focusing on religious purity and adherence to oral traditions.
- **Sadducees:** Wealthy and politically powerful, representing the priestly elite allied with Romans to uphold the status quo (Hamilton 1964:369).
- **Essenes:** Isolated in monastic communities rejecting Temple corruption; they dedicated themselves to purity and asceticism.
- **Zealots[7]:** Primarily poor peasants advocating violent resistance against Roman rule; their hatred for both Roman occupiers and Jewish collaborators exemplified revolutionary potential.

The brewing revolution

The intricate interplay of religious, economic and political tensions rendered 1st-century Palestine a volatile environment primed for revolt. Deep-seated grievances, economic exploitation and spiritual disillusionment with the ruling classes created explosive potential. Crucifixion – Rome's method of suppressing rebellion – became a brutal yet common spectacle aimed at stifling revolutionary passion. As Jesus's ministry unfolded within this context, his message of hope, justice and liberation resonated profoundly with the oppressed populace. Understanding the convergence of social, political and religious sentiments during this period is crucial for comprehending the Jewish reaction to his message of deliverance.

Approaching the climax of his earthly ministry, Jesus's 'triumphant' entry into Jerusalem during the Passover festival marked a pivotal moment in human history. Against the backdrop of Jewish prisoners destined for crucifixion, the stage was set for the entrance of Barabbas, one such prisoner marked for execution. This event symbolised and confirmed the desperate struggle of the Jewish people.

Introducing Barabbas

During the peak of divine interaction with humanity, embodied by the birth and life of Jesus Christ, a curious and enigmatic figure briefly emerges in the Gospel narrative: Barabbas. This silent character, who appears momentarily during Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, subsequently fades into historical obscurity. Early Christian texts provide no insight into Barabbas, leaving his role and significance largely unexplored (Maclean 2007:311). Despite his fleeting presence, Barabbas represents a critical and underexamined perspective that remains also profoundly relevant today.

6.Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews 17.42).

7.Also identified by Josephus as the Fourth Philosophy (Sheldon 2020:4).

An intersection where Jewish and Christian Messianism[8] meets. His story unveils the socio-political realities that shaped the context in which Jesus ministered and was ultimately apprehended.

In contemporary times, there is an urgent need to reexamine historical biblical contexts, particularly as our faith is rooted in actual historical events, challenging the notion of a non-historical Jesus.[9] The pertinent question concerns the insights we can derive from this specific context for our own challenging socio-political realities. What can and should we learn from the Jewish messianic expectations exhibited at Jesus's trial? Is it an 'ideological delusion'?[10] Barabbas serves as a focal point in all four Gospels (Maclean 2007:309), each offering a distinct view of the religious vulnerability of the Jewish people during that period (Hart 2019:293). These narratives clearly reveal how deeply entrenched religious expectations can give rise to significant spiritual delusions – another crucial perspective from which we can learn.

This article contends that the trial of Jesus and the crowd's choice to release Barabbas instead of the Messiah expose a profound spiritual crisis – one that led Jesus Christ to depart from the Temple in Jerusalem. The tragic decision to choose Barabbas over Jesus reveals the ultimate Jewish rejection of Christ, underscoring Jesus' departure from the Temple and highlighting the spiritual turmoil of the time.

Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew provides a more detailed version of the Barabbas narrative, including a significant textual variant where Barabbas is referred to as 'Jesus Barabbas' in Matthew 27:16–17, a name unique to this Gospel. Church Father Origen, writing in 240 AD, acknowledges the inclusion of this name despite his personal objections against it, recognising its importance as a 'verum mysterium' (Hersey Davis 1942:66). The key question is why Matthew, who specifically addresses a Jewish audience, includes the name 'Jesus Barabbas' in his account. The rationale may lie in a deeper theological message, possibly referring to Matthew 24:5, where Jesus warns his disciples about false messiahs. Barabbas is portrayed as a deceptive figure, a nominal Messiah aligned with Jesus' warning about those who would lead people astray.

8.The religious division between Christianity and Judaism is the 'essential conflict' that developed and continues to exist: Jewish Messianism is national, ethnic, political and material. Christian Messianism is universal, cosmopolitan, ethical and spiritual (Green 1987:1). Scholarly work on the topic tends to be neither analytical nor interpretive but crudely historical (Green 1987:2). The object of inquiry into 'messianism is the question if it is an ideology or theology?' (Gershom Scholem quoted by Green 1987:1).

9.Gerhard Bode asserts that no one has successfully integrated both biblical theology and dogmatic theology concerning Christology (Bode 1978:2). He advocates for an integrative approach whereby Biblical Theology (Christology from below – focusing on Christ's humanity, Jesus of Nazareth, and the historical Jesus) can support Dogmatic Theology (classic and traditional Christology – Christology from above) in forming a cohesive biblical-dogmatic account of Christ.

10.This article introduces the concept coined as the 'Barabbas delusion'. By examining the biblical revelation about Barabbas and the Jewish choice for his release, contemporary Christians must urgently reflect on their own 'liberative' expectations. It presents a choice between adhering to an ideology and embracing true Biblical Christology.

Matthew describes Barabbas as 'notorious' (Hart 2019:299), indicating his prominence within the Jewish community. Barabbas represents the kind of Messiah the Jewish people of the time desired – a political insurgent committed to overthrowing Roman rule in the name of God. This contrasts with Jesus Christ, who preached a different kind of liberation focused on spiritual and social transformation. Matthew's account highlights the socio-political implications of Jesus' message (Hart 2019:298) and the choice presented to the Jewish people between two 'liberative' figures: Jesus Barabbas and Jesus Christ. The preference for Barabbas reveals the type of Messiah they were seeking – one who promised immediate, worldly liberation, rather than the spiritual and holistic salvation offered by Jesus Christ.

Mark

The Gospel of Mark, thought by most scholars to be the oldest account of Jesus' ministry and trial, is definitive about Barabbas' revolutionary involvement (Mk 14). He was not a common criminal that was killing people randomly, but Barabbas was actively participating in the Jewish revolt against Rome (Hart 2019:294). He was not opposed to utilising religious violence to gain political victory. According to Mark, Jesus and Barabbas represent fundamentally different kinds of revolutionary practice – violent and non-violent – both of which have led to a common fate: prison and impending execution. Mark's portrayal thus sets up a stark contrast between two forms of resistance to Roman rule, highlighting the radical nature of Jesus' non-violent mission in the face of violent revolt. The idea that Barabbas was some lunatic that turned mass-murderer is thereby nullified. Barabbas was fighting for his people's political liberation (Hart 2019:294).

Luke

Luke offers a distinctive perspective on Jesus' trial, particularly in relation to Barabbas (Cuany 2017:441). Unlike other Gospel writers, Luke shows little interest in exploring the theological rationale for Jesus' death or its redemptive significance, focusing instead on the legal aspects of the trial. This approach diverges significantly from the other Gospels, emphasising the socio-political charges brought against Jesus and his innocence in relation to these accusations (Hart 2019:298).

Luke highlights Barabbas' socio-political identity, contrasting it with the charges against Jesus. While many evangelical interpretations emphasise Jesus' sinlessness, Luke zeroes in on whether Jesus is guilty of the socio-political acts alleged by the Roman authorities. The narrative unfolds in two key segments. The first segment (verses 13–16) details the preliminary proceedings, where Jesus appears before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod, and then Pilate again. Pilate, after consulting with Herod, declares Jesus' innocent of the charges. Both rulers agree on this verdict.

The second segment (verses 18–25) shifts focus to the substitution between Jesus and Barabbas. Despite Jesus being declared innocent, the Jewish crowd demands his execution and calls for Barabbas, a convicted insurrectionist and murderer, to be released instead. Luke's narrative emphasises this unjust exchange: the innocent Jesus is condemned while the guilty Barabbas is set free (Cuany 2017:449). This portrayal underscores the legal injustice that leads to Jesus' crucifixion.

John

The Gospel of John presents an explicit theological portrait, compared to the more subtle theological narratives of the Synoptic Gospels. Even the Johannine account turns the focus on Barabbas' political act of resistance. He is called 'lestai', a bandit or insurrectionist. For the Gospel of John, Barabbas' socio-political act of resistance is a key element of his portrayal. Barabbas was a Jew who sought to engage in religious insurrection as a freedom fighter, believing his resistance aligned with how God had acted on Israel's behalf in the past. His religious revolt aimed to gain political freedom, motivated by frustration and anger that oppressors occupied his land, mocked his God, and exploited his people. Ironically, Jesus's disciples initially responded similarly, ready for insurrection. It seems all four Gospel writers portray the disciples as eager for liberation, although differing on the means to attain it. John's account underscores the political implications of Jesus' mission and the contrasting approaches to achieving liberation.

Summary

This article attempts to coin a phrase called: The 'Barabbas delusion'. It refers to the critical misjudgement made by the Jewish people during Jesus' trial. They deliberately chose political liberation, as symbolised by Barabbas, over the divine purpose of liberation embodied by Jesus Christ.[11] This delusion is rooted in the socio-political context of Roman occupation, where the Jewish people, longing for immediate freedom from oppressive rule, conflated their messianic expectations with the hope of imminent political liberation. They yearned for a Messiah who would lead a violent uprising against their oppressors and restore their national sovereignty. The deeper message of Jesus Christ and His 'kingdom that was not of this world', did not resonate with their actual felt needs.

Barabbas, a known insurrectionist, embodied this militant vision of liberation. By choosing him over Jesus Christ, the people revealed their preference for a political saviour rather than a spiritual one. This choice was not merely a momentary lapse in judgement but a profound misinterpretation of God's purpose for His people. Their self-serving religious delusion was not only displayed (and punished) throughout Old Testament history but was also again exposed and identified during Jesus's last and final visit to the Temple in Jerusalem. The 'Barabbas delusion' at the trial confirms and finally encapsulates this tragic ideological deviation. This delusion had far-reaching consequences. The choice of Barabbas over Jesus not only signified a rejection of God's divine plan for His chosen people but also led to devastating outcomes for them. Their focus on political liberation contributed to the eventual destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and the catastrophic loss of their homeland.

11. For Jesus, the conception of the Jewish Messiah, as initially understood and perceived by most of His contemporaries, was set aside and supplanted by a new redeemer and mediator of salvation. The Jewish Messianic idea represented a temptation from Satan, which He had to renounce (Sigmund Mowinckle quoted by Green 1987:9).

Their failure to recognise and align with their divine purpose as part of the missio Dei resulted in the unravelling of their socio-religious identity and a missed opportunity to fulfil their mission as God's chosen people. A persistent historical sin that God mercifully corrected throughout history was now conclusively addressed. Consequently, Judaism failed to be instrumental to the missio Dei.

In this context, the 'Barabbas delusion' serves as a powerful cautionary revelation. It illustrates the dangers of allowing political aspirations to overshadow spiritual truths and the peril of misunderstanding God's purposes. For contemporary Christians, revisiting this delusion offers vital insights into the risks of conflating a self-centred faith with political ideology. It underscores the importance of prioritising the teachings of Jesus, which advocate for a holistic approach to liberation – one that integrates both spiritual and social dimensions without sacralising secular ideologies. By understanding the 'Barabbas delusion', Christians can better navigate the complex interplay between faith and politics, ensuring that their actions remain true to divine purpose and in the correct way be aligned with the mission of Christ.

Religious vulnerability of God's chosen people (Christendom) anticipating the second coming of Jesus Christ

Introduction

To fully grasp the Theo-political landscape of Western civilisation requires a comprehensive acknowledgement of its origins and evolution. Rooted in the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome and deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian values, Western civilisation has been shaped over the past 2000 years by a multitude of socio-political realities and challenges. From the remnants of ancient empires, it has woven together philosophy, law, and religion into a robust cultural fabric. The Renaissance (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024c) rekindled an appreciation for learning, the Enlightenment (Duignan 2024) confronted ignorance and the Industrial Revolution (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024b) catalysed remarkable advancements. Throughout this continuous evolution, Western civilisation has championed individual rights, fostered innovation and exerted a profound impact on global history and global culture. Through the all-consuming process of globalisation, Western culture has extended its influence globally. Today it is however experiencing its 'civilisational moment' (Guinness 2022) and is on the brink of collapse. The very core of this existential emergency is the 'epistemological crisis' that Western civilisation is facing. It can be called 'the mother of all crises' (Kirk 1999:157).

Religion and politics

There is no doubt that Western civilisation was built on a very strong Judeo-Christian foundation.[12] The reason why it

is in a process of total collapse is the fact that it has left the very foundations that it was built on (Guinness 2022). Parallel to Western cultural development and deeply embedded in it, is the history of Western Christianity's transformation into Christendom.[13] This whole developmental process is marked by the deep intertwining of religious and secular authority. A very brief overview to contemplate this evolution will suffice. It is evident in pivotal events such as the establishment of the Roman papacy, the unification of Europe under Charlemagne,[14] the violent contact with Islam during the Crusades, the Reformation and the subsequent religious wars (Barzun et al. 2024), as well as the complex interplay between politics and religion during the era of colonisation (Webster, Nowell & Magdoff 2023). In more recent times, the persistent entanglement of religion and politics remains evident in phenomena such as 'Apartheid theology' in South Africa[15] and the complex dynamics of liberation and black theology worldwide. These examples highlight the enduring and intricate relationship between Christian faith and worldly power, demonstrating how deeply intertwined they remain in shaping both individual and collective identities within Western civilisation. These milestones underscore how political and social forces have profoundly influenced the development of Western Christianity, shaping its doctrines, practices and global reach. However, the devastation wrought by two world wars severely undermined Western Christendom, stalling its missionary endeavours (Walls 2011:236) and challenging its influence and relevance on the global stage.

The 'death of Christendom'

Western Christendom today faces an existential crisis, often described as the 'end' of Christendom (Muggeridge 1980). The decline of Christianity in the West is mirrored in the weakening of the Church, coinciding with the waning influence of Western cultural dominance. Ironically, the very culture that once sent missionaries across the world has now become a mission field itself. Yet, Western theology and its ecclesiology, gripped by an epistemological crisis, lack the missional focus or clarity to address this new reality (Dreyer 2013:1). The Western Church, consumed by the existential anxiety of its members is unsure of the principles that should guide its engagement with society, seems increasingly disconnected from the world it seeks to reach. Recent studies have convincingly shown that mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations are steadily disappearing (Wagner 2005:230). Christendom, ensnared by cultural captivity, has become insular, self-serving and primarily focused on survival and institutional maintenance rather than fulfilling its missional calling. Amid contemporary socio-political realities, all individuals within Western civilisation, including Christians, face heightened vulnerability to economic instability, political polarisation and societal fragmentation. Forces such as globalisation and

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12. See the article of Michael Novak in *Journal of Markets & Morality* October 1998 entitled: The Judeo-Christian Foundation of Human Dignity. https://www.acton.org/node/6500.

13. https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-christendom.html.

14. https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/charlemagne.

15. See the most recent association of Apartheid South Africa and Apartheid Israel: https://unjppi.org/blog/apartheid-south-africa-apartheid-israel.

urbanisation have dismantled traditional community structures, while a resurgence of nationalism reveals a widespread and urgent desire for identity, security and autonomy. Confronted by these powerful trends, the Western Church finds itself paralysed by accelerating decline and increasingly unable to respond meaningfully to these challenges. Its struggle to redefine purpose and relevance in this shifting landscape has left it ill-equipped to address the profound existential crises of the present.

The rise of 'conservative evangelicalism' (Dispensationalism)

Throughout history, Christians have often anticipated the end of the world during periods of transition, much like the present. This expectation may explain why, for example, dispensational theology has remained so prevalent in Western Christianity, now a default belief in many evangelical churches worldwide (Deik 2020:76). As the influence of Christendom declines in the West, a particular 'version' of Western Christianity continues to shape global socio-political dynamics. It is therefore critical to examine the impact and significance of these remnants in contemporary times.[16]

The second part of this article will explore the intricate relationship between the Christendom Church's mission to prepare the world for the second coming of Christ (Mt 28:20) and its connection to Israel within the context of 'end-times' prophecy. This exploration will be set against the backdrop of the diverse socio-political challenges currently confronting Western civilisation, with a specific focus on the missiological implications of Christendom's response to these crises.

The Christian church and the Jewish people

The shaping of Western civilisation and Western Christianity by Judeo-Christian values is a well-established concept, yet the scholarly examination of the enduring and complex relationship between Christianity and Zionism remains notably underexplored and below the academic radar for most of its existence (Sweetnam 2010:191). Goldman's work highlights the extent to which research on this topic has largely been overlooked within academic discourse (2007:246). Particularly under-researched is the political militancy observed in millennial or messianic movements such as Christian Zionism and Jewish Religious Zionism, which exemplifies the intertwined phenomena of the sacralisation of politics and the politicisation of religion (Aldovandri 2011:114). Rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of Christian Zionism,[17] this article seeks to highlight key aspects of its historical evolution and contemporary beliefs to support the argument that it represents, as identified in the first section of this paper, what can be termed a 'Barabbas delusion'.

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16. The Surprising Staying Power of Dispensationalism. Bonnie Kristian. As a school of theology, it's in decline. As a cultural and political force, it's more influential than ever (visit: https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/08/rise-fall-dispensationalism-daniel-hummel-end-times/).

17. Proto-Christian Zionism emerged out of the Protestant Reformation, drawing from both Jewish Scriptures (the Tanakh) and the early church (Roodt & Roodt 2011:48).

Christianity and Christian Zionism

Christian Zionism, an ideology that has evolved over nearly two centuries (Sweetnam 2010:191), finds its roots in religious thought (Rabkin 2012:75) and predates the rise of political Zionism (Ariel 2006:77). This movement originated outside of Palestine and was significantly influenced by the surge in apocalyptic expectations following the Protestant Reformation, which fostered the idea of Jewish restoration based on a biblical messianic view of the Jews and Palestine. Since the Reformation, the concept of the 'Restoration of the Jews to their Land' has consistently featured in the ideologies of various Protestant denominations (Goldman 2007:248). The earliest known connection between Christian apocalyptic visions and the 'ingathering of the Jews in Palestine' dates to at least the 16th century (Abraham & Boer 2009:92). In 1840, the leader of Britain's Evangelical Party, Lord Ashley Cooper (Ariel 2006:74), petitioned the British foreign minister to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024a), which signalled British support for creating a Jewish national home in Palestine, was deeply rooted in Christian religious beliefs and resulted from a blend of political calculations and Christian advocacy in Britain (Ariel 2006:79). Christian Zionist Arthur Balfour was instrumental in securing British control over Palestine, a crucial step towards the eventual establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 (Abraham & Boer 2009:92).

Christian Zionism has also played a significant role in the United States,[18] where it has historically exerted considerable influence on US policies towards the Middle East. Notably, President Harry Truman, who compared himself to Emperor Cyrus because of his support for Israel, was influenced by Christian Zionist ideas (Abraham & Boer 2009:93). The political faith of US presidents has transformed Christian Zionism into political capital, establishing it as a dominant position within the Evangelical Protestant religious right in the United States (Abraham & Boer 2009:91). As a result, Christian Zionism, particularly in its dispensationalist form, has become one of the most influential theological systems within contemporary Western Christendom (Sizer n.d.:1).

What is Christian Zionism?

Christian Zionism is defined as Protestant support for the restoration of the 'seed of Abraham' to their promised land, a movement inspired by 19th-century European nationalism (Rabkin 2012:85). It encompasses Christian theological backing for the establishment and continued existence of the modern state of Israel, aligned with Zionist ideology (Abraham & Boer 2009:90). Central to this movement is a theology known as dispensationalism, which posits that Christian salvation is intimately connected to the return of Jews to their ancestral land, Palestine. This dispensationalist framework has come to dominate American Evangelicalism,

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18. Support for political Zionism gradually emerged across a broad spectrum of Anglo-American Christians and Conservative and Reformed Jews, largely motivated in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the expulsion of millions of displaced Jews by the rising forces of nationalism and anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe (Roodt & Roodt 2011:49).

exerting a significant influence on US policy in the Middle East (Campolo 2005). Aldovandri (2011:117) describes this belief system as 'Armageddon theology', where the prolonged conflict and chaos in the Middle East are interpreted as signs of the end-times, culminating in the return of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem after a cataclysmic war of Armageddon. Within this narrative, Jews are seen as key actors in the Christian Zionist eschatological vision, with Israel playing a crucial role in setting the stage for the 'Rapture' of true believers (Campolo 2005). While mainstream Jewish Zionists appreciate the material support – such as tourism, financial contributions and political backing – that Christian Zionists provide, they often maintain a cautious distance from the underlying theology (Abraham & Boer 2009:99). The relationship between Christian and Jewish Zionism is marked by an ironic dynamic: Christian Zionists support the Jewish return to the Holy Land on religious grounds, whereas Jewish Zionists do so for political reasons, turning a theological project into a political one (Rabkin 2012:80). The greater irony lies in the fact that traditional Judaism largely rejects Jewish Zionism, while Protestant theologians actively endorse it to fulfil their own religious objectives (Rabkin 2012:75).

Contemporary issues and consequences

Historically, Christians have frequently interpreted socio-political upheavals as indicative of an impending apocalypse. In contemporary times, Western Christendom remains enmeshed in this perspective. The current vulnerability of Christendom is rooted in a recurring pattern across various perspectives: the modification of theology to serve specific ideological or existential aims. On one side, Western Christendom's inward focus on cultural preservation prioritises survival, identity and security, thereby reducing faith to a means of defending a diminishing cultural heritage. This inward-focused mindset, which fosters a perception of God as primarily aligned with human needs, has made Christianity increasingly self-centred across regions such as Europe, the United States and South Africa.

Theology meets ideology

Conversely, the outward-facing, eschatologically driven support for Israel among some conservative Christians shifts the focus to advancing an end-times agenda. Despite their distinct focuses, both perspectives exhibit a common tendency: they transform theology into an instrument for achieving human-centred goals, aligning faith with immediate socio-political concerns rather than its core missional purpose.

This convergence reveals the extent to which Western Christianity has become susceptible to ideological influences that blur the boundaries between faith and politics. In both instances, theological convictions are repurposed to secure desired outcomes, whether preserving cultural identity or fulfilling eschatological aspirations. Consequently, Western Christianity increasingly appears reactive and self-serving, compromising the essence of Christian belief – centred on

transformative mission – and subordinating it to the pursuit of personal or political ends. This dynamic ultimately distorts the integrity of Christian faith, reducing it to a tool for human agendas rather than a call to authentic discipleship and engagement with the world.

Evaluating Christendom from a missional perspective

From a missiological perspective, contemporary Christendom finds itself at a critical juncture where the boundaries between the sacred and secular are increasingly indistinct, thereby distorting the Church's core mission. The decline of mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations, coupled with the rise of conservative evangelicalism, signifies a profound transformation in the religious landscape of the West. Rather than participating in a sacrificial missional commitment to God's mission to reach all nations, Western cultural Christianity (Christendom) now appears to use God to serve its own interests. This shift mirrors the spiritual and cultural vulnerabilities experienced by the Jewish people during Jesus Christ's first coming.

The article posits that modern Christendom is encountering struggles analogous to those faced by Judaism in biblical times. Just as Judaism, within a specific socio-political context, wrestled with its identity and purpose before Christ's first advent, contemporary Christianity faces similar challenges as it prepares for the anticipated second coming of Jesus Christ. This analogy highlights the urgency and significance of this pivotal moment, calling for a reassessment of the Church's mission in light of eschatological expectations.

At the heart of the crisis is the entanglement of theology with ideology, leading to a compromise in and a drift from true biblical Christology. This again echoes the 'Barabbas delusion' during Christ's trial in Jerusalem, where political solutions were prioritised over spiritual truth. Similarly, Western cultural Christianity has moved away from its missional calling, becoming more concerned with self-preservation than with spreading the gospel. This shift has transformed Christendom into a 'den of robbers' (Jr 7:11; Mk 11:17), motivated by self-interest rather than genuine missional concern for all nations (Is 56:7; Mk 11:17).

The current trajectory of Christendom raises significant missiological concerns. The Church's emphasis on maintaining cultural and political status quos, often intertwined with nationalistic intentions, hinders its capacity to engage the world in alignment with Christ's teachings. Rather than aligning with political ideologies or national objectives, the mission of the Church should focus on proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people, fostering justice, reconciliation and spiritual transformation. One must consider whether the present decline of Christendom represents a divine departure analogous to Jesus Christ's final departure from the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Jews chose Barabbas, they effectively rejected Jesus Christ, indicating that their religious commitment lacked a true

biblical Christology, which is why they entirely missed recognising and ultimately serving the Messiah (1 Cor 15:19).

The choice of Barabbas decoded

Barabbas should neither be relegated to the shadows of the Biblical narrative nor should his brief appearance in God's revelation fade into obscurity. His presence at a crucial moment in Christian history demands a deeper examination. The historical encounter, recorded in all four Gospels, where the Jewish crowd chose Barabbas's freedom over that of Jesus Christ, signifies far more than a mere act of substitution. This event encapsulates the complex socio-political dynamics of 1st-century Judaism and, despite its past marginalisation, holds profound relevance for the entire trajectory of Christian history over the past 2000 years. Understanding this episode is essential for grasping the broader evolution of Christianity, which has been intricately woven into the interplay between politics and religion within the socio-political fabric of Western civilisation. Barabbas has never truly disappeared. His shadow continues to loom large, challenging us to confront the enduring and intricate ties between faith, politics and society. His story remains as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago, providing a critical perspective on the ongoing interplay between these powerful forces. Understanding Barabbas is key to comprehending the broader implications of Christian history and the challenges that continue to shape the faith's engagement with the world.

Conclusion

This article concludes by asserting that contemporary theo-political and socio-political realities indicate that God is once again altering his interaction with His chosen people (Christendom) to ensure the continuation and eventual completion of his global mission.

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