


Decolonisation – A reading strategy for the African (re-) interpretation of the Old Testament in a (South) African context

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The interpretation of the Bible cannot escape being influenced by developments and exposure to the social sciences, hermeneutics, globalisation, and so on. While acknowledging the context of progressive universalisation and the multidimensional pull towards homogenisation, the specificity of the African context(s) in the ongoing discourse regarding the theological significance of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts must be acknowledged. The discourse is about positionality and considers theoretical concerns raised by the social sciences and the notion of *cognitive existentialism*. In so doing, a reading strategy and agenda for African Bible studies can gradually be more explicitly enunciated. Issues that need to be more overtly considered are the epistemological basis upon which a historical-critical approach can continue to inform the discourse and narrow the distance between the *ordinary reader* with a focus on *life interests* and the *scholarly reader* with a focus on *interpretive interests*.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Acknowledgment that Bible Interpretation is situated in a context influenced by modernity, and interdisciplinary discourse (science, philosophy, humanities and social sciences) is providing a platform for engaging various readers of the Biblical Text as religious document in the discourse.

Keywords: reading strategy; positionality; modernity; African Bible interpretation; decolonisation; post-colonial; identity.

Introduction

Concerning the attention given to Old Testament interpretation in Africa since the 1960s, Holter (2011:378) rightfully asked, 'What role does historical-critical methodology play in African Old Testament studies, as we have learned to know it in the recent 50 years?' This query must be seen within a context where historical-critical approaches represented a so-called western (colonised) interpretation and usage of the text in a context where a naïve and dogmatic approach regarding the Bible's interpretation played a significant role (Snyman 2003:383; Ukpong 2000). Mbuvi et al. (2014:142) affirmed that 'the interpretive methods of 'Euro-American' dominant academic culture has long been suspect in the Black Church and is usually not well received by HBTS students'. On the contrary, as indicated by Musimbi Kanyoro (1999:19), a 'literal reading of the Bible is the most acceptable reading in churches in Africa'. As such, much interpretation of the Bible amid African Christianity can, to a large extent, be regarded as a fundamentalist approach.

In drawing up the contours of African biblical interpretation, West (2005:49) distinguishes between approaches where the focus can either be on 'those dimensions of text that are of interest to the reader',¹ that is interpretive interests. On the other hand, we find approaches where life interests and concerns 'drive or motivate the interpreter to come to the text'.² As such, historical criticism would belong to the first approach to Bible interpretation. Indeed, it played a substantial role amid the professional guild at various academic institutions where the understanding of the Bible constitutes a specific component of the theological curriculum (Holter 2011:378; West 2005:49–50). Historical-critical approaches and the focus on the historical context(s), including that of the text's formation contributed towards accepting a reading strategy with a particular emphasis on such interpretative interests driven by historical, descriptive and linguistic categories (Mbuvi 2017:152). The challenge now is 'to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stronghold of Eurocentric biblical exegesis' (Enuwosa 2005:87). The fundamental quest here is for contextual

1.This is not about a 'search for a comprehensive collective national identity' (Vorster 2018:2) but a search for an appropriate reading strategy that takes cognisance of the distance between the contemporary reader and the 'Hebrew Bible "texts" in an ongoing discourse and exploration regarding its contemporary theological significance'.

2.As indicated by Bwalya (2012:1), there are 'major societal challenges in the African context which African Christianity, as a life-affirming religion, should continue to embrace, re-embrace and engage with, if it has to be relevant to the African context'.

hermeneutics that acknowledges the role and significance of the Bible for the ordinary reader and explores in more depth an interpretation that would be of value for a disjointed community.

What is somewhat problematic is the simplified line drawn unilaterally in connection with the Bible's association with a colonial legacy and rejection of so-called 'Western methods in biblical studies'³ without appreciating the multi-faceted complexity of biblical interpretation. The challenge is to familiarise the ordinary reader with the fact that with any critical reading/interpretation of the Bible:

Invariably, a linguistic, historical, cultural and social chasm opens up between current readers of Biblical texts and the cultural, as well as historically layered, settings in which the documents originated. (Malan 2010:1)

Ironically, the focus on the historical embeddedness of the text encourages a comparative⁴ reading strategy in Southern African scholarship. The role of the Hebrew Bible in the so-called African Independent Churches illustrates the point in as far as the Old Testament's re-interpretation serves as a tool to identify themselves in and through the Hebrew/Jewish scripture. For example, to describe the members of the African Independent Churches as 'chosen by God' and the notion of 'liberation', i.e. Old Testament terminology and its role in the identification of a group. The emphasis is on the similarity and compatibility – at least at face value – between aspects reflected in the text and the life experience of the contemporary reader, such as rituals, sacred places, taboos and customs (Mbiti 2004:223).

However, most contemporary readers of the Bible in South Africa do not fully comprehend the implications of the historical gap between the Old Testament and the modern reader or the hermeneutical impact of such a critical reading. Awareness of this separation between text(s), context(s) and reader(s) continues to influence the formation and characterisation of African Christianity and African Bible studies but requires further clarification. This also provides for an opportunity to refine the agenda for African Christianity. There is some comprehension for the distance between the historical context and the societal dynamics that played a role in forming the text as we have it today as literature,⁵ not to mention the notion of intertextuality.⁶

From an academic (theological) perspective, the significance of a post-foundational hermeneutical approach recognising the 'heterogeneity of the discourse practices of scientific research' (Ginev 2001:27) can inform the contemporary reader to appreciate and participate in a new and appropriate

3. Dube (2013) indicated that Madipoane Masenya (2004:455) exposed the above dilemma in an article: Teaching Western-oriented Old Testament Studies to African students: An exercise in wisdom or in folly. Refer – Dube (2013:1–6).

4. 'Comparative studies form the vast bulk of all academic African biblical Interpretation' (West 2005:51).

5. Refer for example Tull (2000), Reidy (2010) Bellanca (1994) – Papers on *Language & Literature* 30 (1), 57–72.

6. Mikhail Bakhtin and his emphasis on the dialogical nature of reality is being regarded as the father of intertextuality (Claassens 2003:127).

'style of reasoning' (Ginev 2001:3). Such *reasoning* must be conscious of how the 'limits of scientific knowledge have become noticeable in late modernity' (Van Aarde 2009:2). And in this discourse, reflecting aspects of *cognitive existentialism*,⁷ a research strategy takes shape in defence of science's cognitive specificity (Ginev 2007:72):⁸

The main point of this view is that the circular relations are not 'behind' but 'within' the totality of the respective form of experience (and mode of existence).

Alas, 'the historical-critical method has *still* [– own insertion] not fully arrived in South Africa' Le Roux (1994:198–199).⁹ More specifically:

Ordinary readers, who constitute the bulk of Bible readers in Africa, read from the peripheral or pre-critical position because they have not been trained in using the historical-critical tools¹⁰ necessary to read the Bible in a more critically informed way. (Dada 2010:168)

Furthermore, the shift towards and need for the 'cultivation of a historical understanding of text and context' (Lombaard 2006:912–992) is not fully comprehended. Despite the central role that the Old Testament plays in the establishment and ongoing formation of various African Christian movements, such as some African Independent Churches (Mbiti 2004:220), the interpretation and usage of the text testify to a fundamentalist interpretation of the text to justify various practices within the African Independent Churches (Mbiti 2004:231).¹¹ The biblicist and fundamentalist interpretation allow the Bible to become a 'book of witchcraft' (Human 1997:571). Trying to clarify the 'African biblical hermeneutic approach' as contextual, Nyiawung (2013:2) located the historical-critical method within the context of 'social-scientific criticism'.

While the 'traditional' methods are regarded as 'foreign', 'intellectualist methodologies', the importance of the contemporary African context and the quest to include 'the historically marginalised groups' is recognised. Like elsewhere, 'The exegetical methods of Euro-American dominant academic culture have long been suspect in the Black Church, and are usually not well received by HBTS students' (Mbuvi et al. 2014:142). Holter (2011:387) rightly points to the potential of historical-critical methodology that, 'when used consciously, may serve an African Old Testament interpretation that responds to contemporary African experiences and concerns'. Making critical use of this methodology as a tool for creating

7. Thus the radical version of anti-essentialism would be something like *cognitive existentialism* – a conception that treats science as a *dynamics of research practices* in which cognitive content is constituted and "situated" within open (practical and theoretical) horizons of doing research' (Ginev 2007:68).

8. Refer Ginev (2007) regarding the notion of 'hermeneutic circularity' and the 'epistemic organization of scientific research', that is cognitive essentialism (Ginev 2007:59ff.).

9. As indicated by Bosman (2013:5) 'Le Roux (1994:198–199) is not yet convinced that the historical-critical method has fully arrived in South Africa'.

10. And as indicated by Aichele et al. (2009:386), 'a hermeneutics of suspicion is certainly not unknown among historical-critical scholars (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, 1960, 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?' in *Existence and Faith* [transl. S.M. Ogden, World, Cleveland]).

11. Refer Mbiti (2004:231) regarding the role of the Hebrew Bible in African Independent churches, and specifically, the functioning of specific passages in ritualistic manner (p. 231ff.).

interaction between ancient texts and contemporary contexts, the African guild of Old Testament studies demonstrates its interaction with the global guild of Old Testament studies and its commitment to its own interpretative context'. The fundamental principle of attaining 'access to the historical "world-behind-the-text"' (Sargent 2012:225) gradually developed into a reading strategy acknowledging the 'social locations' (Jonker 2013:5) of the various readers of the biblical text. While acknowledging the distinction between contexts of textual production (Jonker 2013:5) and contexts of textual reception (Jonker 2013:5), it is vital to appreciate the 'alterity of the biblical text' (Sargent 2013:260). In so doing, the focus should move beyond a reading strategy that merely uses a historical-critical toolkit only to strengthen a comparative reading strategy.

The challenge is to provide a platform where contemporary life interests can be considered and serve as a heuristic key 'to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context' (Conradie 2001:436). And, concerning the notion of *text* and *social context*, in the words of Steiner (1975/6:184), 'If we stand serious about our business, we shall have to teach reading' (own emphasis). With the emergence of various interpretive possibilities, the significance of *intertextuality* and post-colonial interpretations' a 'defence can be forwarded for the Bible to be interpreted through the eyes and ideas of the world (African context – own insertion) of today' (Hunter 2014:121). Such an 'Africa-conscious and post-colonialist reading of the Bible is not entirely new' (Yorke 2004:159). It further illustrates the importance of a more explicitly articulated reading strategy, bearing in mind the 'distinction between exegesis and appropriation' (De Wit 2008:4, 5).

The challenge regarding the interpretation of the Bible in Africa requires a multi-pronged¹² approach that necessarily is (1) *reactionary*, thereby acknowledging 'the inadequacy of western biblical studies in providing meaningful responses to concerns pertinent to African communities' (Mbuvi 2017:149). It must be (2) *innovative* in allowing for a 'creative engagement of the African cosmological reality and the Bible' (Mbuvi 2017:149). But furthermore, it also needs to be (3) *critical* in recognising the historical distance between the text and the contemporary reader¹³ (Human 1997:573; Nyiawung 2013:5), and it should also allow for a (4) *creative interpretative framework* recognising the various factors playing a role in biblical interpretation (Conradie & Jonker 2001; Jonker 2001; West & Dube [eds.] 2000). In such a context, the function of a historical-critical approach (Ukpong 1999) must stay on the table.¹⁴ In this regard, refer to questions about the emergence of a cultic identity and the associated *inscripturated* identity of a 'Biblical Israel' in a post-exilic context.

12. Jonker alerts to the necessity of a multidimensional approach (2006:58–76). Reading with one eye closed? Or: What you miss when you do not read biblical texts multidimensionally.

13. The significance of the historical dimension and the 'historicity debate' need to be recognised as far as it should inform the contemporary reader (Jonker 2013:2).

14. According to Horrell and Davis (2014:78) 'The first such development is the dethroning of historical criticism, once the presumed paradigm for biblical studies. Historical criticism was (own emphasis) based on the presumption that the task of the biblical scholar was to discern *what the text originally meant, and what events actually happened, from an objective and unbiased perspective*' (own emphasis).

African biblical scholarship cannot afford to lose sight of the innovative potential of exploring the analogy between contexts of textual production and textual reception (in ancient and contemporary contexts) in interpreting the text (Jonker 2013:1).

The comparative¹⁵ method or reading strategy involves more than pointing to the world of the Old Testament and focusing only on those aspects that seem to be similar or compatible with the so-called African culture and experiences, even if taken at face value. Of more significance in this regard is acknowledging that the 'social locations of specific readers can shape the lens through which a text is read' (Mbuvi et al. 2014:143). In this regard, the apparent similarity and compatibility between the societal context of textual production and some societal arrangements and cultural dynamics of the contemporary African audience are considered (Nyiawung 2013:4). What is critical in the debate is that this 'establishing contextual similarities' (Dube 2013:1) is not restricted to a specific point in the past, that is chronologically and spatially far removed from the contemporary reader in a South African context. The similarities and compatibility are also to be defined and explored in terms of South African society's current societal dynamics.

The point is that some facets of a historical-critical approach can be appreciated and better communicated when the reader explores and acknowledges the similarity and compatibility between textual production contexts and textual reception. Within a context exposed to post-modernism, there is a call for a reading strategy that recognises the diversity and realises that meaning is located in a discourse between 'texts' (not restricted to literature). In so doing, there is a need to create parables with an anti-essentialist emphasis while acknowledging the theological implications thereof (Aichele, Miscall & Walsh 2009:401–402).

A critical reading strategy is an essential requirement in responding to the biblical text and the complexities that must continue to inform the contemporary discourse. In this discourse, the text(s), its reader(s) and the various contexts provide a platform for an ongoing engagement with the texts whereby the idea that texts possess meaning in themselves are by implication rejected. Instead, the sense of texts depends on the readers and the specific hermeneutic environment (Connor 1992:423).

The historical-critical question about the origin and formation of 'biblical Israel' illustrates the point. It explores some issues/similarities in societal dynamics that might assist the contemporary reader in appreciating the theological significance of these texts in a South African context (Conradie 2001:429).

15. *Comparative method* here refers to a specific reading strategy that seeks to allow similarities between the Old Testament context (societal dynamics) and the so-called African traditional context to inform the interpretation of the text (e.g. concept of family, burial practices, music, time, etc.).

'The memory of what happened is not what really happened'¹⁶

A significant challenge concerning contemporary South African bible interpretation is the ongoing clinging to a particular and dated concept of truth, defining it mainly in terms of the logical positivist notion of verification and accepting the idea of *truth/meaning* independent of interpretation in an uncritical and unsophisticated manner. The ordinary reader agrees with the story as narrated in the Old Testament as an appropriate/accurate reflection of past events. The typical reader, and one can rightfully include here, to a certain extent, African Biblical Studies, does not fully understand the implications of historical-critical readings of the text. Furthermore, text-critical indications that the text and language of the Hebrew Bible are in a state of radical uncertainty (Clines 2001:81).¹⁷ Although one must recognise that the general reader of the Bible is not looking at the text through the theoretical glasses of the academic or theologian, a critical perspective that acknowledges the distance between the contemporary reader and the texts still needs to inform the reader. African Old Testament/biblical interpreters need to recognise the fact that 'the memory of what happened is not what really happened',¹⁸ and given the nature of the literary tradition, all our attempts of acknowledging the historical context boil down to the construction of such an *event and its so-called context* at a given point in time. There is also little appreciation for the implied distance between the text and the context(s) of textual formation and ongoing transmission (re-interpretation). In this regard, the author does not wish to specifically enter into the so-called minimalist/maximalist debate (Jonker 2013) as such. Instead, the purpose is to identify aspects that could speak to a contemporary (South) African audience where issues about economic empowerment, identity and religious affiliation play a significant role. The point is that to do justice to the text/interpretation – the multi-faceted nature of the discourse needs to be respected, thereby acknowledging the distance between the 'dialogues partners' while simultaneously trying to do justice to the interpretive process. A comparative reading strategy can include reference to contemporary societal dynamics that, at face value, at least testifies to similarities regarding societal dynamics between the modern¹⁹ South African societal context and that of a post-exilic/Persian period Palestine.

16. With reference to the emergence of Israel/Old Testament Texts and to illustrate the restricted access of the contemporary reader to ancient records, 'It has been estimated that Egyptian temples used 24 million meters of papyrus; of these, only 13 m from Abusir and a similar length from Iahun have been preserved. Of the 112 million pay vouchers to the Roman legions, only six and a fragment of a seventh have survived. Of the hundreds of synagogues in Palestine before 70 CE, only the remains of three or four have been identified' (Yamauchi 2004:1). See also Balcells Gallarreta (2017:37ff.), *Demographic Changes: Social and Ethnic Groups With Regard to Societal Dynamics During the Persian Period*.

17. With reference to text criticism, Clines (2001) argues for the 'deprivileging' of the Masoretic text, necessity of emendation and the acceptance of 'variant readings'.

18. The implied distance between a text and the contemporary reader is recognised by few. 'Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers' (Kazuo 2019).

19. Mbuvi (2017:152) raised a concern regarding African Biblical Studies (ABS) that 'there is minimal attempt to relate the study of the Bible to present world realities of the readers'.

A fundamental question relates to the historical embeddedness and the emergence of a comprehensive cultic identity during the Persian period²⁰ of colonial Palestine. Without going into detail regarding the history of the inhabitants of ancient Palestine, the interpretation acknowledges that the Hebrew Bible provides some tangible (textual) data signalling a process of 'collecting and creating a tradition' (Bolin 1996:12). And in 'forging a collective identity, earlier traditions are searched out and embellished' (Bolin 1996:12). This process took place within a post-exilic context where the notion of 'sacred economy' (Boer 2007:29)²¹ played a significant role in articulating societal dynamics that probably influenced the *traditioning* process. The critical aspect concerning these texts is that they are not primarily presenting a *real past* in the sense of a mirror image of societal developments during Iron Age 1/11 Palestine. Instead, it acknowledges that the texts are part of a process that establishes a new identity in response to and following a particular colonial regulation. In this regard, Bolin (1996:14) refers to the Old Testament as a story constructed not so much to recount a real Israelite past but rather to supply an identity that explains the circumstances of life for the Hellenistic-era inhabitants of Palestine. As such:

Biblical texts typically provide the story from the viewpoint of what became the desired religious practices of the institutionalised or official religion at the Jerusalem temple through the writing of the elite' and reflect the diversity of religious ideas and ritual practices. (Balcells Gallarreta 2017:1, 2)

By emphasising the 'long traditioning process' (Yee 2009:186),²² the contemporary reader can recognise certain aspects, such as the focus on a shared understanding of a collective (re-constructed) past and the critical striving for a shared theological (cultic) identity, to inform their interpretation. It is somewhat *ironic* that the issue of land again plays a crucial role in this regard. Contemporary South African society finds itself in a similar/compatible situation of ancient Yehud's colonial and post-colonial context (Yee 2009):

The religious and political elites governing Yehud were themselves hybrids, ethnically Jewish but also Persian agents. They shared the ethos of both the coloniser and the colonised. Because the text was a hybridic mixture, anti-colonial voices of resistance submerged in the text had the potential to deconstruct its dominant meaning. (p. 186)

According to Ezra/Nehemiah, Cyrus the Great, ruler of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BC)²³, issued a proclamation

20. Very little of the HB, either in content or composition, is to be found in any historical era earlier than the Persian period (Bolin 1996:14).

21. Boer (2007) identifies and describes this context of a sacred economy within a context of specific nodes, that is 'as the village-commune, the temple-city complex, the formation of the despotic state, the tensions between labour and class, and mediations between empire and village commune' (Boer 2007:29–48).

22. In this regard, Yee acknowledges the theoretical proposition of Gottwald (1989) whereby four stages ('horizons') can be identified in the transmission of the traditions and whereby specific. Social-political circumstances influenced and impacted on the formation of the tradition – the 'fourth horizon' being that of the Persian period colonisation and the resistance thereto (see Gottwald 1989:250–260).

23. Between 550 BC and 330 BC, the Persians ruled over the largest empire of the Ancient Near East ever seen before or since, stretching from North Africa to the Indus Valley and from Central Asia to the Gulf (<https://bit.ly/3bg7g3D> – accessed 20 August 2018). 'Three Persian rulers, Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, were responsible for establishing highly sophisticated networks of power and instigating far reaching

and gave instructions that certain captives of the empire should be sent home, thus allowing for the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah (Betlyon 2005:6; Wells 2005:57).

In response to the command of Marduk, and from the theological perspective of the Chronicler's history, the initiative for this development that provided for the process of restoration came from Jahweh/the Lord who '... stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia' (2 Ch 36:22 KJV).

²⁴הָעִיר יְהוָה אֶת־רוּחַ כְּרוֹשׁ מִלְּהַר־מִזְרָח (2 Ch 36:22 WTT)²⁵

The declaration provided for *all his people*, that is, the people of Yahweh, to go to Jerusalem and participate in building the house of the Lord. Allowing for some Hebrew exiles to return to their homeland in ca. 539 BCE provided a complex landscape of political/ideological and religious contours to inform and impact the formation of specific group identities in Palestine. Within such a context of change/transformation, also witnessed by 'blurred ethnic lines' (Blenkinsopp 2000:133), the 'Hebrew Bible' came to be seen as a significant inheritance/artefact to an ongoing embellishment of a newly defined establishment; indeed, a 'time of great transformation' (Betlyon 2005):

The people were rebounding from the devastation of war and grappling with their faith; international trade, fuelled by an emerging monetary economy, was on the upswing; and closer contacts with the Greek world were sowing the seeds of Hellenistic expansion. (p. 5)

Taken at face value, the abovementioned can easily be a description of the contemporary South African context of political/economic change, exposure to a global context and the search for a national identity and adequate response to the turmoil of an oppressive past. Given the democratisation and commercialisation of religion and associated practices, a theological response is also an essential requirement within such a context.

Significant changes in religious practice occurred in those decades, including a new emphasis on the Torah and the Prophets' reading and study. These changes form part of a process whereby the inhabitants of Jehud province were seeking a new identity while simultaneously creating hope for the future, focusing on a cultic identity shaped by a shared past (ed. Berquist 2009; Brueggemann 2009):

(footnote 23 continues...)

Legislation' (The world of Ancient Persia By Rhona Wells – The Middle East October 2005:55). They controlled their empire by a system of devolved administration and government. Cyrus the Great's political acumen was reflected in his management of his newly formed empire, as the Persian Empire became the first to attempt to govern many different ethnic groups on the principle of equal responsibilities and rights for all people, so long as subjects paid their taxes and kept the peace (<https://bit.ly/2W8e6U9> – accessed 21 September 2018).

²⁴פָּרַס (2 Ch 36:22 WTT) Meaning: Persia = 'pure' or 'splendid' (1) the empire Persia; encompassed the territory from India on the east to Egypt and Thrace on the west, and included, besides portions of Europe and Africa, the whole of western Asia between the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian and the Jaxartes on the north, the Arabian desert, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean on the south 1a) Persia proper was bounded on the west by Susiana or Elam, on the north by Media, on the south by the Persian Gulf and on the east by Carmania Persian = see Persia 'pure' or 'splendid' (2) the people of the Persian empire Bibleworks 9 (2013).

²⁵Note the meaning of (עָרַבְרָבִי hiphil perfect third person masculine singular homonym) (1) rouse, wake up Zechariah 41; disturb Deuteronomy 3211; stir up, set in motion Isaiah 412; summon, order out (warriors) Joel 49; stir up (fire) Hosea 74; let (one's rage) be stirred up Psalms 7838; – (2) awake (intrans.) Isaiah 4213 (Bibleworks 9 2013).

Judaism in the Persian period reused older memories and reformulated them into the text as we have it. The practical effect of this shift in critical perspective is to resituate the tradition as a resource for a community that must maintain its distinct identity in the face of a seductive and insistent empire. (p. 41)

Ironically, towards the end of the Persian colonial period, the Hebrew Texts (present Hebrew canon)²⁶ seem to be regarded as having religious authority (Grabbe 2006:323) within a context of political uncertainty with the socio-economic repercussions of transitioning between various colonial powers. Simultaneously, a tradition of ritual segregation gradually took on a particular shape amid the lack of a fixed point of interest (political or economic). It is no surprise that the religious traditions of *scripture* came to fulfil such a common point of interest that would shape the community's identity (Blenkinsopp 2000:135). The collection of various traditions gradually contributed and shaped a collective self-identity for the 'new' community – a community with a 'common past – a past arranged around the motif of former glory lost through a divinely commanded fall from grace' (Bolin 1996:13ff.).²⁷ A clear future would see the restoration of a community that could define itself in covenantal terminology as a people of Yahwe, living in a land given to them by Yahweh, and as such living by a specific religiously informed ethos.

Implications for African Christianity/ African Biblical studies

The significance of 'positionality' (Baker 2008 in Dube 2013:3) became an integral component of the theological discourse that allows for a significant 're-accentuation' in a Bakhtinian sense of the word (Claassens 2003:132) in the formation of African Christianity. Thereby, 'within this dialogue, the foreign culture of unfamiliar text has the function of challenging us to ask new questions that we have not thought of raising' (Claassens 2003:132). Dube (2013:3) is quite correct in his suggestion for an alternative discourse whereby 'Instead of asking how the Exodus event happened, we should ask how those suffering use the Exodus event as ideology to establish collective identities'. The full implications (unintended?) of Dube's reflection (2013:3) require more attention. On the one hand, a more critical understanding of the so-called *Exodus event* needs to be constructed. In so doing, one can articulate these ancient stories' ideological bias and theological significance. Subsequently, its role in forming a spiritual identity in a post-exilic and post-colonial context can be more fully appreciated. Contemporary interpretations cannot ignore the historical embeddedness of the text and the transmission and subsequent (re-) interpretation thereof. Also, a particular understanding acknowledges that the text/'Bible – is itself a

²⁶As indicated by Grabbe (2006) 'Granted, eventually the various books that became the Hebrew Bible were stabilized into a limited number of texts, but when did this happen?'

²⁷Thus, it is clear that by the period 350–300 there is no biblical corpus that resembles the size of the present-day HB. What we see at work in Ezra-Nehemiah is the process of collecting and creating a tradition. In the course of forging a collective identity, earlier traditions are searched out and embellished (Bolin 1996:13).

site of struggle' (West 2015:854). It also allows for such theological/ideological motives to become part of the contemporary discourse. After all, 'Societies create their own understanding of the past, present and future on the basis of the skills and existential situations that individual members are engaged in' (Majka 2013:173).

The intellectual skills that guide intelligent and innovative thought seek to identify 'both dated ideas and creative ideas, originating from the contemporary world, which can provide a new direction' (Van Aarde 2009:4). In an attempt to clarify the theological significance of the text, three aspects or themes can be added to the agenda of African Biblical Studies that are noteworthy and requires further elaboration, that is, (1) the changing stage of 'Biblical texts as a site of struggle', (2) the search for an 'inscripturated identity' in the ongoing discourse with past 'religious experiences' and (3) retribalisation and the importance of defining a new cultic identity.

Biblical texts as 'site of struggle'

The notion of the 'Biblical text as a site of struggle' is not new (Mosala 1989; West 2017, 2018; Wiles 1999; Yee 2009; Gottwald 1989). What is new is the shift in emphasis of an awareness whereby the African context is gradually coming to the fore. Also, the appropriateness of contemporary interpretations can move beyond a historical-descriptive and linguistic analysis and move onto the public domain in constructing a contextual perspective. A fundamental principle regarding the understanding of the Bible is that interpretation is not neutral. As such, the understanding of scripture came to be expressed/articulated in harsh socio-political emanations, even as far back as the time of the formation of the ancient biblical texts within a context of colonial empires such as those of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and so forth (Lee 2017):

The political, economic, cultural, and religious dynamics in those empires between centralised authority and those without power heavily influenced the production of the Bible. (p. 45)

This scuffle became even more prominent in the transmission (interpretation and re-interpretation) of the text as in Segovia's (2000)²⁸ 'world of modernity' (Lee 2017:46–47):

From the early mercantile phase of European imperialism of the fifteenth century to the Western empire-building era of the nineteenth century, to the contemporary capitalist stage of high imperialism, Western imperialistic traditions and Christian missionary movements travelled hand-in-hand. Missionaries, who were protected by the empire, justified foreign domination as God's will. Relying on texts like the Exodus, many Christian missionaries entered and took the lands of non-Christian Asians, Africans, and Native Americans either to convert them, or to promote self-serving claims of superiority and election. (Dube 2000:17)

28. As indicated in Lee (2017:45) 'Fernando Segovia, a postcolonial New Testament scholar, for example, argues that there are three different and equally important worlds that readers of the Bible should investigate and analyze: the world of the text, the world of modernity, and the world of today' (Segovia 2000:119–132).

A colonial context contributed to a situation where the biblical texts and the message being communicated came to be regarded 'as part of [a] missionary-colonial imperialistic package' (West 2010:156) and was subsequently perceived with suspicion (Thomas 1997:43). 'Suspicion', because with the notion of modernisation and enlightenments' rational epistemological approach 'the point of contact between African religions and Western Christian religion, African religions, together with the notion of Africa and Africans, were framed in negative terms' (Ilo 2013:135). Being associated with the colonising process provides a sense of alienation from the biblical text (Dada 2010:161). The recognition of biblical scholarship's ideological dimensions as 'a site of struggle' has some potentially valuable resources and alternative perspectives to offer alongside the many resources being deployed by communities in a post-colonial context of continued re-interpretation of the biblical texts (West 2015:854). For example, African Independent Churches arose as a protest to Christianity's Western forms and expressions (Kealotswe 2005:205). With the 'epistemological shift in the interpretation of African Christianity from the rationality of the Global North' (Ilo 2013:126), the contours are gradually turning to a point where the engagement with the text requires a critical and informed response. It cannot escape the growth of rationalisation. Still, it can also offer alternative explanations (sociological, psychological, economic, political) regarding appropriate descriptions of religious experiences, including the engagement with and interpretations of religious texts (McMullin 2010:8). A more critical approach is a prerequisite for the understanding and re-interpretation of the Hebrew Bible within a particular historical context (Dube 2013:3).

The *struggle-context* discernible in connection with the text's formation is intrinsically part of the paradigmatic structure of the contemporary interpretation of the Bible. The relationship between *text* and *context* presents a circularity where the nature of text should become an even more distinctive and course-altering topic as far as African Christianity is concerned. In unlocking the implications of this textuality, we can also attempt to bring the readers with a focus on the *interpreter's interests* as well as readers with a focus on *life interests* closer to one another. The exploration of some aspects of the societal dynamics discernable in Palestine during the Persian period (post-colonial context) illustrates how we can respond to the contemporary reader's resistance to a historical-critical approach to the Old Testament. Of significance for African Bible Studies and in acknowledgement of the 'modernity/tradition dilemma' (Ter Haar 2006: 655–656), this matter, that is post-colonial societal dynamics, provides an opportunity to expand the agenda of African Bible Studies. With that, there is an opportunity to look at the biblical texts from a more critical and creative perspective (Mbuvi 2017):

Reconstruction theology highlights the need for a biblical paradigm of reconstituting society and thus focuses on post-exilic biblical writings as models of reconstruction. (p. 163)

And:

Crossing also means finding a way for others to follow and enter the world of the text and then journey further, enriched by new nuances and meaningful insights as more ravines are crossed. (Malan 2010:1)

African Bible Studies needs a platform to 'engage in a particular discourse' (Majka 2013:175). The struggle is now moving into the space where readers focused on 'life-interests' can meet readers more interested and focused on 'interpretative interests'. Within this discourse, African Biblical Studies can more clearly demarcate a 'contact zone' in the form of post-colonial biblical criticism (Stegmann & Faure 2015:236). However, it cannot escape the confrontation with modernity and the hermeneutical challenges of the day, that is the cognitive study of religion, subject-object dilemma.²⁹ The discourse involves constructing a theological perspective that is also imagining to be scientific and reflecting upon the distinctions – not separation – between experiences, descriptions, and explanations for a particular phenomenon.³⁰

Search for an 'inscriptured' 'identity'

A post-colonial/Achaemenid controlled 'melting pot' context provides the opportunity for the occupants of ancient Palestine to define/redefine themselves in terms of tribal structures of a covenantal people belonging to God and a people living in a land that they perceived as a gift from God. Hence the focus on ritual/cultic specifically informed behavioural patterns. This theological significance and impact of post-colonial spirituality found its way into the biblical text. These texts provided a platform for an ongoing discourse regarding *lived* and *living* expressions of faith (Lombaard 2011):

The historical processes which underlie the production of the biblical texts are thus of great importance, since (accepting too the difficulties of such historical reconstructions) that is where the religious experiences 'lived'. (p. 218)

The theological significance of interacting via re-interpretation of authoritative texts as '*lived expressions of faith*' can be traced back to the early Second Temple period (538 B.C.E – 70 A.D.) as recorded in Nehemiah 7:72b – 8:18 (Lombaard 2011:219). An important issue regarding the acceptance and determination of religious authority entails the use of 'Scripture' and, by implication, its role in determining which aspects/elements from tradition to retain and which aspects to discard in determining religiosity (Jr 8:8ff.). As is seen in the second temple period, the ability to formulate specific type of texts, and also its interpretation and re-interpretation played a significant role in Ancient Israelite society (De Villiers 2013:3):

Post-exilic Israel was grappling with its identity, and sought guidance from קְהֵלִי בְּתוֹרַת [as was written in the Torah]. (Ezr 3:2 W.T.T.)

²⁹ See also *An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible* by George Aichele, Peter Miscall and Richard Walsh (2009).

³⁰ And even after liberation in South Africa (in 1994) Africans of all kinds, in private and public spheres, continue their entanglement with the Bible' (West 2016:42).

Of interest is how religious texts gradually played a more definitive role in defining the religiosity of the post-exilic community. This community also experienced a 'move toward authoritative traditions about a more distant past whose interpretation set the norms for a community that felt marginated from the decisive currents of contemporary history' (Gottwald 1985:414). The 'textualisation' of traditions is related to ancient Palestine's socio/political developments and the corresponding scribal activities and infrastructure development, bureaucratic activities of the various royal households and priestly activities with a specific focus on cultic practices (Van Seters 2007:88).

In this regard, the Bakhtinian concept of *dialogism* (Nesaria 2015) is significant in its emphasis that all utterances, including texts, are shaped by both the author/speaker and the reader/listener (not far from reader-response theory).³¹ This textual shaping of a particular tradition is more noticeable when language (text) is reused repeatedly within the tradition. It speaks for itself that the Bible plays a significant role in contemporary society. The use of religious texts impacts society's understanding of what religiosity entails in various ways. A critical question in the ongoing discourse is how 'the otherness of the text' (De Wit 2008:4) can be appreciated in the contemporary context and in so doing play a role in defining the religiosity of African Christianity.

A particular emphasis on the contemporary appropriation must acknowledge the Old Testament's ongoing traditioning process of textual interpretation (Dn 5:17; Jr 36:18; Neh 8:8–9) and re-interpretation. In so doing, it can provide for some common grounds for the scholarly and non-academic engagement with the text (De Wit 2008):

I do not see the relationship between exegesis and appropriation as a hierarchical one, as is done so frequently in so many introductions to hermeneutics or methods, but as a dialectical, mutually enriching one. (p. 5)

For African Bible Studies to grow and establish its role within a global context of theological discourse, a re-orientation is required whereby the 'hermeneutic primacy of concrete life' (De Wit 2008:6) that constitutes African Biblical Scholarship needs to be acknowledged. Also, African Christianity can allow reading the Bible to become a focal point in defining its identity. However, the reading of the Bible needs to move beyond 'pre-critical hermeneutical engagement' (Stegmann & Faure 2015:220). A historically informed (critical) reading of the Bible is an essential requirement to retain its status as a document of faith and as a foundational document of (African) Christianity. Apart from a distinction between the historical context of the text (formation of texts), the actual reading and impact (use) of the text on contemporary (South) African Christianity needs to be articulated in a more nuanced manner. In so doing, the post-modern perspective

³¹ Refer (<https://bit.ly/3b71sJl> <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-92805506/mikhail-bakhtin-and-biblical-scholarship-an-introduction> – accessed 23 April 2020). See also Petric (2012:54–68). The reader(s) and the bible(s) 'reader versus community' in reader-response criticism and biblical interpretation.

that the sources that we have access to do not point to a historical reality behind the sources (i.e. the notion of past/'original sender'/'what really happened'), but rather provide and point to other interpretations of past religious experiences (Ankersmit 1989:145). The biblical memoirs (texts/traditions and performances) that once 'provoke sustained reflection on the nation's identity and its deity' (Wright 2009:447) now allow an opportunity to appreciate and formulate a particular/Christian consciousness, thereby contributing to a new identity by allowing the *vox populi* to articulate a critical theological perspective in response to the question: who are we? For this to happen, African Bible readers have an opportunity to engage the biblical texts in a more sophisticated manner, acknowledging that 'the Bible grew as multiple textual memories were compiled' and 'redacted from new perspectives' (Wright 2009:438). African Biblical Studies is continuing to craft an identity through the ongoing engagement with the 'Biblical memoirs'. Such a discourse cannot ignore the development and awareness of the post-modern notion of *historical consciousness* that also informs the reading strategy to be employed regarding the sources (historical texts) available to the contemporary reader (Mannion 2016):

The historically conscious approach emphasises the particular, the individual, the contingent, and the historical, and often employs a more inductive methodology. (p. 274)

A critical engagement with the text, via African Bible studies, seemingly that people attached more value to ideas in written and visual format (Pienaar 2020), allows for the formation of an African Christian identity and discourse in terms of an ongoing 'biblical narrative' (De Bruijne 2019:132).

In recognition of the 'strangeness' of the text, African Christianity can allow for a critical engagement with the text to be the locus of the formation of a specific identity (Ticciati 2006:422). In this engagement with the text, Draper (2015:11, 19) emphasised 'distantiation'³² as a prerequisite for appreciating the role of 'the other' (Biblical text) while simultaneously espousing 'transformative meaning from their conversation with the text'. The recognition of the biblical texts as religious documents can inform how religiosity in a (South) African context materialises. In this conversation, a creative moment emerges, which allows for the reaccentuating of an utterance. Furthermore, participating in the discourse aspects of 'identity formation' and 'empowerment' of the participants are coming to the fore (Geyser-Fouche 2016:1). The formative aspect thereof is evident in bringing forth specific societal dynamics that utilises scripture to determine an identity (scriptural reasoning [SR]) that came to be described in the theological language of the Old and New Testament.

The interrogative, argumentative and collaborative patterns of SR depend on there being groups rather than individuals at work in response to the scriptural texts on the table. And SR

32. Although 'distantiation – setting the text in its own specific historical context' (Draper 2015:9), is not merely to be confined to a specific time and place, it also recognises the 'autonomy off the text'.

both requires and enables a sensitisation to those around us with whom we read. This process of re-interpretation continues to go on partly because in the religious intentions and expectations at work in the reading of scripture, and not just in the texts as objects of historical interest (Quash 2006:404).

'Retribalisation' – Formation and development of a new cultic identity

As indicated, Cyrus of Persia introduced a renewal programme of reversing the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires' disruptive policies. This renewal programme also enabled Judah's population to embark on a 'colonial restoration' programme, falling within the satrapy 'Beyond the River' (Gottwald 1985:429). This was a process that continued slowly and by increments, relying on Jewish leadership to restore the community (Gottwald 1985:429). The point here is not the historical reliability of the texts or the formation of the Hebrew Bible. Still, the use and engagement with texts to define the religiosity of a particular group and the role that it plays in the formation of a cultic identity grew (Yamauchi 2004):

The exiles placed great stress on studying and expounding the Torah, as we see in the description of Ezra, the scribe as 'a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses' (Ezr7:6). (p. 17)

With reference to the formation and use of the text in a post-exilic context (Ezr 2; Neh 7), the theological perspective leading to a cultic identity is critical in as far as it envisages an alternative to existing societal structures contributing to the socio-economic and political restoration of a particular community (Yamauchi 2004:6). During this restoration process, Zhao (2013:6) points to different categories of societal dynamics discernable in the texts that shaped 'self-identity formation as identified by Meng (2013). Among these are the processes of marginalisation (Ezrah-Nehemiah), tolerance (Jonah), and absorption and inclusiveness (Ruth). Furthermore, in responding to and continuing with developing an inscripturated identity, this community was bound together by a particular historical consciousness providing the basis for its sense of unity, including its religious beliefs and social norms (Mojola 1989:19). This traditioning process needs to be seen not merely as an intentional unilateral movement. Still, as a complex process of identity formation, one dimension can also be described in terms of retribalisation. Retribalisation is a complex process whereby an ethnic group or community undergoes an identity change, including a radical shift in membership from one ethnic community to a different one. Usually, such a change involves a change in allegiances – religious, cultural, ideological, linguistic, political, and so on [JSOT 81 (1998) 15–29]. This notion of retribalisation is no stranger to the African reader/context (Mojola 1989:20). Noteworthy is the description offered by Gottwald (1985) regarding the emergence (pre-exilic?) of ancient Israel whereby:

[A]n ethnically and socio-economically diverse coalition composed of a majority of tribally organised peasants (80 percent or core of the populace), along with lesser numbers of pastoral nomads, mercenaries and freebooters, assorted craftsmen and renegade priests. (p. 284)

coming together in a socio-political and religious re-grouping following imperial dominance (Egypt). This process whereby the identity of the Israelites came to be defined in terms of 12 tribes – ‘idealisation of twelve tribes’ – reached a particular format only in the exilic and post-exilic periods (Van Seters 2007:95).³³

Various factors play a role in human social identity and identity negotiation, such as social roles, attachment to land, values, historical memories, among others (Van Aarde 2009:5). In response to the challenges offered by modernity, A.B.S. requires an alternative perspective to take the discourse (so-called ‘West’ vs. ‘South’) into a new direction (McMullin 2010:10). The question is to what extent African Biblical Studies will be able to articulate the notion that the metaphysical and physical have merged, not just according to traditional religion’s holistic perspective but also in terms of the epistemological implications of the contemporary scientific discourses in its rejection of methodological objectivism as ‘reminiscent of logical empiricism’ (Shaffer 1996:90)?

Decolonisation – A reading strategy

While the diversity of approaches is acknowledged, it is vital to identify and develop a reading strategy that might bring the so-called *interpretive* and *life interests* (West 2005) closer together. A re-accentuation can achieve this in the theological discourse that might be more appropriate for contemporary South African Bible interpretation.

African biblical scholarship works hard at a critical analysis of the biblical text, a critical analysis of the African context, and a critical analysis of how and why the biblical text and the African context might be brought into conversation – West *JBL* 134, no. 4 (2015:853).

The importance of allowing for reading strategies with a focus on interpretive interests and reading strategies with a focus on life interests to inform (re-)interpretations of the biblical text (Old Testament) is already notable, in various ways (Lee 2007):

Contextual pedagogy, teaching context as text, is not a new idea to religious educators. Both public educators and religious educators have emphasised the importance of connecting students’ learning to the context of life and also connecting the realities of present life to a re-interpretation of the texts. (p. 1)

The challenge, of course, is to retain the academic integrity of a given interpretation that would at least take into consideration the complexity of the text at hand as well as allowing the contemporary context to play its rightful place, taking into consideration, among others, post-modernism as an epistemological framework (Speckman 2016:207). This

33. Everyone familiar with the South African context will appreciate this issue as of relevance to the contemporary socio-economic/political context and discourse regarding ‘retribalization’. The debate is of course ongoing, also in connection with ‘the complete idealization of the twelve tribes in the exilic and post-exilic periods. There was, in fact, no such twelve tribe system in the pre-exilic period’ – The origins of the Hebrew bible some new answers to old questions John Van Seters/Janer 7.1.

fundamental principle was also recognised by prominent exponents of *dialectical theology* (Draper 2002):

This was an important insight: there are two poles of interpretation, which stand in tension with each other. The historical locatedness of the text and the historical locatedness of the reader must wrestle through to an appropriation of meaning for today. (p. 12/13)

Or, in the words of Wiles (1999:74)³⁴ ‘Every generation has the task of constructing forms of belief and practice appropriate to its own times and culture’. Furthermore:

As children of our time, we have here an opportunity not only to select the data but to present the information in a particular way –to construct one’s ‘story’. (Van der Watt 2005:516/517)

The dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation is a distinctive feature of African biblical hermeneutics, but it needs refinement. More specifically, social location can be seen as a hermeneutical device where the actual understanding is not merely defined in a historical, descriptive manner. Still, interpretation is taking place within an ever-changing context³⁵ and requires the opening up of space for a more nuanced theological perspective within the context of societal transformation. Furthermore, how the discourse is taking place aspires to focus on the appropriation of the text, the third pole of African Biblical Scholarship to be distinguished in addition to text and context (West 2018):

The kind of contextual change and transformation envisaged in particular African contexts shapes *how* biblical text and African context are brought into dialogue. (p. 248)

In this discourse, Petric (2012:60) pointed out that ‘There is not a “right” reading, but rather there are readings that are more useful and interesting than others’. Furthermore, it is essential that ‘we all contribute to the continuous making and remaking of language’. Accordingly, Gardiner (2017) has stated:

We do not ‘own’ the words we use; as such, the meaning is necessarily pluralistic and heterogeneous, the product of the interaction of many texts and voices that can only be pragmatically and contingently unified. (p. 893)

The challenge is to allow the different voices to contribute to the discourse without collapsing perspectival pluralism into relativism. Of importance in the contemporary post-colonial, new socio-economic and political context is the recognising of the text’s alterity and allowing an ‘inscripturized’ theological perspective to impact identity formation. That is, to create a space where the “surprisingness” of texts’ (Quash 2006:405) can be appreciated. In this engagement, there is a need to recognise the dialogical nature of interacting voices in the conversation (Claassens 2003:130) and the ‘bifocal’ nature of interpretation responding ‘simultaneously to political conditions and intellectual developments’ (Gardiner

34. Wiles (1999) as quoted by Spannberg – Inaugural lecture delivered on 19 September 2006 – Can a major religion change? Reading Genesis 1–3 in the 21st century I.J.J. Spangenberg (University of South Africa).

35. ‘The value of the notion of hermeneutical trajectories is that it puts the use of heuristic keys in a historical perspective. It emphasises that the world of interpretive communities is dynamic and is continually being transformed through the process of ongoing interpretation’ (Conradie 2001:439).

2017:893). The extent to which the reader can recognise the particularity of the text, can impact the discourse and enable the reader to present to theology (Newsom 1996:291) another voice in the discourse (Gardiner 2017):

It is precisely this communicatively structured mode of co-operation that is absolutely vital to the process of value creation in the era of cognitive capitalism. (pp. 898–899)

In this engagement, the dialogical³⁶ nature of constructing a proper perspective about the interpretation and appropriation of the Old Testament's 'other' (Ref Claassens 2003:127ff.) calls for a *re-accentuation* that can also bring the role of the reader and their context more explicitly into consideration. Contextual biblical interpretation does not imply detached, a-historical interpretations that show no sensitivity to the reader's context. In contextual biblical interpretation, meaning is closely (if not exclusively) associated with the interpreter's context.³⁷ And in the modern/post-modern context, the distinctions between subject-object, sender-text-reader, interpretation and re-interpretation in a particular historical context becomes blurred, conforming to the notion that for the contemporary Bible reader, 'nothing is objectively, totally and constantly true within all contexts' (Van Aarde 2009:2).

Conclusion – Decolonisation and the formation of a distinctive African Biblical Scholarship

An emphasis on the significance of textual reception (Jonker 2013:7), past and present, can contribute towards crafting appropriate contours regarding the interpretation of the Old Testament for now. Such a reading strategy still needs to be more informed regarding the historical context and acknowledge the distance between the text and the contemporary reader. If not, the theological explanation of the texts becomes a superfluous tool in constructing a particular modern identity!

[T]he construction of post-colonial identity is based on a resistance to the prescribed colonial identity and on a need to reformulate and voice a personality (individual as well as corporate) that is taking shape with the departure of the colonisers. (Snyman 2003:378–399)

In developing an appropriate reading strategy:

[T]he biblical theologian acts as an orchestrator of this dialogue, bringing various biblical voices on the same theme together on a synchronic level, thereby creating space where a dialogue might ensue. (Claassens 2003:135–136)

36.The notion of Bakhtinian dialogism, a philosophy of language and a social theory developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) (Bonetskaia 2004:5ff), is of relevance in that it recognises the dialogical nature of reality and the significance of context and the dynamic interaction implied in such a historical embeddedness of all dialogue (Claassens 2003:127ff.).

37.The "historical consciousness" that is implied here should therefore not be confused with a longing for a past which is forever lost, or with an optimism that the intentions of the original authors can be reconstructed. Historical consciousness is rather the reader- or context-oriented appreciation of the contexts of textual production and of textual reception (from ancient times, throughout the ages, up to modern-day receptions in various and differing circumstances)' (Jonker 2013:6).

It is essential to bring a core aspect regarding the nature of the biblical tradition to Africa in the vernacular of Africa. The vernacular, in this case, is the language not only defined in linguistic terminology but also the 'language that provides for a critical reading',³⁸ that is vocabulary of societal dynamics within the socio-political and hermeneutical context of contemporary (South-African) society. Such an approach can serve, on the one hand, to create a greater awareness of the gap between the 'contemporary reader' and its discourse partner ('biblical text'), and on the other can assist in bridging this gap by employing an academically more informed and respectable discourse (Aichele et al. 2009:399).

In African tradition, the meaning is determined in the community: people talk a matter through until a consensus is reached (Draper 2002:13). We will have to listen with particular care to a conversation not intended for our ears (Draper 2002:14), keenly aware that meaning is not located in the text or the reader/hearer but between them (Draper 2002:15). In this encounter (South), African Biblical Scholarship looks for 'connectivity between the Bible and Africa in terms of resonance and continuity' (Snyman 2003:382). The critical point here is that by allowing for the previously mentioned two dimensions to connect, the contemporary reader needs to explore the ancient texts more critically and in an academically acceptable manner. The modern reader can also appreciate historical consciousness in interpreting the text (Jonker 2013).³⁹ The 'comparative reading strategy' should not be restricted to so-called 'ancient societies' (ancient Israel or African traditional) but can include contemporary societal dynamics and 'grassroots spirituality' (Leaves 2006:47 quoted in Van Aarde 2009:4). Moreover, additional perspectives emerge that allow the modern reader to look at the text more creatively.⁴⁰

It is gratifying to note that some biblical scholars employing Western methodologies are also gradually becoming more open to the influence of contextual-oriented approaches. When we effectively integrate the different available methods, interpretation of the biblical texts can address Africa's spiritual and social concerns. The search for a more integrated approach – rational and critical – whereby one encounters past religious experiences (albeit in textual format) can transform the reader and enable the reader to

38.Ramantswana (2016:178–203). The recognition of social location as a heuristic device in biblical hermeneutics does not necessarily equate to the production of radical and alternative knowledge.

39.As Jonker (2013:6) indicated 'Historical consciousness is rather the reader- or context-oriented appreciation of the contexts of textual production and of textual reception (from ancient times, throughout the ages, up to modern-day receptions in various and differing circumstances)'.
40.As indicated by Aichele et al. (2009:399), 'Cultural criticism offers a fine example of such play and tension between different texts and readings. Cultural criticism is a combination of history of interpretation, reader response theory, and history of reception that seeks to trace how a biblical text or parts of one have been commented on and treated across the centuries by any reader, not just professional or recognised scholars and experts. Playwrights, preachers, moralists, essayists, sculptors, and other artists are all possible sources for views on the Bible. The Blackwell Bible Commentaries through the Centuries series proposes to examine each book of the Bible in this way. The criticism is postmodern because of its diversity and because it offers many different voices without needing to decide which one is right and true to the biblical text.'

articulate contextually informed perspectives in response to the South African context (Van Aarde 2009:6). And in so doing, it contributes to the 'articulation of a set of philosophical parameters for an African hermeneutical approach to the study of the Hebrew Bible' (Hugh 2009:924). It calls forth 'experimenting with new ways to be religious in modernity' (McMullin 2010:9). In this discourse, the distinctiveness of the text needs to inform the theological discourse. A critical perspective needs to preserve the integrity of the interpretive process, lest we end up in a pseudo communication, that is an interpretation by the different readers of the text based on a false consensus (Draper 2015:12), resulting in a pseudo-theological perspective (Ambasciano 2016):

However, the post-modern tenet of problematising any authority has also become a convenient shortcut to blur the distinction between scientific signal (i.e. knowledge systematically obtained via rational inquiry) and nonepistemic noise (i.e. pseudoscience). (p. 1)

And:

A focus on the timely, the particular, the local and the historical inevitably lead to a historical consciousness. It is a consciousness that is seriously lacking in the South African community. It is a consciousness that breeds critical scholarship. (Snyman 2003:410)

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