

DOING POSTCOLONIAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION @HOME: TEN YEARS OF (SOUTH) AFRICAN AMBIVALENCE

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Abstract

Despite the substantial interest in postcolonialism and postcolonial biblical criticism in many parts of the world, (South) African biblical scholarship has been cautious in its response. This article attempts to understand this reluctance, recognising that some of the unfamiliar feel of the discourse stems from the dominance of diasporal sites in its ongoing theorisation, some from its tendency to reify, commodify, and consume anything home-grown and local, some from its failure to envisage a clear liberation project, and some from the way in which postcolonial analysis has been projected back into ancient biblical contexts, and in so doing diminishing current contexts of actual postcolonial contestation.

1. Introduction

More than ten years ago I asked the question (West 1997), does postcolonial biblical interpretation have a place in the South African context, and if so, what place? I asked this question at the 1996 Old Testament Society of South Africa Congress against the background of an emerging cottage industry in postcolonial studies in general and postcolonial biblical interpretation in particular. I noted then that the geo-political emergence of postcolonialism, unlike its other biblical critical cousins, was “located primarily in Southern/Third World contexts or among their diasporal exiles and emigres who live in the North. “But, no doubt” I went on to add, somewhat prophetically, “post-colonial [with the hyphen, then] discourse within Biblical studies will make the shift from East to West and from South to North, as it has done in literary studies, altering its forms as it moves from projects which struggle to change the world to programmes which re-describe the world (see also Goss 1996)” (West 1997, 322).

Postcolonial biblical studies is now an industrial enterprise, ten years later. And the centre of gravity has moved from East to West and from South to North, and the focus from actual struggles to theoretical re-description. Not that theoretical re-description is not important. Cornel West, the African-American theologian, philosopher, and activist reminds us of the emancipatory potential of modes of discourse which destabilise the dominant vocabularies (West 1985, 270-271), and this is precisely one of the significant contributions of postcolonial discourse.

But the question remains, what is the usefulness of postcolonial biblical interpretation in our South African context, and why has (South) African biblical scholarship shown so little interest in postcolonial *discourse*? The question is made even more relevant because of regional developments in southern African biblical scholarship within the last ten years. The first and most significant of these developments is the return of Musa Dube to Botswana in the mid-1990s, having spent a number of years living and studying in the United States. She returned home with considerable expertise and a profile in postcolonial studies and the then emerging field of biblical postcolonial criticism. She brought with her a comprehensive knowledge of the emergent field and a prolific propensity to publish work in this field (see for example Dube 1996). We in the region were, therefore, fairly thoroughly informed both about the discourse itself and its potential for our contexts. However, not even Dube's considerable creative energies in the field of postcolonial biblical studies prompted (South) African biblical scholarship to cast more than a cursory glance at this potential hermeneutical framework.¹ But that has begun to change.

The second development in the last ten years has been the substantial contribution of a South African biblical scholar, Jeremy Punt. In April of 2002 he presented a paper at the New Testament Society of South Africa conference on what was published as "Postcolonial biblical criticism in South Africa: some mind and road mapping" (Punt 2003). His particular contribution was to survey and help us navigate the emergent field of postcolonial *biblical* criticism. While the focus of my initial offering had been on South African postcolonial literary studies (for example Attwell 1993) and postcolonial historical-anthropology (for example Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), Punt introduced us to the substantial work of biblical scholars like R.S. Sugirtharajah, Fernando Segovia, Kwok Pui-lan, Richard Horsley, and of course Musa Dube. He followed this up a few years later in

1 As one of the reviewers of this article for *Neotestamentica* noted, any reluctance to embrace Dube's work may have more to do with her feminism than her postcolonialism!

a closely related article, presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, USA, in 2003, but only published in 2006 (Punt 2006). Noting that there have been “very few attempts to introduce postcolonial biblical criticism as a credible hermeneutical approach for the subcontinent”, he asks, in his provocative title, “Why not postcolonial biblical criticism in (South) Africa: stating the obvious or looking for the impossible?”, and then goes on to consider “possible reasons for the failure of postcolonial criticism to impact upon biblical studies in (South) Africa on a large scale, when it offers such obvious hermeneutical potential, spin-offs, as well as the opportunity to approach the Bible from a different than the traditional vantage point” (Punt 2006, 63).

Punt shows his own hand in this later piece, advocating for the potential value of postcolonial biblical criticism. He is, therefore, somewhat puzzled by the sustained lack of interest in this form of biblical criticism. While there have, of course, been passing references to and partial appropriations of aspects of postcolonial criticism in (South) African biblical scholarship (see for example, van Heerden 2006), there has not been the concerted and deliberate engagement with the discourse. The emphasis has almost always been elsewhere. And while I too am puzzled by the marked absence (or reluctant presence) of postcolonial biblical criticism in (South) African biblical scholarship, I am less convinced of its ‘intrinsic’ usefulness, and so understand something of our hesitancy. But before I explain myself or pursue both my and Punt’s qualified advocacy of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, there is one more development in the South African biblical scene worth noting.

This third development is the recent article by Frank England, entitled, “Mapping postcolonial biblical criticism in South Africa” (England 2004). England’s echoing of my and Punt’s work in the title is deliberate, for he wants to contribute to our programmatic questions by offering related questions of his own and proposing what he considers to be an important resource for the ‘mapping’ of African biblical scholarship in general and South African postcolonial biblical criticism in particular. In order to probe (South) African biblical scholarship more deeply, he proposes we use Michel Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ analysis of discourse. This form of analysis is appropriate, he argues, to the postcolonial task, which includes “to question prevailing biblical exegesis and commentary by returning to their sites of emergence at the interface of discourse and material existence” (England 2004, 91). Although he does not go this far, it could be argued that what England is offering through Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge (Foucault 1972) is a larger project which would go some way to answering

both my and Punt's question: Why not postcolonial biblical criticism in South Africa? The short answer, which Punt puts forward from his own analysis (though not the full scale archaeological 'dig' envisioned by England), is that there are vested institutional, ecclesial, scholastic, economic, and power interests in the status quo of South Africa biblical scholarship (Punt 2006, 68-69). The longer answer is the project England proposes, with Foucault as our guide.

But it is not only what England argues that constitutes the third development in the past ten years, it is that he has joined the discussion. Though deeply committed to issues of biblical hermeneutics in South Africa, especially in the struggle against apartheid, England has not made a contribution to this field for nearly twenty years (England 1989). Yet he has clearly been inspired by the potential value of postcolonial biblical criticism, so much so that it has drawn him out into the public scholarly realm again to join the debate.

England's contribution also leads me into the next part of my article through his invocation of Foucault. One of my worries about postcolonial biblical criticism, and one of the reasons I think it has not been taken up more substantially in (South) Africa, is, as Punt also argues, "the nature of the discourse itself" (Punt 2006, 68). While the reality of particular postcolonial experiences is felt in the bodies '@home',² the discourse that now designates postcolonial studies has tended to be forged away-from-home, in the diaspora.

2. Discourse in the Diaspora

There is a now recurring litany of ancestors of postcolonial studies, invoked as regularly as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, namely, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Read almost any survey or programmatic work on postcolonial biblical criticism and these three names will be invoked (among recent examples see Moore and Segovia 2005; Moore 2006; Sugirtharajah 2003, 2001). Part of my concern is that if this is said often enough we will come to believe it is true that postcolonial studies begins with these intellectuals from the diaspora.

To assert the pre-eminence of these contributions, and significant contributions they are, is to elide both the particular local struggles of actual

2 I use this rather odd formulation as a shorthand for the postcolonial realities of actual postcolonial struggles from within which the analytical categories and concepts of the discourse initially emerged and should continue to emerge.

communities against forms of colonialism and the longer theoretical path that led to current postcolonial theory, a history that includes, argues Roland Boer (Boer 2005, 166), the foundational contributions of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. The former is foundational, and yet the centre of gravity of the discourse has shifted from the local to the diasporal. Fortunately, with respect to the former, (South) African biblical scholarship is rooted and routed @home, so there is little danger of our diasporal brothers and sisters shifting the fulcrum away from our local realities. And Roland Boer, an Australian biblical scholar (among other things), has fortunately provided us with a timely reminder of the latter, showing carefully how the holy trinity of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha have not only elided the actual historical precursors to postcolonial theory (Boer 2005, 167), including Marx and Lenin's critical engagement with colonialism and imperialism, but "systematically detached various key aspects of Marxist theory from Marxism itself and then negated their political potential" in their constructions of postcolonial theory (Boer 2005, 168). Said did this through his appropriation of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony via Foucault's work on power (hence my concern about England's unproblematic appropriation of Foucault), Spivak did this through her Derridean, deconstructive, approach to Marx (which is partially understandable given her commitment to feminism), and Bhabha did it through his use of "Lacanian psychoanalysis along with a demarxified Bakhtin" (Boer 2005, 169).

Re-membering postcolonial criticism in a way that elides the contribution of Marxist analysis is a matter of substantial concern. But it becomes even more problematic from a South African perspective when we watch as Sugirtharajah first coopts Itumeleng Mosala's Black liberation hermeneutics as an example of *postcolonial* biblical hermeneutics (Sugirtharajah 2001, 251-252), and then excludes his contributions on Marxist materialist biblical hermeneutics from a later edition of a book in which they had in an earlier edition made a seminal contribution (compare Sugirtharajah 2006 and Sugirtharajah 1991).

It is enough to make us (South) African biblical scholars suspect conspiracy, particularly when there is a trajectory of postcolonialism which has incorporated Marxism. As Robert Young reminds us, forms of postcolonialism have incorporated "predominantly non-western forms of Marxism ... to analyse the system and histories of imperialism and colonialism, their aftermath and their persistence" (Young 2001, 58). So why the reluctance to grant a place to Marxism in postcolonial biblical studies? David Jobling, however, cautions those of us who would claim an

ideological plot, saying that postcolonialism's 'forgetting' of its own Marxist history "is perhaps not quite the conspiracy" Boer and others of us make it. But he immediately goes on to insist, "to the extent that postcolonialism is hiding (from itself and others) the resources of the Marxist tradition, it is narrowing the ideological options ... of people in struggle" (Jobling 2005, 191). Jobling himself goes further, refusing in his own work on postcolonial biblical criticism to subsume the biblical hermeneutics of actual local struggles under the generic label of postcolonialism. In his own case study (Jobling 2005), that of the work of the South African Black theologian Takatso Mofokeng, he gives the particulars of Mofokeng's context its own integrity, recognising that each local struggle must speak with its own voice before it is brought into conversation with postcolonial discourse.

But I believe Boer is on to something in his conspiracy theory, though it is not only Marx who is the victim. Anything particular and local is prone to commodification and consumption by postcolonial theory in general, and postcolonial biblical criticism in particular. Just as Mosala has been commodified and consumed by Sugirtharajah as a postcolonial biblical critic, much more threatens to be commodified and consumed by its voracious appetite to encompass all, theoretically.

The mechanism by which this process of commodification and consumption operates is ably analysed and described by Roland Boer in one of his early essays on postcolonialism (Boer 1998). In this essay he argues "that postcolonialism is closely tied in with postmodernism", which he acknowledges is not "an overly original suggestion", though what he goes on to argue is. He characterises postmodernism in terms of "a dialectical conjunction between globalization and disintegration" (Boer 1998, 25). Describing postmodernism in these terms enables Boer to make a connection with postcolonialism, "since postcolonialism is not so much a subset of postmodernism as constitutive of the postmodern moment in the first place" (Boer 1998, 26). For it is in postcolonialism that "the intense dialectical opposition of globalization and disintegration shows up most sharply" (Boer 1998, 26). As he goes on to argue, "each time the forces of decolonization have arisen", including in Africa and Asia in the mid to late twentieth century, "this has become a means for yet more intense colonization", in the form of "a more powerful mutation in capitalism in their postcolonial phase" (Boer 1998, 27). In other words, postcolonialism "may be understood as that which arises as part of (while simultaneously becoming definitive of) that phase of capitalism [Fredric] Jameson designates 'late capitalism'" (Boer 1998, 27). Global capitalism "generates

its Other”, according to Boer’s analysis, through the related processes of ‘reification’ and ‘disintegration’ (Boer 1998, 26). Together reification and disintegration function, on the economic level especially, in a two-step process which disintegrates the colonised context and then reifies its fragments by commodifying them, thus rend(er)ing them suitable for consumption by the colonial/imperial centres.

Indeed, Boer argues, the very “assertion of a national identity is part of the dynamic of globalization itself: the desire to be distinct is generated in response to the inexorable drive to economic and cultural uniformity”. And yet in this very response to globalisation, “at the point where one feels a genuine oppositional move has been made, globalization shows through even more strongly” in the way “particular ethnic, local and national quirks become the stuff of global fashion and interest—Australian accents and films, Aboriginal art and literature, to name a few more notable examples” (Boer 1998, 36). The disintegration wrought by global late capitalism on neo-colonial contexts produces local fragments which are exoticised and then consumed in their now commodified and de-politicized forms. The “relentless logic” of global capitalism is that it produces and consumes “the very particularities of a local situation” (Boer 1998, 37). Bluntly put, the internal logic of postcolonial biblical interpretation as a form of postmodern global capitalism tends to encourage the generation of local artifacts, first reifying them as authentic, exotic, native, vernacular, Third World objects, and then packaging them in forms that make them palatable for consumers in the imperial centres.

The way out of this for biblical studies, which is itself determined by economic formations, both in the centres of empire and on the postcolonial peripheries (as Punt also asserts (Punt 2006, 68-69)), is according to Boer for biblical studies to participate in the formation of an anticipatory socialist culture. The most

viable mode of destabilizing, disrupting and finally replacing hegemonic, imperial, biblical scholarship [and its postcolonial relation] is one that seeks to be part of the construction of a culture that anticipates the end of the capitalist social and economic organization that is part and parcel of such a hegemony. Any seriously seditious postcolonial biblical studies needs to make an acquaintance with socialism, in its areas of Marxist political and economic theory and practice For it is here that a truly oppositional discourse may be found (Boer 1998, 46).

I agree with Boer’s analysis, both in his diagnosis and the remedy, which is why I do worry that the oppositional posture (Sugirtharajah 2006, 66) of

postcolonial biblical criticism is not sufficiently attentive to the structural and systemic dimensions of power, particularly at the macro-economic level of global neo-liberal capitalism. I worry, in other words, that postcolonial biblical hermeneutics has too quickly moved beyond liberation hermeneutics. That postcolonial biblical criticism has done so is, I will argue in the remainder of this article, why it has not been taken up whole-heartedly or at all in (South) African biblical scholarship. We realise the danger of separating the local struggles we are engaged in—real, actual struggles in particular contexts—from larger emancipatory and transformative projects (such as socialism). African women’s biblical scholarship is a case in point, and I choose them as a case study because I concur with Tinyiko Maluleke that African women’s biblical hermeneutics is characterised by “freshness, enthusiasm, creativity, and sharpness” (Maluleke 2001, 238); if there is a site where we will find innovation in African biblical scholarship, this is it.

3. Hermeneutics @home

Unfortunately, the leading spokesperson for postcolonial biblical interpretation and one of its pioneers, R.S. Sugirtharajah, has been at the forefront of the campaign (which includes Segovia, in a more nuanced fashion (Segovia 2000)) to minimise the contribution of liberation hermeneutics. While some of his analysis of biblical liberation hermeneutics is astute, his predominant tendency is to caricature (or misunderstand) its components or to coopt/consume them as elements of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics (Sugirtharajah 2006, 4-6; 2001, 203-275). This is unhelpful. Far more helpful is the underdeveloped hyphen Sugirtharajah inserts between “liberation-postcolonial” in his “Afterword” to the third edition of *Voices from the margin* (Sugirtharajah 2006, 495). This hyphen (as many hyphens have come to do) could carry a significant, but yet to be determined, load. African women’s biblical scholarship, particularly the work of Musa Dube, it seems to me, is beginning to show us what weight this hyphen might bear.

Earlier on in his “Introduction” to this volume of essays from the Third World, Sugirtharajah makes a distinction between postcolonial hermeneutics and “diasporic hermeneutics”, saying “If the 1980s was the time of the subalterns, now is the time of the diasporic intellectuals” (Sugirtharajah 2006, 5). Implicit in this formulation, coming immediately after his discussion of postcolonial hermeneutics, is that postcolonialism proper is centred around the postcolonial subaltern on the periphery while diasporic hermeneutics is centred around the postcolonial intellectual residing in the

colonial centre. I agree, but wonder if Sugirtharajah intends this deconstructive distinction, for surely the three usual suspects, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, and the scholarly industry they have founded are more aptly described as diasporic than postcolonial?

Sugirtharajah sustains this deconstruction of his own postcolonial edifice in his discussion of the different agendas of diasporic intellectuals and those “who are physically resident in their respective homelands”:

It is clear that these discourses, the one from home and the other from abroad, are motored and motivated by different agendas. A quick scrutiny of the two discourses will reveal stark differences in their motivation and mission. The key terms for articulations emerging from home might begin with HIV/AIDS, backward classes, base communities, *burakumins*, capitalism, *dalits*, development, environment, free-trade, or the World Trade Organization. The list for the diasporic scenario might begin with alterity, border-thinking, body-politics, carnival, deconstruction, the end of history, mimicry, and so forth. Similarly, these two discourses summon and anchor their work in different families of authors and texts. The theologies at home might include Ambedkar, Banerjea, Chenchiah, Gandhi, Gutiérrez, Garvey, Mbiti, Mosala, Samartha, Song, Kitamori, and Koyama. Diasporic discourse might begin with Althusser, Anzaldúa, Bhaktin, Bhabha, Cabral, Derrida, Said, and Žižek. I may have overstressed the differences. They are, nevertheless, palpable: one is located firmly in the cultural, pastoral, and political milieu of the people and explores the social conditions affecting them, whereas the other is desperately seeking a home and acceptability in the academy, enamoured of and entrapped by its theoretical sophistry and methodological procedures (Sugirtharajah 2006, 6).

Phew! Has Sugirtharajah finally come clean? For what he calls diasporic hermeneutics now looks and sounds like postcolonial hermeneutics, and what might be called ‘@home hermeneutics’ surely looks and sounds like liberation hermeneutics! However, while I admire this moment of clarity and honesty, I do acknowledge that there are aspects of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics (in its various configurations) that are distinguishable from liberation hermeneutics and potentially useful for (South) African biblical hermeneutics, *provided* they remain within a broader liberatory hermeneutical framework with its agenda being determined by those who live and work @home.

The work of Musa Dube is an excellent example of a form of postcolonialism which remains rooted in a liberation framework. Dube is an obvious choice to begin with. Not only does Stephen Moore describe her book, *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* (Dube 2000), as

“Arguably, the most impressive monograph to date in postcolonial biblical criticism” (Moore 2006, 136), she herself uses the postcolonial label for her work (which very few other African women do), and she is fairly clear about her hermeneutic moves, including their broader location within a liberation paradigm.

Many of her hermeneutic moves do have family resemblances with what has been characterised as postcolonial biblical interpretation, though her starting point, often implicit, is more closely akin to liberation hermeneutics. For example, she begins her major work, *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* (Dube 2000), written during a period when she was herself a diasporic intellectual, by setting her study firmly within the struggle for liberation. Her book begins with the following paragraph, rooted in liberation hermeneutics:

During the decades of the armed struggle for liberation in sub-Saharan Africa, an anonymous short story, orally narrated and passed on by word of mouth, became popular. The story held that “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.” The story summarizes the sub-Saharan African experience of colonization. It explains how colonization was connected to the coming of the white man, how it was connected to his use of the Bible, and how the black African possession of the Bible is connected to the white man’s taking of African people’s lands. Admittedly, the story holds that the Bible is now a sub-Saharan book, but it is an inheritance that will always be linked to and remembered for its role in facilitating European imperialism (Dube 2000, 3)

The next paragraph continues in the same vein, stating “Those of us who grew up professing Christian faith in the age of the armed struggle for liberation, from World War II to South African independence in 1994, were never left to occupy our places comfortably” (Dube 2000, 3). The Christian religion, its practice, practitioners, and institutions were relentlessly interrogated, leading Dube to her programmatic question (shared with generations of African biblical scholars), “that is, given the role of the Bible in facilitating imperialism, how should we read the Bible as postcolonial subjects?” (Dube 2000, 4).

I am not disputing that there are elements in Dube’s biblical hermeneutics that go beyond the normal limits of liberation hermeneutics; my point is that postcolonial hermeneutics cannot do the job Dube wants done on its own. There needs to be some form of alliance with liberation hermeneutics, perhaps utilising Sugirtharajah’s hyphenated “liberation-postcolonial” formulation (Sugirtharajah 2006, 495).

Put differently, though invoking the term ‘postcolonial’, is Dube doing anything different to her African feminist sisters who have stayed @home? What in her work makes it ‘postcolonial’? A detailed response to this important question is beyond the scope of this article; my purpose here is simply to note that Dube always situates her appropriations of postcolonial discourse within the larger paradigm of liberation hermeneutics. In most instances she modifies the term ‘postcolonial’ with the term ‘feminist’ (Dube 1997, 2000), and in others she surrounds it with other traditional liberation language (Dube 2006).

And she is not alone in her liberationist appropriation of postcolonial hermeneutic elements. The only other African women to make a significant appropriation of postcolonial biblical interpretation—and she too is the product of a USA PhD, like Dube—is Makhosazana K. Nzimande. She too qualifies her use of the term ‘postcolonial’; in her case she uses the evocative Zulu term “*imbokodo*” (“grinding stone”) to do this, speaking of “postcolonial *Imbokodo* biblical interpretation” (Nzimande 2005). Her consistent use of the upper case for “*Imbokodo*” marks her privileging of the liberation paradigm. Though the term refers to an actual grinding stone, used to grind grain in traditional African homes, it is pregnant with other connotations. The most powerful of these derive from the freedom song sung during the 1956 Defiance Campaign in South Africa as women marched against the apartheid regime’s racist pass laws, singing: “*Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo, uzokufa!*” (“You strike a woman, you strike a grinding stone; and you will be crushed”) (Nzimande 2005, 23-24). Like the grinding stone itself, African women in South Africa are resistant and impervious to even prolonged socio-political and socio-cultural oppression, outlasting apartheid and patriarchy and relentlessly forging their own identity (Nzimande 2005, 23-25). The liberatory trajectory and intent of the term are clear, demarcating a terrain within which postcolonial criticism can make its own contribution.

For I am not suggesting that we African biblical scholars should dismiss the significant potential of postcolonial discourse; I am arguing rather for a cautious appropriation. The tendency of postcolonial criticism to coopt and elide the historic and current contributions of liberation hermeneutics must be resisted, as must the anachronistic tendency to use the discourse to do ‘business as usual’ socio-historical biblical reconstruction. The commodification-consumption tendencies of postcolonialism have not only coopted context-based liberation hermeneutics (as in the case of Mosala’s work), they have also coopted (and deconstructed?) the traditional socio-historical work of mainstream biblical scholarship.

The clearest proponent of this latter tendency has been Fernando Segovia. His careful mappings of postcolonial studies have made a substantial contribution to the emergent field of postcolonial biblical criticism, providing a clear analysis of its dimensions. But it is his interventions on behalf of postcolonial studies and ancient texts that interests me here. In an early piece in which he begins to delineate the contours of “a postcolonial optic” he notes that

A first dimension of a postcolonial optic in biblical criticism involves an analysis of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity that takes seriously into consideration either their broader sociocultural contexts in the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin, respectively, in the light of an omnipresent, inescapable and overwhelming sociopolitical reality—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, as variously constituted and exercised during the long period in question (Segovia 1998, 56).

He then goes on to argue, therefore, that “the shadow of empire in the production of ancient texts is to be highlighted”, and suggests a range of questions that might be put to the socio-historical reality of empire *in these ancient texts*. I emphasise the prepositional phrase because it is clear that Segovia is here focussing on the ancient context of production, not current postcolonial readings and actual postcolonial readers (the two other aspects of postcolonial biblical criticism he delineates) (Segovia 1998, 57-58). But it is precisely, I would argue, these two other aspects that constitute ‘postcolonialism proper’! Postcolonial studies emerges from *the reality of the actual lived experiences of particular forms of colonialism* (see also Slemon 1994)! Projecting it back into ancient texts and their contexts of production is somewhat anachronistic. But Segovia is determined to push for this retrospective move.

In a later essay which continues his project of mapping the postcolonial optic, Segovia carefully maps how postcolonial studies have developed as a critical movement. As he reviews the literature he notes, again and again, that postcolonial studies “confines” itself to the study of texts produced in the process of western colonisation (Segovia 2005, 28). But in his view “its scope is much too limited”, for it “should actively entertain the study of colonialism in transhistorical and transcultural perspective” (Segovia 2005, 29, note 9). And even in those studies that do present imperialism and colonialism as transhistorical and transcultural, Segovia notes that “they point to a fundamental grounding of the field in the conditions, practices, and effects of the Western formation” (Segovia 2005, 45). He worries aloud whether “such grounding is deemed descriptive or prescriptive”, for he

wants to open up postcolonial studies to the transhistorical and transcultural worlds of ancient biblical texts. In sum, “the distinctive characteristics” of western empire, imperialism, and colonialism “should not prevent inquiry into other historical and cultural formations” (Segovia 2005, 46, note 34).

Segovia does provide a glimpse of the kind of hermeneutic he intends in prising out this pre-postcolonial colonial space when he says, in concluding his mapping, that he “subscribes to the view that imperial-colonial formations represent long-standing and wide-ranging phenomena, present across historical periods and cultural contexts”, and that he therefore sees “no reason why postcolonial analysis should be limited to the modern and capitalist formations of the West”; indeed, he continues, “I see comparative analysis as justified and in order” (Segovia 2005, 75). While I agree with Segovia that comparative analysis is certainly useful, we should take care not to deflect the emphasis of postcolonial hermeneutics from its sites of formation in our own struggles.³

Earlier, Richard Horsley had offered a more appropriate take on this kind of hermeneutic. A committed social activist and socio-historical biblical critic, Horsley has made occasional forays into postcolonial biblical interpretation from the perspective of his ‘normal’ socio-historical biblical work. Citing Mosala’s work on the need to recognise the class-based (in terms of the socio-economic ‘class’ formations of a particular period) redactional layers in the biblical text, Horsley goes on to note that “postcolonial criticism of prevailing politico-economic and cultural relations in the modern world makes it possible to discern, often for the very first time, the concrete ways in which the various layers in biblical literature are the products of the very emergence of (struggle for) domination and authority” (Horsley 1998, 153). However, Horsley is slow to embrace postcolonial discourse, precisely because, as he says (in an argument reminiscent of Boer’s) postcolonialism “may often divert attention from contemporary problems of social, political, and cultural domination and obfuscate its own relationship to the conditions of its own emergence, that is to a global capitalism that structures global economic, political, and cultural relations” (Horsley 1998, 153). And we do not, he hastens to add, “want our postcolonial criticism that aims to resist and undo colonial cultural hegemony to become, in effect, complicitous in consecrating the new global

3 Similar caution should be exercised with respect to the concept of ‘class’, which has its origins in particular ‘modern’ social analysis, but which like ‘postcolonialism’ does lend itself to useful comparative analysis with ancient contexts.

capitalist domination by our failure to address the latter's mechanisms and our relations to it" (Horsley 1998, 154).

Horsley then proposes a hermeneutic within which the kind of work envisaged by Segovia might take place; significantly it rests on the liberation hermeneutics of Mosala. Cautiously, he argues that "perhaps by discerning the ancient imperial context of biblical materials in order better to appreciate their agenda we can be more critically prepared to 'read' the current postcolonial or neo-imperial situation in which we want to intervene" (Horsley 1998, 154). So while contributing an essay to a volume on postcolonialism, in a book called *The postcolonial Bible* (Sugirtharajah 1998), Horsley resists co-option, nailing his liberation colours to the mast and prefacing his appropriation of postcolonial discourse with cautionary comments and activist intent.

Furthermore, like Boer, Jobling, and myself, Horsley recognises that resisting empire requires "an alternative way of conceiving history", "a metanarrative that enables a movement to maintain its own identity and solidarity over against the pretensions of the imperial metanarratives" (Horsley 1998, 161). Though writing here about (the gospel of) Mark's metanarrative, Horsley is acutely aware that the postcolonial tendency to emphasise "mininarratives" (Horsley 1998, 161, note 2) and "micropolitics" (Boer 1998, 43-44), not understanding the danger of the neo-liberal capitalist empire's capacity to fragment and dis-integrate and co-opt and consume local struggles. While we should be worried by metanarratives, Horsley recognises their potential for resistance and emancipatory reconstruction in the face of the deadly metanarratives of empire.

4. Conclusion

Sugirtharajah is right when he asserts that postcolonialism "is about both the state of affairs in colonial times and the state of affairs that exists in the fraught aftermath of imperialism" (Sugirtharajah 2001, 246). Here lie the 'originary' events that generate the discourse (see also Sugirtharajah 2006); and the discourse cannot be separated from their '@home-ness' without the kind of loss Sugirtharajah describes in his diasporan lament.

Sugirtharajah is right when he questions whether "everything is postcolonial" (Sugirtharajah 2001, 268). So while I hear Segovia's plea for extending postcolonialism backwards into biblical history, I worry that this smooths and "flattens out" (Sugirtharajah 2001, 268) the particulars of different colonial experiences and the specifics that gave rise to postcolonialism in our era. Unless we deliberately employ the kind of

hermeneutic advocated by Mosala and Horsley, postcolonial-like analyses of ancient biblical texts becomes just one more commodification perpetuated by a benign apolitical postcolonial industry.

Sugirtharajah is partially right when he notes that postcolonial discourse “is torn between its use of mutually incompatible critical categories such as Marxism and poststructuralism” (Sugirtharajah 2001, 246). More accurately, postcolonialism lacks the capacity to provide a hermeneutic in which each of these sets of critical categories have a place. Once again liberation theology provides what postcolonialism lacks, in the guise of Cornel West’s work. The African American Black theologian offers a persuasive hermeneutic which combines three strands: poststructuralism, progressive Marxism, and prophetic Christianity. He argues convincingly that poststructuralism “can serve as a useful springboard for a more engaged, even subversive, philosophical perspective”, can even “lend itself to emancipatory ends in that it proposes the tenuous self-images and provisional vocabularies that undergird past and present social orders as central objects of criticism” (West 1985, 270), and, as Cornel West continues, such shifts are particularly significant for those on the underside of history because “oppressed people have more at stake than others in focusing on the tenuous and provisional vocabularies which have had and do have hegemonic status in past and present societies” (West 1985, 271). But while poststructuralism is able to deconstruct it does not know how to get its hands dirty or to dream (West 1982, 183, 185). Indeed, the danger is that postcolonialism as a sub-set of postmodernism will settle for the play of postcolonial technique rather than its more socially engaged, political, forms (and so I worry about some of the recent work of Punt and England, see Punt 2007; England 2007). Poststructuralism must, therefore, be part of a larger project, a “countermovement”, a “new gospel of the future” (West 1983, 190). And for this larger project what is needed is the social theory and political praxis of progressive Marxism and the resources of prophetic Christianity (West 1982).

So the problem is not “mutually incompatible critical categories”, the problem is a relevant hermeneutic that makes use of both sets of critical categories. I am not sure postcolonialism offers this. Does postcolonialism know how to dream? I am not sure. What is clear is that African biblical scholars who have made use of postcolonialism are not yet persuaded. We insist on using what it offers within a liberation (and/or an inculturation) paradigm.

Finally, Sugirtharajah is wrong when he says that “Postcolonialism is about a set of measures worked out by diasporan Third World intellectuals

in order to undo, reconfigure and redraw contingent boundaries of hegemonic knowledges” (Sugirtharajah 2001, 246). He is not wrong about the deconstructive, resisting, and reconstituting task; he is wrong about the agents of this task. Indeed, I am alarmed when he states that “What diasporic hermeneutics has done is to make regional-based theologies such as African, Asian, or Latin American almost redundant” (Sugirtharajah 2006, 6). I am grateful for the “almost”, but want to make it clear that (South) African biblical interpretation and theologies remain rooted in continental African realities. As far as African biblical scholarship and theology is concerned, the centre of African academic gravity has not yet shifted to the diaspora. From the beginning the task has been initiated and taken up @home. That some of those have moved to other sites of struggle in the centre of empire should not elide those who remain @home and who get their hands dirty and dare to dream in actual postcolonial contexts, using whatever resources seem useful, including postcolonial discourse.

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