

Power and accountability – Using Biblical lenses to explore contemporary challenges in Africa

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Dates:

Received: 26 Feb. 2023
Accepted: 27 June 2023
Published: 18 Aug. 2023

How to cite this article:

Mwandayi, C. & Mukole, M., 2023, 'Power and accountability – Using Biblical lenses to explore contemporary challenges in Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(4), a8584. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8584>

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The Bible is one of the most influential documents in human history that has not only changed believers' lives but has also greatly influenced our society whether one is a Christian or not. While the Western world has somehow managed to remove the Bible from the public sphere and religion relegated as the opium of the oppressed masses in the Communist bloc, to Africans, the Bible has remained a moral compass without which human life becomes ungovernable. As the Bible has come to occupy such a high place of authority in African life, the aim of this article is to examine the contemporary challenges that Africa is facing concerning issues of power and accountability in light of selected biblical texts. Using largely the canonical approach and socio-cultural anthropology, this article takes the Bible as a mirror that leaders should use to self-introspect in regard to their exercise of power and accountability to their subjects. It is our observation that there is now a tendency among African leadership especially during elections to rush to claim *vox populi, vox Dei* meaning 'the voice of people is the voice of God', yet rigging and failure to live up to God's dictates may be manifestly characterising one's leadership. A fish begins rotting in its head hence it is our conclusion that it is only by having a leadership that cultivates a fear of God at its heart that Africa can be healed of its problems.

Contribution: In Africa, it is a paradox that while some political leaders purport to have been schooled in the Bible in mission schools, they lead a life divorced from it. This article adds a voice to the on-going religion and politics dialogue in Zimbabwe by soliciting an honest adherence to its principles.

Keywords: power; accountability; the Bible; leadership; Africa leadership; Ancient Near East.

Introduction

The Bible is regarded as one of the most significant aspects of the Christian heritage in Africa because of its central role in the lives of believers. John Mbiti asserts that 'Africa is deeply immersed in the Bible' (Mbiti 2005:247). This document is highly read in homes, schools, churches and on a variety of occasions (Chitando 2007:6). Not only the Bible continues to inspire the African imagination in different aspects of life, but it also acts as a guide to belief and action. The beliefs and actions guided by the Bible are not viewed only in matters pertaining to spirituality; they are extended to the day-to-day activity in society. That is, every domain of life such as education, leadership and even politics are areas that the Bible is expected to be a guide in providing the best principles in order to achieve great and sustainable results. Of interest to this article are principles relating to power and accountability. Power involves the ability to exercise influence and authority in the physical, mental or spiritual sphere, or the capacity to control the behaviour of others (eds. Simpson & Weiner 2010). Accountability, respectively, can be defined as the responsibility one assumes in accepting the right to lead the community in one way or another, make decisions and act on its behalf. Therefore, when one is accountable, he or she is answerable for his or her actions. In other words, accountability is accepting responsibility for the outcomes expected of a person, both good and bad (Chaffee 1997:7).

The challenges of power and accountability in Africa whether in church settings or professional workplaces and governance are a real phenomenon. Interestingly, despite the centrality of the Bible in the lives of African believers, these challenges have somehow not been fully addressed from a biblical perspective. We strongly believe that the Bible can be used as a mirror that leaders should use to self-introspect in regard to their exercise of power and accountability to

Note: Special Collection: Zimbabwean Scholars in Dialogue, sub-edited by Conrad Chibango (Great Zimbabwe University).

their subjects. The current crisis that Africa is facing when it comes to power and accountability can be only solved using the principles and guidelines offered by the Bible. Though in these days many would want to claim power, the Bible speaks explicitly about the source of power. In the book of Chronicles, we read: 'Yours, O Lord, are grandeur and power, majesty, splendor, and glory ...' (1 Chr 29:11, The African Bible). The Matthean Jesus stresses the same point in the Lord's Prayer, 'for thine is thy kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever' (Mt 6:13, NKJV). As power involves the ability to exercise influence and authority in the physical, mental or spiritual sphere or the capacity to control the behaviour of others (eds. Simpson & Weiner 2010), each person with power has to be answerable or accountable for his or her actions in relation to his or her authority. The most critical aspect of accountability becomes the acknowledgment of the source of power. Once the source of the authority is not identified, accountability can easily be compromised. Thus, failure to acknowledge the source of power and to live up to the expectations explains why some African leaders fiercely compete for power and once they get it, they so cling to it as if it is not something not to be shared.

The contemporary challenges that Africa is facing like the fierce competition for power, clinging onto power, coup d'états, failure to be accountable to followers and other ills in leadership are not new or unique in nature. Ancient Near East accounts and the Bible contain similar struggles for power and accountability. The first part of this article therefore explores how power was understood and exercised in the Ancient Near East. This would be followed by a second part, which looks at the political organisation of ancient Israel. The third part would be devoted addressing African contemporary challenges of power and accountability using selected biblical narratives.

Exercise of power in the Ancient Near East

The contemporary understanding of biblical political ideas and institutions rests in great measure on our expanded understanding of the political institutions in the ancient Near East as a whole, just as in the case with other biblical teachings simply because the Bible does not offer us a clear-cut picture of any political theory (Horowitz 2001:1–7). As the nation of Israel did not emerge in a cultural vacuum, biblical scholars have argued that we cannot comprehend the history of Ancient Israel without digging into the daily life of her surrounding countries especially when we consider the enormous influence such countries made upon the nation of Israel. Ancient Israel was also part of the Ancient Near East (Van De Mieroop 2006), hence, making no surprise to the fact that the Old Testament shares a lot of ideas, religious practices, forms of literature, customs, etc., with other nations such as the region from the eastern Mediterranean coast to central Iran, and from the Black Sea to the Red Sea (Van De Mieroop 2006:40).

Though the concept of power in the Ancient Near East was primarily a question of how strong a nation was, how it was internally organised and how it influenced others, it required a system by which different nations could come together to make political and economic treaties that strengthened their states. The fact that the powerful constantly conquered the weaker nations and possessed their lands led to the political system by which nations opted to make alliances in order to maintain their territories and expand them by joining forces and conquering small and powerless civilisations (Walton 2018). The downside of this political system was that, though some great nations of the region traded and exchanged diplomatic messages with others, they often remained in a constant situation of rivalry and sought to expand their territorial influences at the expense of their neighbours. For example, Assyria's almost constant state of warfare meant that their warrior kings were able to maintain their superiority over their rivals. Nevertheless, within this political system, all players knew what their position was in the political hierarchy and how to interact with fellow participants. They also remained in regular contact with one another, sending envoys back and forth with oral and written messages to maintain the system.

While the political organisation of the states in the Ancient Near East varied, there was a huge discrepancy in access to wealth and power between the numerically small elites and the mass of the populations (Van De Mieroop 2006). Here could be seen an international elite class emerging whose participants had more in common with their colleagues in other states than with the lower classes at home. The elites engaged in an unprecedented accumulation and display of wealth and simultaneously distanced themselves from the rest of the people by living in separate cities or city quarters (Van De Mieroop 2015). During this period, we see great building activities everywhere in the region and artistic production. Van De Mieroop (2015:41–50) argues that this is an era that produced some of the most fascinating monuments of ancient history and Egypt presents perhaps the most telling example of this, except for the great pyramids, but most of Egypt's famous tombs and temples date back to this period.

One common characteristic throughout the Ancient Near East is that public buildings including palaces and temples were often situated in clearly delineated and protected areas of the cities or even that entire cities served as royal residences. The desire of the ruling elites to separate themselves from the rest of the population was taken to its logical conclusion by building new capital cities. Psychologically, it points towards a desire to distance the ruling elites from the people. These cities also reflect the power struggles that went on between the elites. With this development, governmental and political power was now vested in the city state. The most important aspect of the role of cities is to be found in their relationship to the temples and the gods. The patron deity of a city was typically considered the one who founded, built and sustained the city. Therefore, the prominence and prosperity of the city and its

god were inextricably intertwined. Wilton (2006) argues that 'formerly kingship did not exist in the land, and the rule was given to the gods. But the gods grew fond of the black-headed people and gave them a king' (Walton 2006:205). As individuals who stood between the divine and human worlds, kings were expected to discern the divine will and facilitate its execution. In Egypt, for instance, the almost total immersion of the persona of the king into the divine realm led inexorably to the conclusion that the acts of Pharaoh were the acts of deity.

In the Ancient Near East, kings were likewise eager to affirm at every opportunity the evidence that the gods supported their reign, claiming to continue good omens and favourable dreams and prophecies. They may have not been divine but they were elected by the gods and adopted into sonship. In ancient Egypt, for example, the pharaoh was called 'the son of Re', the sun god. As such, they are not portrayed as gods but are sometimes treated as gods outside of Egypt (Winter 1992:16–42). Power in the Ancient Near East was therefore derived from the gods, and it was to them that was attributed the power to build, sustain and protect the nations to the extent that even battles between states were mostly fought on a godly level. In Mesopotamia, all official business was conducted in the name of the gods (Cannistraro & Reich 1999). The ruler or king was chosen by the gods and was accountable to the gods. As nations made political alliances, accountability was also expected from kings to other nations otherwise a breach of political treaties could result in wars (Ilari 2019:421–442).

Power and accountability in Ancient Israel

Judaism was essentially a theo-political phenomenon, a means of seeking salvation by constructing God's polity through which the covenantal community described in the Bible takes on meaning and fulfills its purpose in the scheme of things (Elazar 1995:115–123). The biblical account of the origins of the Jewish people reflects a blend of kinship and consent that generates a special political culture and a variety of institutions at home in it. A family of tribes becomes a nation by consenting to a common covenant with YHWH and with each other, out of which flow the principles and practices of religious life and political organisation that has animated the Jews as a corporate entity ever since (Horowitz 2001:1–7). This is to say that the nation of Israel starts with Yahweh who unites the different tribes to form his chosen nation. The nation depends on God in every dimension and activity of life. Important to note is that it was difficult to separate social dimensions of life from political, economic and religious dimensions as well. This implies that God's polity governed the Israelite life in all areas.

When it comes to the political organisation of Israel, it can be fairly said that the fundamental principles animating the government and politics were theocratic, federal and republican. Thus, the theocratic principle inspired and

permeated all of Israel's political institutions. God was, therefore, as earlier mentioned, conceived to be directly involved in the governance of the Israelites.

Political relationships in ancient Israel were also based on the covenant or federal principle. The Hebrew Bible portrays the covenant principle as the basis for the relationship between God and man, between the nation of Israel and God and among men. Covenants were the means through which lasting relationships were forged, designed to preserve the respective integrities of the partners and to provide a basis for cooperation among the covenanted so as to achieve common ends that were delineated in the contract (Elazar 1995).

Republicanism is another great political principle of biblical Israel. When understood in its broad sense, republicanism reflects the view that political order or leadership is a public thing [*res publica*], that is to say, it is not a private preserve of any single man or ruling elite but the property of all those within the scope of its jurisdiction and that power is so organised to reflect this fact. What this means therefore is that republican government involves a limitation on the powers of those given authority and some provision for the representation of public concerns as a matter of right in the formulation and execution of public policy. In Deuteronomy 17:14–17, for example, we hear Moses say to the people:

... should you then decide to have a king over you...He whom you set over you as king must be your kinsman...But he shall not have a great number of horses; nor shall he make his people go back again to Egypt to acquire them ... Neither shall he have a great number of wives, lest his heart be estranged, nor shall he accumulate a vast amount of silver and gold. (Deuteronomy 17:14–17)

Elazar (1995:120) argues that republican conditions prevailed in biblical Israel except during periods when individual monarchs essentially usurped authority and were considered to be usurpers by the biblical account. Though a majority of Israel's kings proved were a failure in living up to these conditions, such a system helped in maintaining checks and balances on the king.

In ancient Israel, it was understood that it was Yahweh who led His people (Jdg 8:22–23; 1 Sm 8:6–7), implying that although a leader whether religious or political was physically present, he or she had to acknowledge that God was the one leading His people. Yahweh was thus understood as having simply delegated His responsibility for the right ordering of the world to leaders, reflecting his covenant partnership with humanity. Leadership in the Old Testament was less concerned with the ability of leaders to discern direction but more with how they exercised obedience to God's will. Clear examples could be given of Moses who spoke only what God had revealed, and the prophets fulfilled their roles by speaking as God's oracle. In this manner, accountability is a requirement for all those exercising power given by Yahweh.

The evidence of the biblical record reveals that various kinds of accountability were instituted by God. The Old

Testament indicates clearly that God is concerned about proper accountability. The Hebrew Bible begins with the sense of accountability right from creation where God places accountability at the centre of the duty of humanity (Gn 1). After the creation of all things, God gave humanity responsibility over the rest of creation (Gn 1:26–30). Such responsibility accorded humanity over creation shows that humans were to account to the creator.

In terms of leadership, the Pentateuch portrays Moses as a figure who proved to be an accountable leader. This enabled him to efficiently and effectively lead the people of Israel throughout their journey from Egypt through the wilderness of Sinai to the Plains of Moab. In Numbers 14, when God wanted to wipe out the people, Moses acted on their behalf, interceding for their sins. God listened to him and pardoned the Israelites.

Addressing African contemporary challenges of power and accountability using the Bible

The question of how biblical texts were shaped by their political setting (s) within some political and theological empires is extremely relevant in the current intellectual climate. Post-colonial theorists have carried out valuable work on this and related questions which are mostly related to the way that texts were used by empire builders to justify their actions and how those texts are read today in post-colonial settings (Bhabha 2004). Unfortunately, even in the post-colonial period, some African leaders still use biblical texts to justify their hold onto power. Therefore, for us to efficiently explore the current African crisis of power and accountability, we must use constructive biblical texts that can help us solve this crisis. We must first acknowledge that the Bible is a controversial document in Africa because of Africa's traumatic encounter with the West, which led not only to a loss of political control but also to a damaged self-understanding (Gifford 2008:203–219). Nevertheless, the Bible has maintained its centrality in the everyday life of Africans. While there may be ways in which it could be argued that Western politics have been debibled since the advent of the separation of church-state in Western discourse, the same cannot even be considered a subject of debate across Africa because the Bible, as Togarasei (2008:73) puts it, 'is the book. It is read in times of joy and in times of sorrow' (Gunda & Kugler 2012).

The moment we use the Bible as a mirror to self-introspect ourselves as African nations, we begin to see that in terms of leadership and governance, our leadership has failed us. There is a visible shift from a God-centred perspective of life and leadership as it was in ancient Israel, to a man-centred perspective. This can be attributed to the attempt by leaders to do away with any form of accountability to God and the constituents they govern. Here we tend to concur with Banks and Ledbetter (2016) who claim that the fact of the matter is that when leaders seek to ignore accountability to God and

others, they leave themselves vulnerable to the distrust of the people and they will eventually become dictators because of the non-compliant attitude the followers will take to their directives (Banks et al. 2016). The contemporary crisis of power and accountability in Africa can only be solved through the acknowledgment of God as the Source and Giver of power to leaders and followers. When we acknowledge that power comes from God, he wants us to lead his people for his purpose, we become conscious of the responsibility given to us which needs to be accountable, to both God and those being led. It implies that leaders will no longer use power for their selfish interests but on accomplishing God's will for his people. It is in this context that we are arguing that the contemporary challenges Africa is facing in terms of power and accountability in leadership can be solved by going back to the understanding of the concepts of power and accountability in the Bible.

What is also killing Africa is that our leadership is entering into partnerships with foreign investors who purport that they are keen on pulling us out from the mud of poverty yet their intention would be after siphoning Africa's rich mineral resources. Instead of improving the lives of citizens, these so-called foreign investors and their cronies in government get away with fatty pockets at the expense of the local citizens. In the case of Zimbabwe, for example, history points to its close relations with China for decades. When relations between Zimbabwe and Western countries froze because of the sanctions imposed by the latter during Mugabe's era, China stepped in as an all-weather friend. In 2018, according to Chingono (2020):

Zimbabwe-Chinese relations were elevated from 'all-weather friends' to strategic partners, paving the way for Chinese investors to pour money into the country, particularly in the extractive industries, where they have been accused of paying little attention to environmental damage by environmental and human rights activists. (n.p.)

In Mutoko, for example, the locals are crying foul over the continued plundering of the rich granite stone by the Chinese Jinding mining company (Chingono 2020). The same concern is shared also by the Nyamaropa people. A Chinese company by the name Shanghau Haoying Mining Investments is reported to have been given a license by the government to mine granite on tracts of land belonging to local people.

Earlier in the discussion, we saw that the Hebrew Bible portrays the covenant principle as the basis for the relationship between God and man and that covenants were the means through which lasting relationships were forged, designed to preserve the respective integrities of the partners and to provide a basis for cooperation among them so as to achieve common ends. This principle of forging meaningful and trustworthy covenants can help Africa improve its political governance.

Furthermore, we witnessed that republicanism is another great political principle mirrored in the Bible. The Bible portrays a limitation on the powers of those given authority

and some provision for the representation of public concerns as a matter of right in the formulation and execution of public policy. When it comes to some African leaders, hardly would one find limitations on the powers of those given authority. During Robert Mugabe's time, for example, news presenters on the Zimbabwean State TV – ZTV would address him as 'His Excellency, The President, First Secretary of the Party, Head of State and Government, Commander in-Chief of Zimbabwe Defense Forces'. It was not just the love of titles that Mugabe wanted, but the titles themselves showed that his powers had no limitations but were everywhere to be felt in the arms of the government and even beyond. Apart from Mugabe, we can be reminded of 'Field Marshall Dr Idi Amin Da MC DSO CBE (Conqueror of the British Empire) – Life President of Uganda'; Joseph Mobutu of Zaire who became known as 'Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Waza Banga' meaning (Warrior who Goes from Conquest to Conquest Leaving Fire in his Wake) as well as 'His Excellency the President, Ngwazi Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda – Life President of the Republic of Malawi'. In the case of the latter, if anyone in his country missed a comma in calling out his name, he or she would get into serious trouble (BBC News 2015). Upon a closer analysis, we find that the practice of acquiring a long list of titles by new presidents soon after their countries were liberated from foreign rule is probably because they saw themselves as the indispensable sole liberators of their people and this explains why they could not come to terms with term limits and wanted to be presidents for life.

The principle of republicanism exuded in the Bible can help Africa in dealing with power, and enhancing accountability wherever power is action, whether, in church, college, government, etc., power should be limited in the hand of people to avoid its abuse and if someone is given power, he or she must use it for the public that gave them that power in one way or the other.

Lessons from the New Testament

The New Testament in particular has important lessons to teach about power and accountability. This document emerged within a time the political system in place was imperialistic in nature. However, our focus is from Jesus's time to the Apostle Paul. Judaism at the time of Jesus was a complex mixture of opposing social, religious and political ideologies. Just like we have seen in the Old Testament, social, religious and political affairs were so much connected to the extent that one cannot easily separate a religious group from its political ideologies.

While Jesus had dealings with the various socio-political groups and religious ideologies of his time, he took his own unique life option. It was a position that had certain parallels with the likes of John the Baptist, though there are significant differences in their teachings and ministry. True politics is, of course, embodied in Jesus Christ. His saying about 'rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God' (Mt 22:21) provides our Gospel focus. The catchy phrase is perhaps one of the best-known political sayings of the Bible.

It is also perhaps one of the most misinterpreted and misused, frequently cited texts by politicians who are upset by Christian critiques to defend the view that religion or the realm of God must keep out of politics which is the realm of Caesar. During his lifetime, Mugabe, for example, once told Catholic bishops to concentrate on church issues and leave politics to politicians. In his scathing attack on the bishops, he said:

If I had gone to church and the priest had read that so-called pastoral letter, I would have stood up and said nonsense ... the bishops have decided to turn political. They have gone wrong, sadly, very sadly. This is an area we warn them not to tread. (Dzirutwe 2007:n.p)

Jesus told the Pharisees, in effect, that they should have no problem returning such sacrilegious coinage to the occupying political power. But the primary calling is to recognise God's claim, a claim over all of life. The claim of God's kingdom, which Jesus announces and for which he will shortly die, requires a different type of politics. It calls for politics driven not by Caesar and tricks political questions but by those made in God's image, determined to respect God and his image-bearers and to give themselves back to their Creator rather than seeking to live without reference to him.

Other New Testament passages relating to politics include Romans 13:1–7 whereby Paul encourages all to be obedient to the higher authorities, that is the Emperor. In 1 Timothy 2:1–2, Paul further makes an exhortation to give thanks and to pray for the Roman authorities. 1 Peter 2:13–17 and Titus 3:1–12 express the same view of the Christians' proper attitude towards the government as Paul had expressed a generation or two earlier. These cited texts show that the early Church's teaching was that Christians should be obedient to the governing authorities only in so far as there is no authority except from God, those that exist have been established by God. Any resistance therefore to authority was tantamount to opposing what God had appointed (Rm 13:2). Given that those in authority had been appointed by God, it meant they had to be accountable to God's people. In reference to their accountability, Paul uses the terms: 'servant of God' (Rm 13:4) and 'ministers of God' (Rm 13:6) to characterise their role as God's appointees. As pointed out already, it is unfortunate that some African leaders have shifted away from a God-centred perspective of life as they want to make themselves the point of reference in everything and not God. The Constitution of a country is usually a system that is put in place to ensure accountability but sadly, articles and paragraphs of such constitutions are either modified or interpreted to the benefit of the leaders in power. The imperial ideology of the Roman style is evident in most African leaders who tend to quote New Testament texts to support their ideas. Romans 13 has often been used to demand unquestioning obedience to those in authority and this is interpreted as a command from Paul. Togarasei (2004) argues that the same text has led African leaders such as the late Robert Mugabe during the 2002 elections in Zimbabwe to continue using the imperial ideology of the New Testament. Certainly, Paul was not encouraging blind obedience even to dictators who have no respect for God as the source of all

authority. If only such leaders were to listen to Paul that their proper role is that of being servants and ministers of God then Africa would be rid of self-aggrandising leaders.

The New Testament has several other examples of accountability in leadership. One example is what Paul portrayed about Timothy when he made him in charge of the church in Ephesus. In 1 Timothy 2:2, Paul instructed Timothy to deliver to faithful men what he had learned. This instruction for the selection and training of only faithful men suggests the understanding of accountability. The approach used by Paul of empowering people and releasing them for mission and ministry, as noted by Lawanson (2006:1047) is accompanied by a reciprocal obligation of accountability, for empowerment without corresponding accountability breeds irresponsibility.

Conclusion

Admitting the political nature of the Bible does not mean perceiving the biblical texts as political treatises or themed propaganda. The political nature of the Bible is all about recognising the texts' political contexts of origin, acknowledging their political-aligned nature and granting the political significance of their Jewish setting. The New Testament is often viewed as portraying an imperial ideology when it comes to politics. However, it requires a detailed exegesis of the texts for us not to see them as political treaties for personal interest in the present. Both the Old and New Testaments strongly state that God is the Source and Giver of Power. Therefore, our African leaders must acknowledge this fact and that will undoubtedly change how we perceive and use power in our leadership whether in church, professional working places or politics. God must be the basis on which power and accountability are formed in African leadership so that we can reduce the struggle we often see regarding power.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, coming up with the original draft, funding acquisition, formal analysis, review and editing of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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