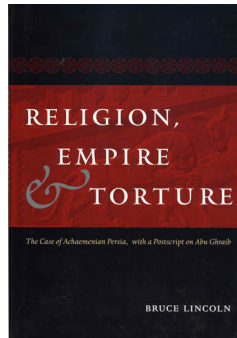


○ **REVIEW OF BRUCE LINCOLN, *RELIGION, EMPIRE AND TORTURE: THE CASE OF ACHAEMENIAN PERSIA, WITH A POSTSCRIPT ON ABU GHRAIB***
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Bruce Lincoln's theme, 'how religion, empire and torture can be interrelated' (16) is of huge importance to contemporary world politics. In the light of the unfolding picture of how torture has become an inextricable part of 'war on terror' policy, recently exposed and explored in Phillippe Sands' book *Torture Team*, Lincoln has produced a timely work (Sands 2008). Unlike Sands however, Lincoln does not tackle the politics of the 'war on terror' directly. The reason for this decision is that passions and preconceptions run so high that unencumbered analytical clarity is an ill-fated task. As Lincoln explains, 'there is no agreement on basic terms, or on what data might have relevance, let alone on the proper means of their interpretation' (Lincoln, xii). As an example of Lincoln's point, take even the phrase 'war on terror'. That the phrase is a problematic – even dangerous – discursive construction, rather than a war as such, has been the subject of much contention over the past several years. That such basic issues are so contentious causes problems talking across a priori ontological presuppositions. Stray too far from basic primary assumptions of a perceived camp, and your analysis of the 'war on terror' will be pigeonholed and dismissed by many, and perhaps by those you would most like to convince. Lincoln's abstraction to Achaemenian Persia serves to provide analytical elucidation that might convince across camps.

As Lincoln realises, his subjects of enquiry are fraught with analytical difficulties. Can America be considered an empire? By what criteria might such a claim be made? Few would dispute the centrality of religion to the 'war on terror' but should it be interpreted as an inexorable clash, a just war or a discursive construction (see Lewis 2002, Elshtain 2003 and Jackson 2005 respectively)? Lincoln's elegant solution is 'to engage the problem obliquely by considering examples sufficiently removed from our own as to afford some critical distance' (xii). The obvious criticism of such an approach would be to question its relevance. Do the dusty Persian archives

really have anything to tell us, or are they simply a distraction from the real contemporary politics that require our attention?

In one sense Bruce Lincoln's book follows in the 'religion and empire' mould that has become so dominant in biblical and religious scholarship over the past few years. A normative issue in the present (most often related to US foreign policy) motivates the author to set up dialectic between ancient and modern worlds – ancient tragedies, it is assumed, might shed light on, or even help us with, contemporary ones. Most frequently the ancient empire in question is Rome (Crossan and Reed 2004; Horsley 1997, 2003). Post-colonial criticism has made the lens of imperial subjugation central to mainstream biblical scholarship (Sugitharajah 2003, 2006).

Uneasy questions lurk around much of this 'religion and empire' work. Why and in what ways is the ancient world relevant to modern ethical concerns? Despite the apparent normative credentials does this work in fact only serve to provide new academic canons of literature for an elite few who have time for such antique speculation? Does the canon – now more apparently representative, normative and concerned – in fact remain obscure, detached and elitist? Does modelling, and resolving, grievances in the abstract world of ancient empires provide an ethical salve for a kind of scholarship that has nothing of use to say about the real world?

Despite the surface similarity to this burgeoning 'religion and empire' genre, Lincoln's book is set quite apart. Indeed, his success in this book draws attention to the inadequacies of so much of the field. Lincoln is quite clear that Achaemenian Persian is used as a 'spectacularly instructive example that lets us consider more general issues, not as an object of inherent fascination' (16). So many of his peers simply use a sprinkling of contemporary political thought to colour another return to the authorising value of ancient religious figures. The simple difference here is that Lincoln has produced a work that is important to contemporary political understanding.

He does this with an excellent theoretical and methodological approach. The work is grounded in an impressive grasp, clear from the preface, of the social and political issues involved. In his earlier book *Holy Terrors* Lincoln applied discourse analysis to the 'war on terror', offering an important, timely and revealing comparative study of the religious rhetoric used by Bush and Osama Bin Laden in the wake of September 11 2001 (Lincoln 2002). Here again Lincoln employs a sound comparative methodology in order to provide the tools for epistemological analysis of how religion, empire and torture function.

Lincoln uses a thematic approach in order to explore the epistemological ground on which imperial ideology is constructed. The key themes as he sees them are: (1) a starkly dualistic ethics with a binary discrimination between good and evil; (2) a theology of election as God's chosen; (3) a divinely mandated soteriological mission that understands the empire's victims as its beneficiaries (95).

Only a cruel reduction of the ways that these themes are expertly drawn out is possible here. First, Lincoln explores the spatial politics of good and evil through the case of Darius the Great. He outlines a cosmology of power, which uses religious discourse first to define centre and periphery and second to code imperial might as ontological virtue. This moral geography is at the heart of political subjugation across times. We see in the Persian case an echo of what the contemporary political philosopher Giorgio Agamben terms, the state of exception. For Agamben 'sacredness' is 'the originary form of the inclusion of bare life in the juridical order'. Sacredness, 'an invisible imperative that inaugurates authority', he claims, underpins the state of exception by defining those inside, and those outside the boundaries of the legal system (Agamben 1998,

84–85). The chapter is also a useful accompaniment to geopolitical theory that has sought to map out the spatial aspect of political violence (Gregory 2004). Lincoln lays bare the discursive manoeuvres that allow sacredness to define centre and periphery.

Next Lincoln considers the construction of being god's chosen through the cases of Cyrus II (the Great) and Darius. In the inscriptions concerning the latter an antithetical construction is evident. Divine favour is constructed in relation to its opposite, 'the Lie' of Gaumata (45–9). Further, the imperial restorative mission is predicated on the need for the chosen to counteract the Lie (49). This in turn leads Lincoln to explore the Achaemenian cosmology and how the imperial King constructed himself as rooted in the creation of time. The divine creation of 'bumi' (earth/empire) leads inexorably in the Achaemenian narrative to the kingship of Darius over 'this great, far-reaching earth/empire (bumi)' (54). Thus the King is not only legitimated by time immemorial, but also people are charged with working to restore the eternal, natural condition in the hereafter. The ontological distinction between primordial eternity and final, eschatological eternity therefore have a crucial political function. As Lincoln shows, the Bisitun inscription and Achaemenian cosmology contain the belief that Achaemenian king will bring about the triumph of good over the Lie, the end of history and the triumph of eternal perfection (60–2).

Chapter five outlines how the ideas of cosmological order can come to take on material form. The 'restoration of the world's original material perfection' (76) was materially embodied in Darius's palace and in the royal banquet table's regional dishes. Likewise the Achaemenian *paridaida* gardens (taken into European languages as paradise, but in Persian literally meaning walled enclosure or garden) formed a physical manifestation of the ideal of an all-embracing totality. Each example brings into focus the hegemonic quality of the imperial cry for enduring peace and unity. The desired paradise at the end of history can only come about through the negation of the enemy army, famine and the Lie (79). As Lincoln's discourse analysis eloquently outlines, this totalising vision of paradise can be a post-hoc legitimation but can also be a motivation for the most morally questionable of imperial policies (80).

It is to the most depraved of these policies that Lincoln's analysis finally turns. He gives a detailed account of torture mandated by the Achaemenian king, Artaxerxes. The acts, Lincoln realises, have a gruesome logic as the culmination of the imperial ideology. Within this ideology the most violent and painful physical degradation that the victim of torture undergoes is a graphic illustration of their guilt as embodiment of the evil of the Lie. In the context that Lincoln has outlined these acts were 'a legal procedure informed by and thoroughly grounded in religious principles that included such domains as ethics, cosmology, demonology, and salvation'. Given that the imperial king had constructed himself as antithetical to the Lie these most abhorrent practices are read in the imperial discourse as 'confirmation of its loftiest principles, even when the two stand in the starkest contradiction' (94).

In his postscript, Lincoln draws together the similarity that he sees between the 'religiously grounded apologia of empire' in the Achaemenian inscriptions, and that of the rhetoric of the Bush administration. He draws comparisons with the stagecraft of Bush's 'mission accomplished' speech, the toppling of Saddam's statue and the images of torture at Abu Ghraib. The similarities are compelling. Lincoln skillfully uses the critical distance of the ancient sources to allow important questions to be asked. The student of the more recent case is left to ask whether the discursive practices that legitimate and/or motivate hubris and selective morality are anything new. Lincoln's

book provides an emphatic 'no', and by making clear how these epistemological forces cut across time, he sets out the dangers of the notion of exceptionalism.

Lincoln's approach is subtle. Aware of the likely knee-jerk rejection that might otherwise be received by such a telling deconstruction of these 'war on terror' discursive themes, he offers the Persian example to powerful analytical effect. If agreement can be found on the role of religion, torture and empire here, he seems to suggest, perhaps this can provide a starting point. The themes are of great importance and bearing on contemporary political theory. The way that Lincoln subtly and yet powerfully elucidates their relevance should be required reading for those seriously trying to unravel the place of religion in contemporary political violence. The only trouble with this subtlety is that it can be easily ignored. It is hoped that this book will be given the attention it demands.

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