

Interpreting ‘the exile’ in African biblical scholarship: *an ideo-theological dilemma in postcolonial South Africa*

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Abstract

The dominant interpretive paradigm in African biblical scholarship involves a socio-historical comparative analysis of the biblical text and the African context. While the analytical processes employed in each of two major constituent parts -- biblical text and African context -- are clear, the third part of the interpretive act, namely the actual comparative appropriation is less clear. Nigerian scholar Justin Ukpong and South African scholar Jonathan Draper (via the work of Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte) are the clearest about the interpretive elements that brings the biblical text and the African context into conversation, and yet even in these cases the ideo-theological dimensions of the appropriative act are somewhat obscured.

Using ‘the exile’ as an example, this paper interrogates the ideo-theological dimensions of the appropriative act in (African) biblical scholarship. Beginning with the term ‘the exile’, which is already ideo-theologically laden, the paper explores the dilemma’s posed by a postcolonial South African appropriation of what is commonly known as ‘the exilic period’ in ‘Israel’s’ biblical history. Using particular biblical texts by way of example, particularly Isaiah, the paper probes the contributions and limits of biblical scholarship in attempting to appropriate ‘the exile’ in current postcolonial/post-apartheid South Africa, especially when the term ‘exile’ is conjoined to the term ‘suffering’.

Introduction

The most characteristic form of African biblical scholarship falls within what has been called a comparative paradigm, which Knut Holter has helpfully defined

as studies whose major approach is a comparative methodology that facilitates a parallel interpretation of certain Old Testament [and New Testament] texts or motifs and supposed African parallels, letting the two illuminate one

another. Traditional exegetical methodology is of course found here, too; however, the Old Testament [and/or New Testament] is approached from a perspective where African comparative material is the major dialogue partner and traditional exegetical methodology is subordinated to this perspective.¹

What I want to interrogate in this paper is more precisely *how* biblical text and African context ‘illuminate’ or ‘dialogue’ with one another. In other words, what are the hermeneutic moves we make in African biblical scholarship in order to bring African contexts and biblical texts into conversation?

Comparative studies form the vast bulk of all academic African biblical interpretation, and can usefully be divided into three overlapping chronological phases.² According to the chronology developed by the Nigerian biblical scholar Justin Ukpong (but in the words of Holter) there was ‘an early reactive phase (1930s-1970s), which legitimized African religion and culture vis-a-vis the western tradition through comparative studies’, which then led to ‘a reactive-proactive phase (1970s-1990s), which more clearly made use of the African context as resource for biblical interpretation’, which in turn led to ‘a proactive phase (1990s), which makes the African context the explicit subject of biblical interpretation’.³ In each of these phases, as Holter’s earlier definition of the comparative approach acknowledges, there is an explicit dialogue between the socio-historical dimensions of the biblical text and the religio-social realities of African life.

The dialogue between the socio-historical world of the biblical text and the religious, cultural, economic, and political world of African life is two-way. The comparative approach is not simply a strategy for validating anything and everything in the African socio-historical world that shows some similarities with the socio-historical world of and behind the biblical text. The comparative approach is always evaluative. Ukpong identifies five, overlapping, forms of evaluation. ‘The first approach seeks to evaluate elements of African culture, religion,

1 Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 88.

2 Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

3 Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000*, 89, Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions."

beliefs, concepts or practices in the light of the biblical witness, to arrive at a Christian understanding of them and bring out their value for Christian witness'.⁴ 'The second approach is concerned with what a biblical text or theme has to say in the critique of a particular issue in the society or in the church's life, or what lessons may be drawn from a biblical text or theme for a particular context. It is similar to the first above but with the difference that in the first approach the contextual realities studied are assumed to be values or at least to contain values whereas in this one they are presented as liabilities to be challenged with the biblical message'.⁵ 'In the third approach biblical themes or texts are interpreted against the background of African culture, religion and life experience. The aim is to arrive at a new understanding of the biblical text that would be informed by the African situation, and would be African and Christian'.⁶ 'The fourth approach has to do with erecting 'bridgeheads' for communicating the biblical message. This means making use of concepts from either the bible or African culture, with which Africans can easily identify, to show the continuity between African culture and Christianity, for the purpose of communicating the biblical message'.⁷ 'The fifth approach has to do with the study of the biblical text to discover biblical models or biblical foundations for aspects of contemporary church life and practice in Africa'.⁸ Explicit in Ukpong's own work, but not always in the work of other African *biblical scholars*, is his clear ownership of what it is that connects these two components of the comparative method. 'The goal of [comparative] interpretation', declares Ukpong, 'is the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation'.⁹ According to Ukpong, there is an ideological and a theological element in the process that connects text and context.

In what follows I am going to interrogate in more detail these ideological and theological elements and the 'connecting' process which they partially constitute. I am not going to offer an defence for this kind of work in this paper; this is what the vast majority of African biblical scholars do! Indeed, it is what most, if not all, biblical scholars do; we African biblical scholars are just more overt about the always-implicit-connection between text and context (as Hans Georg-Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, among others, have argued). But this

4 Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," 17.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 17-18.

7 Ibid., 18.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 24.

does not mean that we are always explicit about how we connect text and context.

A third pole

Jonathan Draper has been one of those among us who has tried, consistently, to be explicit about how we make connections between text and context. In an essay published in 1991,¹⁰ before it was fashionable in South Africa to do overtly contextual biblical interpretation, Draper carefully delineates the elements involved in making the connection between text and context.

Drawing on the pioneering work of Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Ricoeur, Draper identifies the move from distanciation (whether via socio-historical or literary analysis)¹¹ -- what the text meant (traditionally referred to as 'exegesis'), to belonging (via particular contextual appropriation) -- what the text means (traditionally referred to as 'interpretation' or 'understanding'). But how is this move made? Draper begins to answer this question quite confidently, saying: 'My hermeneutic also deliberately chooses to read the text within the community of the oppressed, because the fundamental paradigm of the Bible is God's *liberative* design for mankind' (cf. Croatto, 1987:40).¹² However, he then seems to reconsider, for he goes on to say that 'The option for the poor forms the horizon of my understanding and belonging, yet it does not itself determine the process by which the text is interpreted'.¹³ In support of this reconsideration he quotes from Clodovis Boff, one of the earliest liberation theologians to interrogate the connection between text and context. Boff argues, as quoted by Draper, that 'strictly speaking, the word of God is not to be found in the letter of the scripture. Nor is it in the spirit of the hearing or reading community. It is precisely between these two, in their mutual, dynamic relationship, in a back-and-forth that is never perfectly objectifiable'.¹⁴

10 Jonathan A. Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," in *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament*, ed. Patrick J. Hartin and Jacobus H. Petzer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).

11 That Draper identifies both as forms of distanciation is itself significant, a point to which I will return later in this paper. See *Ibid.*, 242.. Draper is here referring to the work of Croatto in J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (New York: Orbis, 1987), 40.

12 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 243.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (New York: Orbis, 1987), 136, Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 243.

At this point in Draper's hermeneutic considerations there is no explicit concrete location for the dynamic process he has begun to analyse. But we can discern an emerging presence, hovering between the textual pole and the contextual pole. This presence is, of course, the reader! It is the reader that enables the text and context to engage in conversation. So if we are to push Boff at this point, we could on to say that it is the reader who enables the regular back-and-forth movement between text and context. It is the appropriative reader who makes the text and context mutually engage. But what precisely is it within the, until now absent, reader that facilitates the process of appropriation? This is the question at the core of this paper.

Both Draper and Boff flirt with a possible identification. For Draper it is his ideological-theological conviction that 'the Bible is God's *liberative* design for mankind'. The Bible has a particular 'shape', in the sense advocated by Albert Nolan¹⁵ and invoked by Draper further on in his reflections.¹⁶ Rejecting simplistic notions of correspondence between text and context, Draper, like Boff,¹⁷ insists that 'Meaning ... cannot be transferred from the text to the present on a 'one for one' allegorical basis'. 'Scripture', he goes on to argue, 'is not a blueprint, but a paradigm'.¹⁸ Similarly, Boff too acknowledges what I will call an ideological element or moment or movement, speaking above of 'the spirit' of the hearing or reading community. He is more explicit later, and again Draper picks up on this in his own analysis. For Boff the 'key element' in his explanation of how text and context are brought into connection 'is not this or that particular text of Scripture, in correspondence with such and such a precise situation... The key element here is the global, and at the same time particular "spirit"'.¹⁹

What mediates or connects particular text and particular context is, for Draper, an identifiable macro-shape to the Bible and, for Boff, the global spirit of Scripture. They seem to assume a self-evident shape/spirit to the Bible, and it is a liberative shape/spirit. This assumption was not uncommon in liberation theology, particularly in its Latin American, North American

15 Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 149.

16 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 244.

17 Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, 244.

18 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 244.

19 Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, 140, Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 244.

Black Theology, South African Black Theology, and South African Contextual Theology forms during the 1970-80s.

However, as Draper notes in his essay,²⁰ emerging voices in South African Black Theology during the late-1980s began to question whether indeed the Bible had a liberative shape/spirit. Takatso Mofokeng²¹ and Itumeleng Mosala²² added their own distinctive analysis to an emerging strand within liberation theologies, forged by feminist scholars,²³ which questioned a self-evident liberatory trajectory of the Bible.²⁴

Draper's hermeneutic of trust in the Bible's liberatory thrust is, therefore, not naive; he is fully aware of the counter claims of a hermeneutic of suspicion. So how then does he maintain his position? There seem to be two elements to his ideo-theological orientation, one substantive and one strategic. The substantive element is his conviction that biblical scholarship confirms, from a socio-historical and/or a literary perspective, a Jesus who 'seems to have deliberately chosen to identify himself with the landless poor of Palestine, although he had the option of the security of a trade and home'.²⁵ The strategic element is his commitment to do his biblical scholarship in the service of ordinary South African readers of the Bible,²⁶ for whom the Bible is a sacred text with the potential for transforming praxis.²⁷ Both elements are evident in Draper's reading of Luke 13:6-9, which he offers as a case study

20 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 240.

21 T. Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation," *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988).

22 Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

23 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983), Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Towards a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, ed. B. Mahan and L. D. Richesin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalization in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

24 Latin American liberation hermeneutics has also begun to shift its orientation, problematising the Bible itself. A good example is Elsa Tamez, "1 Timothy: What a Problem!," in *Toward a New Heaven and New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

25 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 243.

26 *Ibid.*, 240.

27 *Ibid.*, 245.

of his contextual tri-polar hermeneutic.²⁸

Like all of us African biblical scholars who have risked actual encounters between the biblical text and our African contexts, Draper has continued to probe the connection between text and context. A decade later, Draper reiterates the importance of ‘the shape’ of biblical theology, drawing directly once again on Nolan’s formulation as his starting point.²⁹ In so doing he quotes a sentence from Nolan’s book, *God in South Africa*, in which Nolan rather nicely captures the earlier images of both Draper’s and Boff: ‘Objective revelations and Biblical norms are not the letter or content of the good news for us today but the spirit or shape that the gospel will have to take for us or for anyone else’.³⁰

This leads Draper into an elaboration of a ‘tri-polar’ movement between distantiating (‘letting the text be other’ through socio-historical and/or literary exegesis), contextualisation (‘analysing my situation as a reader/hearer’, using sociological, economic, and anthropological tools), and appropriation.³¹ As I have said, it is ‘appropriation’ that interests me in this paper, for it performs the role of mediator between text and context. But what I want to hold onto is the search for the elusive elements within the reader that constitute the act of appropriation. We have already begun to discern some of these; but things become much clearer when Draper draws on the work of Christina Grenholm and Daniel Patte.

Scriptural criticism

Appropriation, for Draper in this later formulation, ‘involves understanding that the Bible is a particular kind of text: it is the normative [ie. scriptural] text of a faith community’.³²

Draper’s earlier understanding of the Bible having a particular design or shape now finds, via the ‘scriptural criticism’ of Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte,³³ further resources with

28 Ibid., 247-55.

29 Jonathan A. Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What Is Contextual Exegesis in the New South Africa?," in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, ed. McGlory T. Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

30 Ibid., 149, Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel*, 25.

31 Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What Is Contextual Exegesis in the New South Africa?," 154.

32 Ibid., 152.

33 Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte, "Receptions, Critical Interpretations, and Scriptural Criticism," in *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations*, ed. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

which to analyse and articulate the relationship between biblical text and particular present contexts.

While Draper is persuaded that an emic, within the religious tradition, reading of the Bible is important in contexts where the Bible and biblical interpretation matter, he does not want to see scriptural criticism slipping into ‘a retreat into pietism’,³⁴ which he worries Grenholm and Patte’s formulations might promote. He refuses to let go of the communal and contextual dimensions of biblical interpretation that were so important in the struggle against apartheid. ‘Our context prompts us’, argues Draper, ‘in the questions we bring to the text and decides what counts as an answer’.³⁵ And while our faith context is an important aspect of our context, so too are our cultural, socio-economic, and class contexts.³⁶ So for Draper a theological connection between text and context is not enough; there must also be an ideological connection. But besides these qualifications, Draper likes ‘the dynamic’ of Grenholm and Patte’s tri-polar method.

Before I examine this dynamic, I want to point, again, to the focus of my analysis, for it tends to slip and slid if we do not pay attention. In the terms of the paragraph above, I want to probe *how and with what* ‘our context prompts us’, for this is an aspect of the appropriative moment. Surely our contexts prompt us through our *ideological* commitments to them and through their *ideological* formation of us? Similarly, though this is implied rather than stated, our sacred text also prompts us. Again, the question must be *how* scripture does this. And the answer is similar. Surely our sacred text prompts us through our *theological* orientation towards it and through its *theological* formation of us? While I recognise that this is an overly neat distinction between ideology and theology, the distinction serves here as a heuristic one, enabling us to discern elements within the appropriative process.

With these related questions in mind, I will now examine the dynamic of Grenholm and Patte’s tri-polar method in more detail. Grenholm and Patte introduce their understanding of scriptural criticism as ‘an interpretive process that interrelates three poles: (1) a scriptural text, (2) the believers’ life, and (3) the believers’ religious perception of life’.³⁷ What is

34 Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What Is Contextual Exegesis in the New South Africa?," 153.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 154.

37 Grenholm and Patte, "Receptions, Critical Interpretations, and Scriptural Criticism," 14.

particularly helpful about Grenholm and Patte's notion of scriptural criticism is its explicit recognition of appropriation and the real (believing) reader who embodies it as the third pole. Being clear about this third pole is helpful, for all biblical interpretation incorporates this third pole, whether it is acknowledged or not. What Grenholm and Patte refer to as 'bi-polar readings'³⁸ are simply tri-polar readings which are not explicit about the third pole. Bi-polar readings are closet tri-polar readings!

Having outlined their tri-polar schema, Grenholm and Patte then, immediately, go on to elaborate on the third pole. 'The third pole', they say, 'includes interpretive traditions of all kinds that shape our preunderstandings of the biblical texts and reflect the religious experience of the presence or absence of the divine through which believers perceive their relation to the conditions of their life'.³⁹ While I agree with Draper that Grenholm and Patte seem to privilege the theological over the ideological, their formulation does not exclude the kind of socio-political ideological commitments Draper has in mind. But as I have indicated, the 'lived' element in Grenholm and Patte's account of the third pole given an ideological orientation by Draper, who holds onto the liberation notion of praxis. For Draper 'appropriation implies praxis'.⁴⁰ 'Lived faith'⁴¹ is, I think, an apt way of referring to what I have called 'an ideo-theological orientation'. It is clearly central to the appropriative moment. In other words, how and with what we connect text and context has to do with our ideo-theological *embodied* faith.

In the third of a series of articles on contextual biblical hermeneutics,⁴² Draper elaborates on this element, and in so doing sheds more light on the third pole. Interestingly, he does this most clearly in a fourth section of his argument, after he has discussed each of the poles in its own section. Having concluded his discussion of each of the poles, and before he goes on to apply the tri-polar model to a particular text, he introduces a new section, with the sub-heading 'The location of the reader(s)'. He begins this section by saying that, 'In terms of the application of the whole model, I would like to stress that the reading of particular texts is also guided by an understanding of the fundamental nature of the Christian community and of

38 Ibid., 16, 21-27.

39 Ibid., 14.

40 Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What Is Contextual Exegesis in the New South Africa?," 158.

41 Jonathan A. Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa," *Grace and Truth* 19, no. 2 (2002): 18.

42 Ibid.

who Jesus is. Put in another way, the interpretation of individual passages is placed within the ambit of what the interpreter considers to be the primary axis or thread of the whole'.⁴³ This is now familiar, Draper is emphasising again how central our understanding of the shape of scripture is to appropriation. But why then not include this material under the sub-heading on 'Appropriation'? I will allow this question to hover, while I continue with Draper's argument.

He continues by acknowledging that there are 'oppressive strands' within the biblical narrative, 'such as the story of the dispossession and genocide of the Canaanites which accompanied the entry of Israel into the promised land'. There are also, he adds, Phyllis Trible's 'texts of terror',⁴⁴ 'such as the rape of Tamar and many other violations of women in the Old Testament'.⁴⁵ But 'these we read', says Draper, revealing his ideo-theological understanding of the shape of scripture, 'against the fundamental axis of liberation, love and justice, which characterises God's dealing with his people'. In order to read the Bible with this ideo-theological orientation, Draper acknowledges, requires that our conversation with the biblical text involves 'talking back to the text', interrogating it, even 'reading it against the grain'.⁴⁶ Draper's responsibility to the discipline of biblical studies requires that he acknowledge the ideo-theological ambiguity of the Bible itself.⁴⁷ This is another element in the appropriative moment, *for a biblical scholar*, namely, that we accept that scripture does not have a self-evident shape. The shape has to be constructed.

As Draper continues with his argument he reveals the elements that he privileges in constructing his own ideo-theological orientation. 'We have to make choices in our reading of the text', he says, 'just as in life'.⁴⁸ 'We [notice the plural] choose [notice the constructive aspect] to read from the perspective of the powerless, the outcast, the poor, rather than from the perspective of the powerful, the respectable, the rich'.⁴⁹ Our social location, he is saying,

43 Ibid.: 18.

44 Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

45 Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa," 18.

46 Ibid. In his reference to reading 'against the grain', Draper invokes the work of Itumeleng Mosala, Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*.

47 Whether it makes sense to speak of the Bible 'having' ideo-theological orientations is an interesting and complex discussion Stephen Fowl, "Texts Don't Have Ideologies," *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995), Gerald O. West, "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy," *Scriptura* 86 (2004).

48 Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa," 18.

49 Ibid.

plays a pivotal part in our ideo-theological orientation. But it is not only this contextual pole that shapes our ideo-theological orientation; it is also the socio-historical [and/or literary] dimension of the biblical text itself: ‘We find authority’, he continues, ‘for this [social location] from what is probably the oldest strand in the tradition of the words of Jesus, namely, the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-26)’.⁵⁰

Owning ideo-theological orientation

The integrative *dynamic* between the three poles is evident. The contextual pole makes a contribution to the ideo-theological orientation of the appropriation pole, in terms of the readers’ social location and the choices readers make about their social location. The textual pole makes a contribution to the ideo-theological orientation of the appropriation pole, in terms of its own core axis (as discerned by particular readers).

In a sense, therefore, one could revert to earlier bi-polar conceptions of an engagement between text and context. However, the significant contribution of this emerging tri-polar theoretical framework is that it provides us with a way of interrogating the constructive nature of biblical interpretation. But -- and here I return to Draper’s decision not to include this discussion under the heading of ‘Appropriation’ -- because we all (including us biblical scholars) are reluctant to own up to our interpretations being constructed rather than immanent or essential, we hesitate, with Draper, in including this overtly constructionist-type discussion under the appropriation sub-heading. We prefer to believe that our social location and the text’s interpretation are self-evident. This is the value of the third pole; the very term ‘appropriation’ and the opportunity to interrogate it force us to own up to our ideo-theological construction.

I can understand, however, why Draper discusses elements of his ideo-theological orientation under a separate heading, that of social location. The struggle against apartheid forced biblical scholars to take sides, along with all South Africans. And while some tried to take a middle-way, adopting a ‘third way theology’,⁵¹ they were actually supporting the racist status quo by refusing to actively resist it, as *The Kairos Document* made clear.⁵² Choosing sides

50 Ibid.

51 Anthony O. Balcomb, *Third Way Theology: Reconciliation, Revolution and Reform in the South African Church* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

52 Kairos theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church*, Revised Second Edition ed. (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986).

meant, for many of us white South Africa biblical scholars, betraying our ancestors and our communities. So social location was never self-evident!

We have also been fortunate to have the voice of Itumeleng Mosala among us. Against a strong tradition within liberation biblical hermeneutics, which proclaimed the liberatory shape of the Bible, Mosala insisted that we look more carefully at the Bible, using ‘eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation’⁵³ and historical-materialist analytical categories.⁵⁴ Though this led Mosala to question whether the Bible really did have an emancipatory design, and to declare its intrinsic oppressive character, he nevertheless refused to abandon the Bible (most of the time). But instead of using the Bible’s shape to construct his ideo-theological orientation he used the historical-materialist *reading methodology* itself. Both context and text, Mosala argued, should be interpreted with historical-materialist categories and concepts.⁵⁵ So not only was social location not self-evident, neither was the Bible’s basic design.

How we connect present contexts and biblical texts is, in sum, through ideo-theological appropriation, partially determined by our understanding of the Bible as sacred text, our understanding of the Bible’s predominant shape, and our understanding of social location and social engagement (praxis).

Responsibility to discipline and accountability to community

The tension for socially engaged biblical scholars, like Draper, is that in using our interpretive resources while collaborating with marginalised communities and contexts, we recognise that we must be responsible to our discipline of biblical studies. This is why it is important that we are able to demonstrate, within our discipline, that the Bible does indeed have a liberatory design.

Fortunately for African biblical scholarship, with its strong emphasis on socio-historical

53 Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology," in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 196.

54 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*.

55 See Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, Second Edition ed. (Maryknoll, NY and Pietermaritzburg: Orbis Books and Cluster Publications, 1995), 70-75.

forms of interpretation,⁵⁶ it has been socio-historical biblical scholarship that has provided the foundation for making an argument about the Bible's liberatory design. So, for example, the pioneering *socio*-historical work of Norman Gottwald gave an impetus to many of us working in liberation hermeneutics,⁵⁷ for his *Tribes of Yahweh*⁵⁸ argued that God's originary intention was to establish an alternative, egalitarian society over against the centralised monarchic city-state with its tributary mode of production. Such was the suggestive power of this socio-historical analysis that it propelled a whole array of projects, from small summary booklets outlining 'God's project' of liberation⁵⁹ and Old Testament theologies which traced this liberatory trajectory through the full array of Old Testament literature and into the New Testament.⁶⁰

Gottwald himself took up the task of trying to follow this liberatory trajectory through the various literature of the Hebrew Bible in his *The Hebrew Bible: a socio-literary introduction*.⁶¹ As even a cursory reading of this and his earlier work makes abundantly clear, Gottwald is not simply forcing the text and its socio-historical contexts of production into a predetermined mould. Indeed, he warns that it is 'a risky business to 'summon up' powerful symbolism out of a distant past unless the symbol users are very selfconscious of their choices and applications, and fully aware of how their social struggle is both like and unlike the social struggle of the architects of the symbols'.⁶² He cautions that efforts to draw 'religious inspiration' or 'biblical values' from, for example, early Israel 'will be romantic and utopian unless resolutely correlated to both the ancient and the contemporary cultural-

56 Gerald O. West, "Shifting Perspectives on the Comparative Paradigm in (South) African Biblical Scholarship," *Religion and Theology* 12, no. 1 (2005).

57 I emphasize the sociological dimensions of Gottwald's socio-historical work because it was sociological models and methodologies that enabled Gottwald to postulate a liberatory shape to the fragmentary historical data.

58 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979).

59 Carlos Mesters, *God's Project* (Cape Town: The Theology Exchange Programme, nd).

60 Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," in *Walter Brueggemann Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," in *Walter Brueggemann Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K Gottwald and Richard A Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

61 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

62 Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.*, 703. Gottwald gives considerable space to developing this point (703-706).

material and social-organizational foundations'.⁶³ So Gottwald is carefully attentive to the resources and restraints of biblical scholarship. But he honestly does believe that there is sufficient evidence to view the early history of 'Israel' as 'the historical project of economic and political emancipation'.⁶⁴ That this shape can be discerned in the available data informs Gottwald's own ideo-theological orientation, for he argues that as socio-historical study of the origins of Israel

penetrates more and more deeply to the circumstances and dynamics of Yahwism's emergence, the integral social-revolutionary character of Yahwism comes more clearly to light and thereby once again challenges the synagogues and churches with the disturbing implications and consequences of claiming continuity with a religion sprung from such roots.⁶⁵

But the integrity of Gottwald as *biblical scholar*, also prompts him, for example, to caution that though there is relatively compelling evidence for a economic and political social struggle, this does not appear to be the case for the women's struggle. In a footnote in *Tribes of Yahweh* Gottwald argues that 'women and men who care about the future of feminism in our religious communities should be examining the techno-environmental and socio-political conditions of ancient Israel to see what parameters actually existed for a feminist movement and to assess the extent to which Israelite women benefitted or lost from the transition between elitist hierarchical Canaan and a generally much more egalitarian intertribal Israel'.⁶⁶ However, he was not particularly confident that such socio-historical research would contribute very much to the feminist cause.

A careful calculus of these gains and losses [of women in early Israel] will ultimately be of far more significance to the contemporary religious feminist movement than attempts to make ancient Israel religion look more feminist than it actually was. I personally estimate that Israelite women gained much from their break with Canaanite society, but I do not for a moment think that they achieved -- or could have achieved under ancient technological and social conditions -- what women today are capable of achieving. I would not like to see contemporary religious feminists, and I include myself among them, led

63 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 706.

64 *Ibid.*, 238.

65 *Ibid.*, 597.

66 Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.*, 797, note 628.

into the trap of pinning many hopes on dubious arguments about an ancient Israelite feminism which to this point is more a chimera than a demonstrated reality. For feminists who wish to keep in continuity with their religious heritage, I believe it is sufficient to assert that contemporary feminism in church and synagogue is a logical and necessary extension of the social egalitarian principle of early Israel, which itself did not exhibit any appreciable independent feminist consciousness or praxis.⁶⁷

Gottwald is right, of course, to caution against what Hugo Assman refers to as ‘a fundamentalism of the Left’ that too easily reads the agendas of the present back into the past, short-circuiting the careful scholar work that is required by attempting ‘to transplant biblical paradigms and situations into our world without understanding their historical circumstances’.⁶⁸ However, such is the importance of founding moments for discerning and constructing historical and social identity, that feminist scholars have not been deflected by Gottwald’s caution, deciding instead to do their own socio-historical work on this formative period. So, for example, Carol Meyers does her own careful socio-historical work on the formative period of ‘Israel’s’ social history, and with integrity to her discipline discovers the ancient ‘Israelite’ women in their context.⁶⁹

Because the Bible matters to current contexts, socially engaged biblical scholars must be accountable to their contexts by bringing the particular context’s concerns to the biblical text. Because socially engaged biblical scholars are biblical scholars, they also have a responsibility to their discipline. So Meyers, like Gottwald, reconstructs the life of pre-monarchic women, using the resources of biblical scholarship to recover a place for women within ‘egalitarian values and patterns’ of life in pre-state Israel.⁷⁰ It is her ideo-theological accountability to the women’s struggle today which shapes her quest, but it is the responsible use of sociological, anthropological, archaeological, and literary tools which shapes her reconstruction. What she finds in the biblical text, in turn, re-constitutes her ideo-theological orientation, for, as she says, ‘If the egalitarian values and patterns that prevailed during those prestate centuries are to have any meaning for later generations, including our own, this

67 Ibid., 797, note 628, my emphasis.

68 Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 104.

69 Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

70 Ibid., 14.

recovery of Everywoman Eve's life and context should make the nonhierarchical position of women a visible and enduring model, as are the other widely acclaimed theological and social innovations and accomplishments, of early Israel'.⁷¹

The work of Gottwald and Meyers provide excellent examples of tri-polar interpretations. They demonstrate the continual to-and-fro movement between text and context; they demonstrate the ideo-theological character of this to-and-fro movement; they demonstrate the way in which both text and context each constitute and re-constitute ideo-theological orientation; they demonstrate how ideo-theological orientation is directly related to particular contexts/communities of accountability; and they demonstrate how ideo-theological orientation is regulated by the discipline to which they are responsible, biblical studies.

While the examples I have used so far focus on the formative and foundational moments of early 'Israel', other moments of 'Israel's' formation have become similarly significant, particularly in Africa. I refer here to 'the exile'.

'The exile': accountability and responsibility

Biblical studies does not always cooperate with socially engaged biblical scholars! Just when we were beginning to feel secure in our socio-historical reconstructions of the early periods of ancient 'Israel', historians of the biblical world began to cast serious doubt about the available evidence, arguing that if we were to bracket the biblical witness itself, there was not a great deal that we could rely on until at least the Persian period.⁷² And so while Gottwald's work on 'the exile' begins by problematising the very notion of 'exile', arguing that the term itself privileges a focus on the upper-class Judahites, including the leadership of the state and the temple-cult, who were deported to Babylonia, some of whom then returned under Persian patronage, another whole trajectory of scholarship asks the larger question, 'was there ever an exile?'.⁷³ Robert Carroll provides a clear and concise overview of the debate on this topic, beginning with Charles Torrey in 1910 who argued that the scholarly consensus that there

71 Ibid.

72 See for example Philip Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), N.P. Lemche, *Ancient Israel. A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), N.P. Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (London and Louisville: SPCK and Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), T. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

73 Robert P. Carroll, "Exile, Restoration, and Colony: Judah in the Persian Empire," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 111.

was an exile and that it had been a great watershed in Judah's history was 'a thoroughly mistaken theory'.⁷⁴

Interestingly, however, Carroll does not stop with casting doubt on the historical reliability of 'the exile'; he too goes on to complete the hermeneutic circle -- taking up a tri-polar approach -- by making this historical doubt the subject of his engagement with our present. Gottwald is aware, of course, of the fragmentary nature of the historical evidence concerning 'the exile', but he chooses to read what historical evidence there is within the socio-historical frame he has constructed for what he calls 'colonial Israel',⁷⁵ which includes, as we have seen, 'Israel's' 'revolutionary beginnings'.⁷⁶ For Gottwald there is evidence, given his socio-historical frame, of ongoing and actual social, economic, political and theological contestation among the various social sectors during this 'exilic' period, during which the circle of those who had previously controlled the state and temple apparatus of Judah -- but who had been deported or dispersed to Babylonia and Persia, where they had collaborated with the Persian government, with whose support they had returned -- eventually asserted their control over the redefining of Israelite-Jewish identity.⁷⁷

Carroll, as I have indicated, is not convinced by the historical evidence. 'That there were many deportations by foreign imperial powers need not be denied or disputed', Carroll acknowledges, 'yet there need not have been an exile *as understood by the biblical writers* because that representation may be more myth than history and more ideology than reality'.⁷⁸ 'The exile' is more a literary construct than a socio-historical event. The agenda, according to Carroll, 'of this ideological myth of an exile during the Babylonian period and of a return of such deportees (or their descendants) during the Persian period is the privileging of the Jerusalem community centered on the rebuilt city and temple'.⁷⁹ At this point in his argument Carroll begins the turn of the hermeneutical circle, showing us his ideo-theological orientation, for he continues by arguing that 'Such a myth helps to render invisible or 'written out of history' -- whether literally or effectively is a moot point -- peoples and communities who do not participate in the myth and its chosen community'.⁸⁰ Carroll completes the hermeneutic circle when he goes on to appropriate his reading of 'the exile' for later contexts,

74 Cited in Ibid.

75 Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, 419-56.

76 Ibid., 131-288.

77 Ibid., 438.

78 Carroll, "Exile, Restoration, and Colony: Judah in the Persian Empire," 112.

79 Ibid., 112-13.

80 Ibid., 113.

saying that ‘Similar ideological moves will take place later in history ...’, including when Christian communities relate to Jewish communities.⁸¹

I began this section by saying that biblical scholarship does not always cooperate with socially engaged biblical scholars. ‘The exile’ is a particularly good example at this moment in (South) Africa’s history. There is much talk of ‘reconstruction’ in political and economic terms since our liberation in 1994,⁸² and even advocates for a ‘theology of reconstruction’.⁸³ But because the discourse of ‘exile and return’ has become ‘a root metaphor, a myth, and a metaphysic of existence’ for many in our world,⁸⁴ including (South) Africans, we should be cautious about employing it uncritically as part of our ideo-theological apparatus. Do we, socially engaged biblical scholars, go along with our theological colleagues who use the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to construct a theology of reconstruction in postcolonial (South) Africa? Or do we destabilise their theological readings of these texts, which simply accept the ideological myth of ‘reconstruction’ as it is portrayed in these texts, thereby participating with the dominant sectors in colonial Judah who have written those contending with them out of history and story?

The South African biblical scholar Elelwani Farisani has taken up the challenges of this question, for it is a question really does matter in our context.⁸⁵ I will not repeat his programmatic work here; instead I want to conclude my discussion of ‘the exile’ with a brief account of my own attempts to be accountable to communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised with whom I read the Bible,⁸⁶ and to be responsible to my discipline of biblical scholarship. In so doing I am also going to take up an aspect of the above discussion

81 Ibid.

82 Our founding macro-economic policy was called ‘the Reconstruction and Development Programme’ (though, unfortunately, it was quickly abandoned in favour of a more capitalist policy).

83 See for example Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992).

84 Carroll, "Exile, Restoration, and Colony: Judah in the Persian Empire," 114.

85 Elelwani Farisani, "The Ideologically Biased Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for an African Theology of Reconstruction," *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 2 (2002), Elelwani Farisani, "The Third Return of the Babylonian Exiles to Palestine," *Old Testament Essays* 19, no. 3 (2006), Elelwani Farisani, "The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for an African Theology of Reconstruction," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 116 (2003), Elelwani Farisani, "The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for an African Theology of Reconstruction" (PhD, University of Natal, 2002).

86 Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), Gerald O. West, "Contextualised Reading of the Bible," *Analecta Bruxellensia* 11 (2006).

that has been alluded to but not dealt with, namely, the question of whether the distantiation pole of the tri-polar method can accommodate both socio-historical and literary forms.

Draper implies that both socio-historical and literary modes of exegesis do justice to the demands of distantiation.⁸⁷ I have been more forthright, arguing, against the early pronouncements of Gottwald, Mosala, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to the contrary, that literary modes of reading are as effective in developing distantiation as part of a liberation hermeneutic as socio-historical modes.⁸⁸ But I also appreciate the immense importance of socio-historical perspectives, particularly in African biblical scholarship and among ordinary African interpreters of the Bible.⁸⁹ I have therefore tried to develop a sensitivity in myself and my students in the School of Religion and Theology, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, to both the literary and socio-historical dimensions of the biblical text.

When we come to 'the exile' in the Biblical Studies curriculum, I give the students the following exercise, forcing them to face both their accountability to their own communities and their responsibility to the discipline of biblical studies:

'To earlier prophets, such as Amos, Israel was judged for its exploitation of others, for making others 'לְנִי, but the assessment in Second and Third Isaiah alters the theological conception underlying 'לְנִי by applying it to the people as a whole'.⁹⁰ Explain Pleins' argument and then briefly indicate what relevance his argument might have for a context like yours.

I choose David Pleins' book precisely because he shows his hermeutical 'hand'. He allows us to watch as he navigates the three poles of our hermeneutic, while continually being responsible to the detail of biblical scholarship and accountable to his own social engagement. My students are able to identify and assess the resources of biblical scholarship with respect to 'the exile' (and the breadth of scholar resources Pleins provides ranges from historical-critical to canonical modes of reading). With this 'responsible' knowledge they are then given the opportunity to be accountable to their communities by bringing the biblical

87 Draper, "'for the Kingdom Is inside You and It Is Outside of You": Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," 242.

88 West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*.

89 Gerald O. West, "The Historicity of Myth and the Myth of Historicity: Locating the Ordinary African 'Reader' in the Debate," *Neotestamentica* 38 (2004).

90 David J. Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 266.

text into dialogue with their own particular contexts, which embrace a considerable cross-section of the African continent.

What I will add to this exercise in future, for it is the fruits of my deliberations in this paper, is a requirement that they try to be overt about the ideo-theological orientation they adopt in bringing text and context into conversation. For my argument in this paper has been that the appropriative moment is not self-evident. It is both the construct of the constant engagement between text and context, and a separable component of the interpretive process. But like the cake-as-interpretation we consume, it is difficult to unbake! The distinct and different elements that make up a cake cannot be extracted from the finished baked product, or not without enormous difficulty. Similarly with an act of interpretation, but unbake it we biblical scholars must if we are to be honest about our community accountability and our disciplinary responsibility. That appropriation has its own constructed ideo-theological logic, and is not simply a distillation of our biblical scholarship, makes it difficult for us to acknowledge and own this dimension, this third pole. But we should be grateful to Draper, Grenhom and Patte, among others, for forcing us to be more attentive to the process of interpretation and in giving us the opportunity to interpret with more integrity.

Conclusion

The primary focus of this paper has been to analyse how and with what we connect biblical text and local present context in the process of interpretation. What has emerged has been a recognition that it is useful to identify a third pole in the interpretive process besides the poles of context and text. This third pole -- the appropriative reader -- is usually suppressed in favour of a bi-polar model of interpretation. However, identifying a third pole helps us to be honest about the reader and his/her ideo-theological work that goes on in the interpretive act. Simply put, our social locations construct ideological orientations which partially constitute our engagement with the biblical text; and the biblical text constructs theological orientations which partially constitute our engagement with our community contexts. However, the process is not this simple, for in most African societies the Bible is thoroughly woven into our social locations, so it is not that easy to separate out the ideological and the theological, the text and the context. They have mutually constituted each other, leaving their ideo-theological residue in us. The ongoing process of re-reading scripture from within our social locations also constantly reconstitutes our ideo-theological orientation.

But for biblical scholars, even socially engaged biblical scholars, the discipline within which we ply our trade requires some responsibility in how we interpret the Bible. We are trained to read the Bible in particular structured and systematic ways -- critical ways, and it is these sets of structured and systematic questions which constitute our discipline. We socially engaged biblical scholars believe these critical resources are valuable, even in communities outside of the academy, which generates a tension between our accountability to our local communities and our responsibility to the discipline.

This tension is one of the reasons we are so reluctant to own up to this third pole, for it acknowledges that our scholarly resources alone do not self-evidently serve up an interpretation of the biblical text for or with our local communities. Something more is going on, and that something is our ideo-theological orientation. As biblical scholars we would want to be able to demonstrate that our ideo-theological orientation is indeed significantly constituted by the detail of our discipline, even while we would to use the Bible in a way that is accountable to the concerns of our communities. Our primary responsibility to our discipline, I would argue, is to honour its attention to the detail of the biblical texts within their literary and linguistic contexts and the socio-historical contexts that generated them. Getting the detail to fit within a coherent framework is difficult, which is why, for example, theologies of the Old Testament remain rather unconvincing. And yet our local contexts require of us more than just lots of detail, they yearn for a word from God. When we respond to this desire, as we should, we are then forced to choose what detail we give voice to and what detail we silence. It is our ideo-theological orientation that determines how we do this.

Admitting that our biblical interpretations are not self-evident products of our scholarship is difficult to do. But in contexts where the Bible really does matter it is important that we do so. I have used 'the exile' as an example, for in our current South African context 'exile' is a powerful and complex metaphor. Already aspects of this 'exile' metaphor have found their way into our political and theological life, and if we socially engaged biblical scholars are to continue to make a contribution to how the Bible is used in our society then we must be attentive to how we ourselves connect text and context.

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