

# Social identity and South African Biblical Hermeneutics: a struggle against prejudice?

Gerrie Snyman

Gerrie Snyman teaches Biblical Studies and Old Testament Studies at the University of South Africa <snymagf@unisa.ac.za>

## ABSTRACT

In a recent debate in the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* (vol. 12-14), the issue of social identity and South African (Biblical) hermeneutics was put on the table. This essay responds to the debate from the point of view a member of the colonial remnant or apartheid's perpetrator culture. The essay starts with a summary of the *BOTSA* debate and then discusses the following three aspects that the debate highlighted: (a) a recognition of subjectivity in contrast to a prevailing objectivist and essentialist approach in reading the Bible; (b) the call for 'contextual authenticity' in relation to the problem of ideology in defining context; and (c) the role of postcolonial Bible reading in the light of an expressed discomfort with a critical reading of the Bible and an unease with what is perceived to be 'Western hermeneutics'. The essay concludes that (i) the effects of colonialism in the form of objectivist Bible reading and essentialist thinking will linger on long after its demise, (ii) an appeal to contextual authenticity makes sense within an objectivist and essentialist framework and (c) a postcolonial Bible reading can bring the texts back to their place of origin and thus loosen the Bible from its (perceived) Western protection.

## Voice(s) of the colonial remnant

Reading some of the literature written from an Africentric perspective, and being struck by its commitment to set up a usable framework for people living in Africa, I have yet to find a discourse that properly deals with the 'colonial remnant' as a topic. I define the colonial remnant as those people who constitute the seminal depositories of their non-African ancestors who either visited Africa for a brief period or settled permanently on African soil.

The colonial remnant consists of those men and women who were born on African soil and who had no choice in their *status domicilium*, as well as those who made a deliberate choice not to return to the colonial metropolitan centre. Living in Africa obliged them now to carve out a new identity.

Identity is one of the central questions posed by postcolonial theory. The debate on identities initially sprung from the resistance to a prescribed identity enforced by the colonizers and from a need to reformulate and express an identity that took shape once the colonizers left. In turn, the identity of those who form the remnant of colonial possession and imperialism, became extremely problematical as it became more and more cut off from the metropolitan colonial centre.

In post-apartheid South Africa, in this process of transformation from a colonial (apartheid) to a postcolonial existence, we have entered a phase what probably could be called a period

of *identity-specific* Bible readings.<sup>1</sup> People who once were victimised, now use their historical suffering as a certificate of legitimacy to stop hiding their ethnicities or gender in order to awaken and nourish their wounded identities. After all, they are the voices that have once been excluded by main stream theology.

It should be no surprise that the voice of the former coloniser, or the colonial remnant, has lost its prevalence. To focus on the colonial remnant is not to recover that prevalence, but to garner some attention on the difficulty they have in constructing a new identity and unmaking their new voice heard. It is as if in the process of reconstruction and adaptation, the new found power of the former silenced voices, makes it difficult to hear the remnant's voice that has changed into something different. Ideological commitment may also contribute to an inability to detect a changed voice. Be that as it may, the colonial remnant and the former colonised are inextricably involved and have a stake in unravelling their identities in terms of race, gender and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent debate in the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*, volumes 12-14, and in a massive volume on reading the Bible in Africa,<sup>3</sup> I have acutely become aware not only of the impact the colonising of the identities of the indigenous inhabitants of Africa<sup>4</sup> had on the colonised, but also of the effects of the reciprocal shaping of the colonial identity by the once colonised. Although the latter process may be perceived as poetic justice in the light of the effects of colonialism, the effects are as devastating as they once were on the previous colonised. Despised and forgotten by the colonial metropolitan centre and vilified and scapegoated by the once colonised, the colonial remnant is firmly held in a grip of a power play they never can win.

The debate in *BOTSA* highlighted three issues (which will structure the rest of the article):

- (i) In the call to recognise subjectivity in the Bible reading process, the antagonist in the debate appears to have been constructed in objectivistic or essentialistic terms.
- (ii) The focus on contextual authenticity, apart from the obvious power play, brought forth the problem of ideology in defining context.
- (iii) The negative side remarks about Western hermeneutics' role in the current criticism of

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<sup>1</sup>R.S. Sugirtharajah. *The Bible and the Third World. Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial encounters.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62.

<sup>2</sup>Sugirtharajah (*The Bible and the Third World*. 271) argues that if the field is restricted to one group only (either the colonised or the coloniser), the whole process becomes critically ineffective. In fact, the processes each group underwent are completely ignored. It is not recognised that the colonised passes from a stage of imitating the coloniser to a desire to return to his or her roots through to being an awakener of his or her people. Similarly, the coloniser who moves from being a willing participant in colonialism to a feeling of remorse, seeking to rectify past misdeeds and misperceptions in order to carve out for themselves a new existence under postcolonial rule, is not appreciated.

<sup>3</sup>G. O. West and M. Dube (eds) *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends.* (2000. Leiden: Brill). For a review on the book, see G. F. Snyman, "Review Article: Hermeneutics, contexts, Identity: A critical discussion of *The Bible in Africa*", *Religion and Theology* 10 (2003), 378-415.

<sup>4</sup>This is a process that is still going on. Musa Dube's essay "Batswakwa: Which traveller are you (John 1:1-18)?" in West & Dube, *The Bible in Africa* 150-162, raises the problem Africans face when living outside of Africa. According to her, Africa is constructed as a negative place, a story of war, backwardness, poverty, disease, and death: 'Africa is presented as a wholly negative space with no normal life or anything positive.' The implication is that an African reads and lives with or by the stories written for him or her and not by him or her.

the Bible, put the question of the purpose of postcolonial Bible reading on the table.

### The BOTSA debate

The question that gave rise to this debate, was whether 'White' South Africans can by definition produce 'African' scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Madipoane Masenya was very sceptical about the possibility of 'White' scholarship being African.<sup>6</sup> She based her scepticism on the belief that the products White academics produced failed to benefit African communities. In her view, their academic enterprise takes place in an ivory tower detached from real life situations. In other words, the predominant paradigm is objectivism with no recognition to any subjectivity. From the tone of her essay, I received the impression that a call by White scholarship to be called 'African', will be regarded with utmost suspicion and dismissed as opportunistic.

In my own answer to this question I said that I am part of both worlds.<sup>7</sup> Being a Euro-African, I am intellectually completely Eurocentric, being trained in the philosophies of the great Western thinkers. Yet being born in Africa, without any choice, I am by birth part of the African continent. Moreover, the polarisation of Western hermeneutics with Africentricity left me bemused (because of the rise of neo-racism), yet terrified (because of the rising intolerance towards the colonial remnant). My being in Africa has forced me to embrace postmodernity more and more, as it enables me to take into account different subjectivities.

Innocent Himbaza took Masenya to task regarding her insistence on context as the defining element in the academic enterprise of Biblical Studies.<sup>8</sup> To him, the reader's context is only one window with which a text is approached and with which it is understood. He argued that one cannot *invent*<sup>9</sup> the meaning of a text, or the history of the biblical authors, the textual evidence or the reception of the authors' interpretations. These need to be studied. Race and gender does not influence the gathering of knowledge in this regard. Race and gender may only matter when one asks the question of current text reception.

Masenya responded by asking, correctly, whether Western methods, such as the historical-critical method, should always be the starting point.<sup>10</sup> Her problem is that its assumed

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<sup>5</sup>W. S. Boshoff, "Can 'White' South African Old Testament scholarship be African?" *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (May 2000), 1-3.

<sup>6</sup>M. J. Masenya, "Is White South African Old Testament scholarship African?" *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (2000), 3-8.

<sup>7</sup>G. F. Snyman "Playing the role of perpetrator in the world of academia in South Africa." *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (2000), 8-20.

<sup>8</sup>I. Himbaza, "La recherche scientifique et la contextualisation de la Bible", *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 13 (2002), 4-8.

<sup>9</sup>Mary Lefkowitz experienced in her book *Not out of Africa. How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) a similar problem regarding the construction of African history within Africentrism. She found that cultural motives and not facts as evidence play a determining role in the construction of history.

<sup>10</sup>M.J. Masenya, "Response to Himbaza and Holter." *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 13 (May 2000), 9-12.

objectivity is problematical. But so did the Bible and Culture Collective with their *Postmodern Bible* earlier.<sup>11</sup> And Schüssler-Fiorenza's presidential paper at the SBL much earlier.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in asking how one can account for subjectivity in terms of race and gender, Masenya is in good company. Nevertheless, to me her answer appears extremely problematic. It sounds as if race and gender predetermine thought structures and methods. In other words, although claiming subjectivity, that subjectivity is rooted in essences.

In her response to Himbaza, she provided an example of what she meant by 'White' scholarship's inability to speak truthfully about Africa. Her argument is that a scholar in Europe cannot speak with more authority and legitimacy about the African context than an African scholar. This perspective was augmented by Jesse Mugambi.<sup>13</sup>

Mugambi's point of departure is a distinction between African and Africanist scholarship. 'White' academics commenting on the African context are regarded as Africanist and not African. To him, Masenya's concern related to contextual authenticity to which he links an ethical responsibility, that is, a responsibility to make a moral or contextual application on the part of the scholar. He added an extra item on the agenda created by the debate, namely the view of the Bible as a document of faith. In a veiled reference to Himbaza, he suggests that anyone wishing to read the Bible merely as literature or as mythology, without any ethical obligation, should migrate to their home of specialisation, which is evidently not a faculty of theology.

## **Subjectivity, objectivism and essentialism**

### **1 My own subjectivity**

There is not much doubt in my mind how postcolonial Africa feels about the colonial remnant.<sup>14</sup> One question I do not find an answer to, is what does one do with the colonial

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<sup>11</sup>Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

<sup>12</sup>E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The ethics of biblical interpretation. Decentering biblical scholarship." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988), 3-17.

<sup>13</sup>J. N. K. Mugambi, "African and Africanist scholarship." *BOTSA* 14 (May 2003), 9-12.

<sup>14</sup>Zimbabwe, close to home, is one example. The Zimbabwean president's address at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 was received with a standing ovation and enthusiastic applause. H. Mashabela, a journalist and member of the SA Observer Mission who declared the 2000 Zimbabwean presidential elections free and fair, reckons in an article ("Zimbabwean land reform: implications." *Focus* 31 (2003), <[http://www.hsf.org.za/focus31/focus31mashabela\\_print.html](http://www.hsf.org.za/focus31/focus31mashabela_print.html)>), that the accolade showed 'tacit' (sic) expression of appreciation of the courageous stand President Mugabe took in resolving the critical land problems in Zimbabwe. To others, while, admitting that Mugabe reversed a symbolically important injustice as the racially skewed land holdings, a man who causes famine in the process, is no hero (cf. T. Lodge, "A man who causes famine is no hero", *Focus* 31 (2003), <[http://www.hsf.org.za/focus31/focus31lodge\\_print.html](http://www.hsf.org.za/focus31/focus31lodge_print.html)>). The suffering is not limited to the colonial remnant, although they were made the scapegoat for all their woes. In the *Bible in Africa*, Gerald West (G. O. West, 2000) "Mapping African Biblical interpretation", in West and Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa*. (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 30 and "Contextual Bible study in South Africa: A resource for reclaiming and regaining land, dignity and identity" in West and Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 608-609 narrates twice a particular anecdote that actually frames the book. 'When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us "let us pray". After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible'. It is a powerful story that frames the colonial power in all its corruption

remnant, despised by the former colonised as representatives of the abominable colonial legacy and rejected or forgotten by the former colonial metropolitan centres. They have been left to fend for themselves. Their political power has disappeared and their economic power is being cut to size.

In South Africa, the political, intellectual and theological bankruptcy - the latter due to sheer bad hermeneutics - within the structures of the colonial remnant, left the people totally disempowered. They have lost their integrity and self-respect. Every meeting with them starts with the assumption that the colonial other is a racist. It is a perception that is reinforced each time a violent confrontation between black and white hits the TV screens.

How does one change what Robert Carroll<sup>15</sup> calls 'bad hermeneutics'? Bad hermeneutics occur when a reader extrapolates a few desirable elements from a story that is full of undesirable elements. It is established when a biblical narrative is appropriated by taking over the ideology behind the text. The latter usually happen when a literal interpretation is followed. Subsequently, it is nearly impossible to rehabilitate a group of people when they read those undesirable elements, such as Israel's attitude towards the surrounding nations, on the same level as the more desirable ones, such as loving one's neighbour.

An inability to reflect on one's own ideology invariably leads to accept some undesirable elements as the will of God. At the moment, in my own church community (*Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Afrika /Reformed Churches of South Africa*), we struggle to get women accepted as equal partners in the ministry.<sup>16</sup> The reason for the struggle is simple: Patriarchy is divinely ordained. The churches' inability to recognise their own ideologies and those in the biblical texts, renders them unable to question the ethics of any discrimination.<sup>17</sup> Postcolonial criticism's link to postmodernism does not leave a liberation theology intact either, as its hermeneutics are also rendered suspect! Similar to the Afrikaans speaking churches' hermeneutics, Liberation Theology extrapolated from the Bible a partial paradigm from a larger narrative that in itself is not liberatory at all.<sup>18</sup> Sugirtharajah, referring to Liberation Theology's use of the Exodus narrative, asks what is so liberating of the narrative for native Americans, because the Canaanites are driven out or killed.<sup>19</sup> For the one God is a God of deliverance. For the other, he is a conquering god. Same texts, two views, two

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and perversion. In the light of such culpability, any land redistribution programme will sound to correct the imbalances that have been created in the past and allow people to reclaim and regain their identity and dignity. This story conjures very little sympathy for those who were being driven off their land in Zimbabwe.

<sup>15</sup>R. P. Carroll, "(South) Africa, Bible, Criticism: Rhetorics of a visit" in West & Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa*. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 200.

<sup>16</sup>G. F. Snyman, "Telling women to be like men? Some theoretical aspects regarding the interpretation of the Bible on gender issues", *Koers* 67 no. 1 (2002), 1-26.

<sup>17</sup>In fact, it appears to me that the Afrikaans speaking churches tremendously failed the respective colonial remnant. Some of them indeed went to the TRC with a confession of guilt, but these confessions did not generate a reevaluation of their hermeneutics.

<sup>18</sup>Carroll, (*South*) *Africa, Bible, Criticism*, 199.

<sup>19</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 259.

experiences.<sup>20</sup>

It seems to me, from a postmodern perspective, that Liberation Theology, in the end, has not succeeded in bringing new thought categories to the table. According to Sugirtharajah<sup>21</sup> liberation hermeneutics operate with an inherent modernistic agenda shared by other Western theologies. Subsequently, Liberation Theology is not prevented from biblicism or a view of inerrancy of Scripture, typical ailments within Protestant Christianity. It wants to redeem the world of colonial atrocities through the very book that perpetuated them.<sup>22</sup> To them, the Bible is not a problem, only its interpretation. In an essay on the Book of Esther, Athalya Brenner asked what does it take to survive and succeed as a Jew in a diaspora framework. Her answer was not comforting. One had to mutate into one's former adversary.<sup>23</sup>

Such a mutation has become one of the critical pitfalls of postcolonial criticism when race is used in the same way as the coloniser once did.<sup>24</sup> Blauner argues that race is a confusing concept because of the variance between scientific and common sense definitions of the term.<sup>25</sup> Anthropologists argue that race is fiction as all people are 'mixed'. Sociologists say that this fiction remains a sociological reality as people define each other racially. The dynamics of ethnicity is different, but the results are the same. Race is associated with biology and nature, ethnicity with culture.

Race and prejudice are intertwined. Pincus and Ehrlich define prejudice as an attitude with an interrelated set of beliefs, feelings, and motivation about some object or class of objects.<sup>26</sup> Thus, I am obliged to recognise the fact that the way apartheid was enforced, created a

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<sup>20</sup>Says Robert Warrior in an essay ("Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians. Deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology today", *Christianity in Crisis* 49 no. 12 (Sept 11, 1989), 264): 'As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror.'

<sup>21</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 239.

<sup>22</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 259.

<sup>23</sup>A. Brenner, "Looking at Esther through the looking glass", in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susannah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 79.

<sup>24</sup>D. Duncan, "A flexible foundation: Constructing a postcolonial dialogue," in D. T. Goldberg and A. Quayson (eds.), *Relocating Postcolonialism*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 320-333. Duncan adds that those who have adopted the notion of colonizers as always white Europeans and the colonized as always non-white races run the danger of perpetuating in an inverted form those racialist essentialisms that they sought to overcome and displace.

<sup>25</sup>B. Blauner, "Talking past each other: Black and white languages of racism", in Pincus and H. Ehrlich (eds.), *Race and ethnic conflict. Contending views on prejudice, discrimination, and ethnoviolence*. (F. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 24. Blauner sees race as a political construct that translates the human being's tendency to see people in terms of their colour or other physical attributes into structures that make it likely that people will act for or against them on such a basis.

<sup>26</sup>F. L. Pincus, and H. J. Ehrlich. "Prejudice," in F. L. Pincus and H. J. Ehrlich (eds.), *Race and Ethnic conflict. Contending views on prejudice, discrimination, and ethnoviolence..* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 49. According to Pincus and Ehrlich, a person being prejudiced against some group, means three things: (a) that such a person holds a set of beliefs about that group, (b) that person has an emotional reaction to that group and (c) that person is motivated to behave in a certain way toward that group.

particular unfavourable image of white people. As a precaution, certain strategies were developed when dealing with them. These prejudices will take time to change.<sup>27</sup>

## 2 Identity, Africanism and Whiteness

Masenya's construction of South African academia in terms of white and black should be understood in the light of the recent history where this racial distinction was the acceptable mode. Whiteness used to be articulated in terms of the markedness of blackness.<sup>28</sup> The contrast between the two supplied the meaning of white as the norm. With churches set in patriarchal values, Biblical Studies and Old Testament Studies will inevitably reflect a white male appearance. However, the advent of a non-racial democracy had a serious effect on white maleness.

Firstly, since 1994, whiteness assumed more and more the position of otherness. It became no longer a condition to be cherished. Says Wicomb: 'As a construct, whiteness cannot be fully addressed; indeed, it appears to be only from within and bound up with meaning of a specific ethnic group that a revision can emerge; in other words, it must literally be deconstructed. It is not surprising that Afrikaners, the group most in need of rehabilitation, are engaged in such a discursive struggle.'<sup>29</sup>

In the process of deconstruction, whiteness can no longer be seen as an objective body of basic behaviour and ideology with which one can easily frame someone. It has become fluid. J.M. Coetzee, Nobel prize laureate for literature 2003, argues that whiteness has become something incomplete, not fully adapted to its environment.<sup>30</sup> Whiteness is something liminal, an inbetweenness caught in a process of acculturation. It is a peculiarity that only concerns people no longer European, not yet African. It is a condition that will inevitably be absorbed into Africa.<sup>31</sup> The struggle for liberation from apartheid inevitably forced this group of people to rethink their identity. In the newspapers and in literary discourse, a discursive struggle is now taking place.

However, within the Afrikaans speaking theological<sup>32</sup> guild, the situation is different. A

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<sup>27</sup> Another critical pitfall is highlighted by Cooper in an illuminating political study. (F. Cooper, *Africa since 1940. The past of the present*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (2002)). Cooper suggests that the post-colonial states inherited the colonial institution of gatekeeper states. In gatekeeping, the colonial regime merely controlled what entered or left the borders or the ports of the colony. When the colonisers vacated their positions, the new regime formed by the colonised simply took over that function. The problem soon became rulers in control of the gatekeeping who wanted to stay there.

<sup>28</sup> G. F. Snyman, "'Who has the moral right to speak?' A reflection on a discourse within Old Testament Studies", *Old Testament essays (New series)* 15 no 3 (2002), 803.

<sup>29</sup> Z. Wicomb, "Five Afrikaner texts and the rehabilitation of whiteness," in R. Kriger and A. Zegeye (eds.), *Culture in the New South Africa. After apartheid. Volume two. Social Identities South Africa Series* (Cape Town: Kwela and SA History Online, 2001), 159. To Wicomb, the term 'whiteness' does not collocate with the key words of the narrative of freedom, so that its potential for discursive appropriations or refigurations of its general field of meaning is limited.

<sup>30</sup> J. M. Coetzee, J. M. *White writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa*. (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Wicomb, *Five Afrikaner texts*, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Although the churches made the right noises about the new political dispensation, the basic hermeneutics with

theology set in modernistic terms finds it nearly impossible to create a religious discourse with which a new hermeneutic can be developed. A new movement, called 'The New Reformation'<sup>33</sup> fails to find any favour within the Afrikaans speaking churches. The movement initiated a new look on the Bible and especially on Jesus. They incorporated the new criticisms that have been withheld by the churches during apartheid. Their focus was to lay bare the problems caused by a literal interpretation of the Bible. The movement recognised the different ideologies with which the Bible is read and with which it was once written.

But this focus is not welcome, as it undermines the churches' current power on their members. By no longer viewing the biblical texts as benign texts, the 'New Reformation' undermines traditional readings with which social life and morality could be theologically justified. Neither is this new view welcomed by some Liberation theologians. It undermines the same modernist framework on which Liberation theology is based. And because the main impetus came from those who are regarded as apartheid supporters, the existing distrust acted decisively.<sup>34</sup>

It seems to me that a literal interpretation of the Bible hampers the Afrikaans speaking churches' own rehabilitation into South African society. A literal interpretation fails to recognise ideology or cultural relativity. These are crucial two aspects one surely needs when confronted by religions and cultures that differ from each other. Moreover, as the racial category of white and black is based on modernist assumptions of objectivity and essentialism, so is a literal interpretation in its denial of subjectivity and the belief to distill an essence from a biblical text.

The Afrikaans speaking churches are keeping their members in what can be called 'historical prisons'<sup>35</sup> Culture is viewed in a static way, disregarding any potential for unity or commonality. In the past, culture was marshalled as an ideological weapon for apartheid as well as for the dispossessed, freezing any thought in the process. As soon as culture is influenced by ideology, says Zegeye and Liebenberg, it becomes exclusive and static in its attempt to dominate or wrest power from the 'other'.<sup>36</sup> The oppressor and the oppressed tended to displace each other by force, maintaining static thinking. The position of power from which they operated was more important than pragmatic politics.

To rehabilitate would mean to abandon the historical prison with its static view of culture in favour of fluidity, interactions and mutations of manifestations of culture.<sup>37</sup> In the BOTSA debate, I felt myself being marginalised and thrown back into a framework from which I

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which apartheid was theologically justified, remains firmly in place.

<sup>33</sup>P. Muller (ed.), *Die Nuwe Hervorming*. (Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2002).

<sup>34</sup>R. Botman, "Godsdiens-aktueel: Jesus-debat met geloof en kennis." in *Beeld* (June 3, 2002), 8.

<sup>35</sup>A. Zegeye, and I. Liebenberg. "The burden of the present", in R. Kriger and A. Zegeye (eds.), *Culture in the new South Africa. After apartheid. Volume 2.* (Pretoria: Kwela Books & SA History Online, 2001), 316.

<sup>36</sup>Zegeye and Liebenberg, *The burden of the present*, 316.

<sup>37</sup>Zegeye and Liebenberg, *The burden of the present*, 317.

sincerely wanted to escape, namely a static view on the Bible and, subsequently, an essentialist view on perpetratorhood. But my discomfort with the debate serves perhaps as an indication that I am already experiencing fluidity in identity. The way I am constructing my identity at this stage, definitely do not fit the mould in which the colonised Other is setting 'whiteness' and 'Westernness'.

Identity is one of the central questions posed by postcolonial theory. It sprung from the resistance to a prescribed identity enforced by the colonizers and from a need to reformulate and voice an identity that is taking shape with the departure of these colonizers. Edward Said coined the term Orientalism, a discourse that enabled European culture to manage and produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively.<sup>38</sup> Orientalism is a body of theory and practice constructed by the West that established a context of colonial investment. But to Said the notions of Orient and West (Occident) remained *ideological fictions* from which one should get away. In fact, Said refused to think of identity in terms of essentials and he found it nonsensical for people to defend their identity against the onslaughts of the West.<sup>39</sup>

In the terms set by Said's notion of Orientalism, 'Africanism' suggests an Africa produced by non-Africans in a way that suits certain ideologies. It is an ideological construct. When such a construction is used as if it is objective reality, problems arise, for example when someone purports to speak *for Africa* without recognising or acknowledging his or her own ideological bias and without asking Africans what they think.

Does this mean that *every* non-African speaking about Africa is *per se* an Africanist? Does it mean that those 'outside' of Africa cannot speak truthfully about Africa, because they do not possess insider information? Conversely, can only the insider speak truthfully? The Africa constructed by the insider is equally an ideological construct. The insider can repudiate the Africanist view, but should not fail to admit and declare his or her own ideological bias in turn. If both constructions are ideological fictions, why should one give preference to the insider view? Is it a moral choice or rather a choice linked to a biological essence such as race? Is it a choice based on power?

When something is taken to be an essential feature of being, that person is totalized. Totalization happens when one takes the other person in one's mind to be the real person, ignoring one's ideological perspectives completely. In the end, we need to deal with the constructions we make of each other. Here the ethical moment suggested by Emmanuel Levinas is important.<sup>40</sup> The ethical moment suggests a moment in which one feels a radical obligation towards the other person who is met in his or her destituteness and loneliness, as if the other cries out 'Do not kill me'. The ethical moment is not concerned with the essence of people, but rather the way we construct and interpret other people. One should leave open the possibility that the person may be quite different from the interpretation of the other one

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<sup>38</sup>E. W. Said, *Orientalism*. (London: Sage, 1985), 3.

<sup>39</sup>E. W. Said, "In conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and Ania Loomba", in D. T. Goldberg and A. Quayson (eds.), *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3.

<sup>40</sup>E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

has in one's mind<sup>41</sup>

### 3 Objectivism and essentialism

The hermeneutical framework of modernity is objectivism and essentialism.<sup>42</sup> The term 'objectivism' suggests the idea that knowledge exists independently of human perception. Personal feelings or opinions do not influence perception at all. Objective reality can be perceived without any preconceived idea. Truth exists as something independent of a human being. It functions separately from human perception. Thus, it can be grasped by the human mind on the condition that the mind has shed its prejudices or subjective feelings. In other words, objectivity enables people to access objective truth. Subjectivity has no role.<sup>43</sup>

Exclusion of the human perspective has led to serious perversions in the past. Apartheid is just one recent example.<sup>44</sup> From an objectivistic point of view, there is no need to inquire into effects. In fact, such an inquiry would have introduced subjectivity into the scheme of things. Without any human thoughts or experiences about God to be taken into account, and with the Holy Spirit to lead the way, there was no possibility of recognising any ideology at all. One simply read the text that provided one with the will of God. Perception was immediate and judgment was steered by the Holy Spirit. A particular view of Scripture acted as a protective sheath for the theological justification of patriarchy or apartheid in Afrikaner civil religion.

A similar situation is developing within some Afrikaans speaking churches' continuous exclusion of women in the ministry. The lack of recognition of any ideology, either on the readers' side or in the biblical text itself, makes it easy to see patriarchy as divinely ordained. When women are thus excluded from public office, the fact that men made the decision and the fact that this resolution operated within a patriarchal set of rules, are not recognised. The power behind the authoritative interpretation is masked and filled with prejudice.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>G. F. Snyman, "The body, rhetoric and postcolonial criticism", *Religion & Theology* 9 no. 1 (2002), 73. See also G. F. Snyman "Who am I? Some thoughts on fabricating the body in postcolonial/ postapartheid South Africa", *Alternation* 8 no. 1 (2001), 188-218.

<sup>42</sup>S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The hidden agenda of modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

<sup>43</sup>Snyman, *Telling women to be like men?* 8.

<sup>44</sup>When people ask how apartheid could have evolved amidst the preaching of reconciliation, justice and peace (cf. The open Letter. "An open letter to pastors of all churches in South Africa", in C. Du Toit, (ed.), *Confession and Reconciliation. A challenge to the churches in South Africa*. (Pretoria: Unisa, 1998), 8-10 and G. F. Snyman 1999. "Will it happen again? Reflections on reconciliation and structural contraception." *Religion & Theology* 6 no. 3, 1999), 379-410.), an answer should be sought within apartheid theology's objectivistic theoretical framework. Without a need to take a human perspective into account, the prevailing apartheid ideology enabled the Bible reader to follow the impulses of a perceived benign text which he or she was asked to imitate. Imitation of the text was perceived as a way to accomplish the will of God in one's life. There was no pressing need to look at the effects of one's reading, since the text was divine revelation, and therefore benign, even when it meant to discriminate against others.

<sup>45</sup>This is what Gosnell Yorke calls the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold of (white male) Western scholars in relation to the Bible (cf. G. Yorke, "The Bible in the black diaspora: Links with African Christianity", in G. West and M. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 142). It is a dispassionate and objective Bible reading that masks the concerns of a particular population group. It may be useful in a cultural confrontation to implicate this hermeneutics as typical 'Western', but the recent African furor regarding the consecration of an Anglican gay bishop in New

However, the discomfort with objectivism came a long way within postcolonial thinking. Reading Leopold Senghor's St. Anthony paper, one senses that it is the notion that people can be empty vessels that need to be filled or soft wax that can be moulded by 'the fingers of the white demiurge' that fuelled his reaction. In his days, people were regarded as *tabula rasa*, enabling them to assimilate to the culture of the powerful.<sup>46</sup>

Instead, Senghor thought that *discursive reason* (the reason which only sees) was inadequate to understand reality. He needed *intuitive reason*. That is a reason which delves beneath the surface of facts and things, a reason 'which comes to grips, expresses itself emotionally, through that self-surrender, that coalescence of subject and object; through myths, [...], primordial rhythms, [...] the gift of myth-making, the gift of rhythm.'<sup>47</sup>

But would ascribing intuitive reason to African hermeneutics not constitute a process similar to Western hermeneutics' objectivism? Just as the colonial regime functioned on the essences of what is Western, so does Senghor in the end come to what is essentially African. In other words, because the Western paradigm is regarded problematic in terms of its essences, another hermeneutics with more acceptable essences (pertaining to Africa) is created. This is the impression I received in Masenya's manifesto. The Western essence does not fit the African context. Something that can represent the African essence should replace it.<sup>48</sup>

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Hampshire, tempted me to look for fitting philosophical categories. This perceived hegemony is not essentially Western, given the reaction of some African churches within the Anglican sphere. Moreover, others within Western culture certainly did their bit to break this ideological and hermeneutical stranglehold, for example the *Postmodern Bible*.

<sup>46</sup>L. S. Senghor, "Negritude and African socialism. Lecture delivered at St Anthony's College, Oxford", in D. Brydon, (ed.), *Postcolonialism. Critical concepts*. Vol. III. (London: Routledge, 2000 [1963]), 999.

<sup>47</sup>Senghor, 'Negritude and African socialism', 1000.

<sup>48</sup>The furore that the consecration of a gay man, Gene Robinson, as bishop in the Anglican Church in New Hampshire has created within some African circles, has revealed a startling cling to traditional Western hermeneutics. The Bible is read as if it condemns homosexuality as an abominable sin (Leviticus 18.22, 20.13 and Romans 1.26-27). Nigeria's archbishop threatened to cut ties with the mother church. Uganda's Anglican Church severed ties with the diocese of New Hampshire. Kenya's Archbishop stated that the devil entered the church. These bishops simply share the same sentiments of conservative Anglicans. In contrast, the Archbishop of Cape Town welcomed Robinson to the ranks of the primates of the church. But one newspaper could not help to show the irony of it all. 'It is an alarming reversal when native clergymen start lecturing the countries that brought the Christian God into their midst about the devil', says acclaimed journalist John Matshikiza ("The devil finds work", *Mail & Guardian* (November 7 to 13, 2003), 34). He notes, tongue in the cheek: 'Christian missionaries came into the colonies as a colonial vanguard, and relentlessly beat the horrors of heathenism and devil worship out of their astonished, captive audiences. [...] The Anglican missionaries did not mention that their own native England was full of witchcraft and covens of Satanism. Nor did they mention the fact that their own church had come into being through a contentious sexual issue that would rival the one that is rocking today's church: namely the fact that King Henry VIII objected to the pope insisting that he take no more than one wife. He would rather leave the Catholic Church and start his own than be denied his urge to be polygamous - even if it was in a serial, rather than parallel, manner, like the Africans were doing when the missionaries arrived and registered their distaste. Now the African primates, having discarded their devils along with their deities and dressed themselves in pompous robes and satin sashes, are pointing their fingers at their blasphemous former masters across the water and acting holier-than-thou.' The missionaries did their job well in transporting the modernistic hermeneutical framework to Africa whereby the Other is regarded in essentialist terms. Essentialism is a mode or representation whereby people are defined by fixed and invariable properties

In the postcolonial debate of identities, essentialism<sup>49</sup> represents that reduction of a group of people to an essential idea of what it means to be European or African. The coloniser and the colonised reduce each other to an essence with which they can be perceived.<sup>50</sup> This reduction is present wherever we observe other people. It is a coping mechanism with devastating consequences when it functions subliminally.

The problem shoots up when these essences become ideologically fixed and conformed to a modernist universalising agenda. It fails to recognise any individuality. bell hooks argues that class, gender or race cannot be barriers for identity.<sup>51</sup> To her, one of the consequences of postmodernism is that many people share, for example, the sense of deep alienation, despair and continued displacement African-Americans are experiencing at the moment. Shared circumstances induce shared sensibilities which cross boundaries of class, gender, or race. hooks sees it as a base for solidarity and coalition. In hooks' opinion, for too long a narrow and constricting notion of blackness has been imposed from the inside as well as from the outside. She wants to affirm multiple (black) identities, because class mobility has altered collective black experience.<sup>52</sup>

### **Contextual authenticity**

In the light of colonialism's denial of an insider view of the different African contexts, I can understand the plea to allow those within a particular context to describe their context. But that it should triumph over the outsider view, is problematic.<sup>53</sup> In terms of cultural essences, 'contextual authenticity' appears to be valuable. However, its effect is devastating. If only the insider with experience may speak truthfully, does one not end up with cultural relativism? Furthermore, does the quest for contextual authenticity not make human experience a hermeneutical trump card? To claim authenticity is to end conversation.

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believed to represent their real or true essence. In Robinson's case, sexual orientation is regarded as fixed by physical and biological appearances. A penis defines a particular sexual orientation, namely heterosexuality.

<sup>49</sup>I understand Essentialism as a mode of representation whereby a group of people is defined by a small set of fixed and invariable properties in the belief that these properties represent their real or true essence. Essentialism ignores the conditions under which these perceived properties surfaced and it does not allow for any possibility of change or variation within the group. Essentialism does not see that any perceived feature is the result of a complex system of cultural, social, psychical and historical context, making it difficult to assume a person under a set of pre-existent essences.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. D. Fuss, "Interior colonies. Frantz Fanon and the politics of identification", in D. Brydon, (ed.), *Postcolonialism. Critical concepts*. Vol. III. (London: Routledge, 2000 [1994]), 1106.

<sup>51</sup>b. hooks, "Postmodern blackness", in D. Brydon, (ed.), *Postcolonialism. Critical concepts*, (London: Routledge, 2000[1990]), 1306-1313. hooks offers a postmodern critique of identity, challenging the notion of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness.

<sup>52</sup>For example, hooks argues that racism did not have the same impact on everyone. She refers to multiple experiences of identity that ensures diverse cultural productions. She challenges what she calls imperialist paradigms of black identity which represents blackness one-dimensionally either in terms of white supremacy or in terms of the grand narratives third world nationals or elites impose on others.

<sup>53</sup>Sugirtharajah Sugirtharajah (*The Bible and the Third World*, 259) sees it simply as the consequence of what he calls the triumphalistic nature of liberation theology.

Contextual authenticity, with its focus on the dichotomy of insider-outsider, creates a one-dimensional view of the context. An insider point of view may provide an empathetic view of society. But it remains *within* the borders of that society's cultural context. An outsider view uses categories that are not part of the insider culture in order to explain the context. It creates a distance with a particular context, providing a different angle on what is going on inside.

The predominance of an insider's view, is far reaching. In the words of Sugirtharajah only a Jew can then resist anti-Semitism, only a gay can support homosexual rights, only animals can do animal theology and only trees can talk about deforestation: 'Personal experience, cultural affinities and ideological closeness, important though they are, are poor surrogates for understanding and accountability in hermeneutics. Sensing and feeling what is right is sufficient. One does not need to have lived it.'<sup>54</sup>

In Biblical Studies, the consequence of insider experience to establish contextual authenticity will result in Africans teaching Biblical studies, as they would know best what is right for their African students. But how does someone know what is best? The transmission of knowledge is made dependent on good or beneficial motivations. If someone's motivation is good, then what he or say or teaches, is right or relevant. Will contextual authenticity in the end not result in making the question of what may or may not be said in class dependent on motivation and ethnicity?

Because the Bible is a major source for Christianity, knowledge about the Bible is quite important. Does contextual authenticity mean that if the knowledge is constructed by a European, that kind of knowledge will have no bearing upon the African reader? The scarcity of critical resources compelled African readers to focus on the story presented by the Biblical texts. Would knowledge about the world of text production and the historical world to which these stories refer be of no concern for an African reader? If this knowledge is indeed useful, does it matter when those, who generated knowledge about the world of text production or the historical world, do not reside in Africa?

In a multicultural society such as South Africa, the contextual authenticity will have to be broken further down to the respective cultures. Will a Northern Sotho woman be able to do justice to the context of an Afrikaans man? Gender, race, culture, and patriarchy will be at stake. If this is true, how does the notion of contextual authenticity differ from the policy of separate development of the apartheid state? If contextual authenticity is based on being in the same cultural tradition, rejecting outsiders, how can one then make authentic propositions about the Bible, a set of documents originating from a completely different cultural and historical tradition? How does one then know the experiences behind each Bible story? Contextual authenticity makes the understanding of the Bible impossible.

The insider-outsider argument implies that one does not have to believe what the outsider has to say. It seems that the character of a person's motivations is predetermined by his or her culture or ethnicity and not by volition. It is then not the person who speaks, but his or her skin. From an Africentric point of view, an African can be trusted to say something truthful about Africa, but a European cannot. He or she may be motivated by self-interest, self-promotion and inherent prejudice. Is it not possible for individuals to think for themselves

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<sup>54</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 270.

and to break beyond the bounds of their culture, race, gender or nationality?

Contextual authenticity is based on a territorial centre of power and fixed boundaries. It is a useful notion within a modernist agenda where a claim to contextual authenticity becomes a form of gatekeeping.<sup>55</sup> It is designed to keep out certain ideas, especially those from the former colonial masters that may contaminate the essence of being African. In my mind, the binary oppositions created by terms such as African and Africanist, White and Black and Western versus African, function as a way of gatekeeping. In the end, it is simply a question of who has the power: the power of control over the economic resources and the power to define and to dictate.

Perhaps the debate reflects the liminality of the South Africa that emerged in a period just when the concept of a modern nation-state was shedding its geographical borders in favour of globalisation. John Comaroff<sup>56</sup> made the following salient remark to Homi Bhabha: '[South Africa] represented a heroic, hopeful effort to build a modernist nation-state under postmodern postmortem conditions; at just the time, that is, when the contradictions of modernity were becoming inescapable. As Eric Hobsbawm said then, the African National Congress was perhaps the last great Euronationalist movement. He was not altogether wrong.'

If Comaroff is correct with his remark, why do we bother to safeguard cultural borders? Since 1990 we are confronted with a new world order, a new 'empire' as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim in their book *Empire*.<sup>57</sup> South Africa emerged just as the world started its passage to this new 'empire'.

'Empire' is a new form of sovereignty which has eclipsed the sovereignty of nation-states. The concept of a nation state was fundamental to modernity and the colonial project that brought Asia, Africa and the Americas under the influence and power of Europe. The new empire, according to Hardt and Negri, has no territorial centre of power or fixed boundaries or barriers:

'It is a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.'<sup>58</sup>

In the passage from modernity to 'Empire' there is less and less distinction between inside and outside. Hardt and Negri argue that the modern dialectic of inside and outside has been replaced by a play of degrees and intensities, of hybridity and artificiality.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>In the colonial period, colonial states were gatekeepers states, controlling the intersection between the state and the outside world. Its main source of revenue was duties on goods entering and leaving its ports. As gatekeeper the state decided who would leave for education and what kinds of educational institutions can enter. When the colonial regime left, the new political elite took over the function of gatekeeping.

<sup>56</sup>H. Bhabha, and J. Comaroff. "Speaking of postcoloniality, in the continuous present: A conversation," in D. T. Goldberg and A. Quayson (eds.), *Relocating Postcolonialism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 32.

<sup>57</sup>M. Hardt, and A. Negri. *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup>Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, xii.

<sup>59</sup>Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, 187.

The binaries that used to define conflict have become blurred (Hardt & Negri 2000:189): 'The Other that might delimit a modern sovereign Self has become fractured and indistinct, and there is no longer an outside that can bound the place of sovereignty.'<sup>60</sup>

### Postcolonial criticism of the Bible

If Hardt and Negri's idea of a new empire hold sway, are the current parameters of the debate still valid? If the world is no longer divided into two or segmented camps but rather defined by innumerable partial and mobile differences, why then set up a debate in terms of binary structures and a new sovereignty that can rule over the past colonial or apartheid sovereignty?

Is the debate perhaps not fixated on an old form of power with propositions for strategies only effective on the old terrain? The debate does not take into account 'differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities'?<sup>61</sup> How sufficient is gatekeeping and boundary maintenance where territorial boundaries are giving way to a spatial totality?

In the struggle to contest and subvert the empire, as well as the construction of a real alternative, the time has arrived to relinquish colonial boundaries and modernist classification systems. Moreover, Hardt & Negri say that any proposition of a particular community in isolation, defined in racial, religious, or regional terms, shielded by fixed boundaries, is destined to end up in a ghetto.<sup>62</sup>

The remark that scholars who read the Bible in terms of mythology and literature (secular and scientific readings) should migrate to the relevant disciplines, as theology is preserved for reading the Bible for faith communities in order to draw from it divine guidance, creates, in my mind, the condition for ghetto-theology. Ghetto-theology is based on a world perspective that is narrowly defined along strong traditional lines, leaving no option for alternative views.<sup>63</sup> Apartheid theology was a ghetto-theology that did not allow any critical view on the Bible and the norms it expresses. Were people able to criticise the norms of the Bible, the theological justification of apartheid would have been more difficult.

For a faith community to draw divine guidance from the Bible may sound pious, but there is no guarantee that those who will bear the marks of their reading, will find the divine guidance beneficial. I am not sure whether the Canaanites found the Jews' divine guidance beneficial.<sup>64</sup> The Iraqi's did not.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, 189.

<sup>61</sup>Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, 138.

<sup>62</sup>Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, 206.

<sup>63</sup>G. F. Snyman, "Binnegevegte in die GKSA: Verskuiwing van 'plausibility structures?'" , *In die Skriflig* 26 no. 3 (1992), 359-364.

<sup>64</sup>J. Collins, "The zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the legitimation of violence", *JBL* 122 no. 1 (2003), 6.

<sup>65</sup>Siker ("President Bush, Biblical faith, and the politics of religion", *Religious Studies News. SBL edition* 4. no 5(2003), <[http://sbl-site.org/Newsletter/05\\_2003/SikerP.html](http://sbl-site.org/Newsletter/05_2003/SikerP.html)>) poignantly illustrates how Pres. George W. Bush's Bible reading made him accept the mantle of God's vehicle of punishment by starting a war against Iraq.

What are the checks and balances in a faith community's reading? Other kinds of readings, *inter alia* those who treat the biblical texts as myth and as literature. They scrutinise the biblical text and they do not hesitate to read against the grain. Maybe if someone in the apartheid community was able to say it was wrong of Israel to keep themselves apart and to discriminate against other peoples, apartheid would not have received theological justification.

Robert Carroll <sup>66</sup> said the following (after a visit to South Africa): 'I think there is one thing which I learned above all else and that is the absolute need for a *critical* reading of the Bible in any culture where the Bible is deemed to be of sufficient importance as to be imposed on the construction of life and social structures. No ideology drawn from, based on or associated with the Bible should ever be allowed to see the light of day ever again. Until the Bible has been subjected to *a severe critical scrutiny* and strong allowance made for cultural differences and calculations made of the likely consequences of the imposition of any practical policy based on the Book, its role in social engineering should *at best* be kept to a minimum. The Bible is *an unsafe Book* from which to do politics or social engineering in contemporary society. Its roots are in ancient alien times and among ancient alien creatures. [...] I also learned at a new and deeper level that neither liberatory nor marxisant readings of the Bible could ever be adequate as constructions of society for many different reasons.'

In his view, the appropriation of a biblical narrative involves taking over the text and colonising the biblical material. The purity of a reading or the innocence of intention of any group choosing to read the Bible in this way is not guaranteed. To extrapolate a few desirable elements from a story that is full of undesirable elements is an inadequate way of using the Bible to initiate social engineering. And although he referred to apartheid, he recognised that this kind of reading can be extended to some liberation hermeneutics too: 'Apartheid in South Africa has demonstrated just how destructive and costly such bad hermeneutics can be, and because reading and implementing any such reading of the Bible remains a common and popular practice around the world today it is necessary to be very careful in matters hermeneutical - *caveat lector*, mind how you read!' <sup>67</sup>

Ukpong also asks for a more critical attitude towards the biblical texts. <sup>68</sup> Ukpong found that his readers were oblivious to cultural influences in their attitude to and use of the Bible. Hence their dogmatic use of the text. To him, the basic hermeneutic theory is that the meaning of a text is a function of the interaction between the text in its context and the reader in his or her context. This means there is no absolute meaning of a text to be recovered. There are not two distinctive processes of recovery of meaning and application in a context. It is

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Siker tells how Bush used John 1:4-5 in order to make America the Word made flesh, the one God sent to the world: 'That such language suggesting the divinization of America can come from the lips of a sitting President, and one who claims the Lordship of Jesus at that, is nothing short of astonishing.' These ideas were brewed in what Siker calls a para-church setting in the White House. Not so recently the apartheid community drew divine guidance which said it is fine to segregate and to discriminate. The results were equally disastrous.

<sup>66</sup>Carroll, (*South*) *Africa, Bible, Criticism*, 198-199.

<sup>67</sup>Carroll, (*South*) *Africa, Bible, Criticism*, 200.

<sup>68</sup>J. S. Ukpong, "Popular readings of the Bible in Africa and implications for academic purposes", in G. West and M. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, Leiden: Brill, 2000), 582-594.

one process in which a reader should be critically aware of his or her context interacting with the text.

The lack of critical assessment and recognition of cultural influences in the reading process is the result of a particular way of reading the Bible. It is a reading learnt by the missionaries who were schooled within a particular framework, namely positivism and objectivism. Subjectivity of any sort is ruled out. Ukpong's solution links up with the postmodern paradigm which focusses on the local, the timely and the particular.<sup>69</sup> Mcentire says that Western fundamentalist Christianity has placed limitations on African hermeneutics, so that any uncritical reading of the text constitutes an act of self-defeat for African readers.<sup>70</sup>

Sugirtharajah proposes a postcolonial space that can free one from the nationalistic mode of analysing and firm commitment to cultural ghettos. To him, postcolonial criticism allows one to be highly eclectic and to embrace every tool as long as it promotes just causes.<sup>71</sup>

He suggests three possibilities within the postcolonial condition.<sup>72</sup> The first possibility is the challenge colonial supremacy by exposing colonial control and domination. The second possibility is to recover the cultural soul from the intellectual and cultural grip of the colonial master. Both these possibilities are subjected to the epistemological assumptions of the colonial master. The debate is shaped in terms of essentialist notions of the self and the other, polarising the two groups. The third possibility, to which Sugirtharajah gives his support, is one of mutual interdependence and transformation. An identity is constructed on the basis of the intertwined histories of the coloniser and the colonised. Says Sugirtharajah: 'Its aim is to go beyond totalisms, essentialisms and dichotomies, and transcend the modernist notion of assimilating the marginalized and the minorities into one monolithic whole. The key words here are hybridity and liminality, which denote an in-between-space.'<sup>73</sup>

He wants to go beyond the binary notions of the colonized and coloniser. The focus is on the critical exchanges and mutual transformation between the two. It does not mean the colonized are innocent, generous and principled and the coloniser culpable, greedy and responsible for all social evils.

What does it mean for biblical studies? It means an ideological critical scrutiny of the biblical

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<sup>69</sup>Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 186-192.

<sup>70</sup>M. Mcentire, "Cain and Abel in Africa: An Ethiopian case study in competing hermeneutics", in G. West and M. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 248-259. The contributors to *The Bible in Africa* express page after page their negative feelings against what they call 'Western hermeneutics'. But when one constructs their picture of Western hermeneutics, one finds in some instances a very particular one, namely a fundamentalist treatment of the Bible as the only truth. But Western hermeneutics is much more than a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. Conversely, the cry against 'Western hermeneutics' cannot be universally African. Recently, some African churches rejected homosexuality as an abominable sin, because the Bible told them so. 'To be told by the Bible' entails a particular Western hermeneutic.

<sup>71</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 272.

<sup>72</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 248.

<sup>73</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 249.

texts for their colonial entanglements.<sup>74</sup> These entanglements make, for example, any associative or admiring identification between the self and Israel or any character that represents her extremely dangerous. These characters operate on the presupposition of usurping the surrounding nations.

The Bible can no longer simply be read for its divinely guided incidents or reports about divine-human encounters. The construction of God in the Bible is in itself an ideological tool to encroach on others. How can the Bible be read in search of an alternative to a better world in order to cope with the colonial aftermath, when its stories are about an imperialism of ideas and religion? However, an ideological-critical approach does not provide any solace and comfort to those searching answers for their existential problems! As a perpetrator, I do not find the Bible comforting at all, as the Bible not only condemns the perpetrator, but provides no model for rehabilitation. A king that errs, usually dies a horrible death. When David errs, others pay the price.

A postcolonial reading means that the biblical texts are read as documents emanating from colonial contacts, revaluing colonial ideologies, stigmatisation and negative portrayals embedded in the content, plot and characters.<sup>75</sup> It inquires into the world of text production, asking how ideology informed the production of these texts.

## Conclusion

From a postcolonial perspective, the colonial remnant is indissolubly linked to the former colonised. Because the effects of colonialism linger on long after its demise, the interaction between the colonial and the colonised will reflect the frameworks of the past, especially the rational frameworks with which arguments are set up. Apartheid was the result of an objectivistic framework of thought and its subsequent racism based on essentialism. Neither party in this conflict have escaped this influence. But the construction of new identities takes place in circumstances very different from those that enabled colonialism. Identities have become fluid and hybrid with the weakening of political, geographical and cultural borders.

An appeal to contextual authenticity, however understandable, remains an instrument within an objectivist and essentialist framework. In fact, if followed to its consequences, it will render the understanding of the Bible impossible. It presents a form of gatekeeping in line with the establishment of the first nation-states after colonialism. With the emergence of a new 'empire' the parameters of the conflict changed. The world is no longer divided into two segmented camps of Western versus African. People within both spheres share the same sense of alienation, despair and displacement.

The Bible played a central role in the rolling out of colonialism / apartheid and the struggle for liberation. If it is true that both emerged from the same philosophical tradition, modernism, their use of the Bible will become a problem in a society entering the world of postmodernity and the affirmation of multiple contexts and identities. It will perhaps not be so detrimental to read the Bible as myth and as literature within the sphere of theology. To

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<sup>74</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 251.

<sup>75</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 271.

liberate the Bible from the image and likeness <sup>76</sup> of the exporters of particular brands of Western Christianity, it is necessary to bring the texts back to their place of origin, the Ancient Near East. In rediscovering its oriental roots and Eastern heritage, postcolonial criticism may help loosen the Bible from its Western protection and suspicion with which it is regarded because of its use in support of slavery, patriarchy and the exploitation of the environment. <sup>77</sup> Such a process will generate a much needed historical consciousness that will unmask literal interpretations of the text.

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<sup>76</sup>M. Dube, "To pray the Lord's prayer in the global economic era (Matt. 6:9-13)", in G. West and M. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 615.

<sup>77</sup>Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 282.