

Postcolonial biblical interpretation: a futile exercise?

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Abstract

After modernism, interpretive approaches moved away from focussing only on language for seeking the meaning of texts. In biblical interpretation, the same trend emerged. Focus shifted to the periphery and even the historical (diachronic) and current (synchronic) "outsides" or contexts of the language of texts in order to establish meaning in specific texts and textual genres. "Postcolonial" interpretation followed this trend in most African contexts and became more popular in the after-colonial eras of African interpretive communities who have been liberated socially and politically, and with that, also literarily. The postcolonial interpretive exercise currently gains ground, but also fights criticism from the pure literalists.

Introduction

The history of the interpretation of the Bible has gone through many stages. These normally followed a trend in philosophy which rules the era or period into which the interpretive approach(es) would find expression. Literal interpretation was a trend of the middle ages where the main philosophical approach was to argue within the realms of religious belief. The modernist era saw the emergence of more critical interpretations with historical criticism, structural criticism and others.

Linguistically, the emergence of post-structuralism and deconstruction were distinct to the post-modern era, following and criticising the structural approach to language of the modern era, especially in the wake of the book of Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916. These approaches remained linguistic approaches, focussing on language and the workings of language.

The postmodern era also saw other trends in, specifically, biblical interpretation with the emergence of certain forms of, what can be called "ideological" approaches to biblical study, such as feminist interpretation, or even ecological interpretations, or interpretations from certain political viewpoints, such as an African interpretation and an African hermeneutics or a liberation hermeneutics. In one of the South African journals a writer (Adamo, 2012, p.15) even refers to a "Africentric" interpretation.

Simultaneous to the rise of postmodernism during the sixties (some suggest fifties) so-called post-colonialism appeared. "The term 'postcolonialism' can gener-

ally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and sprawling in scope.” (Hiddleston 2009, p. 1). Aware of the fact that there a distinction drawn between post-colonial (hyphenated) and postcolonial (not hyphenated) philosophy (cf. Hiddleston, 2009, pp. 3f.), the gest of this paper is to distinguish postcolonial literary critical exercises from the main literary critical exercise of postmodern philosophy, namely deconstruction, and see whether the negative judgements that have been levelled against deconstruction by some (e.g. Ellis, 1989) might hold true for postcolonial criticism as well. Hence the question of the title of this paper: Could this be another literary critical exercise in futility?

Literary critical practice in deconstruction

Derrida, using the basic principles of the linguistic sign forwarded by De Saussure as a label receiving its meaning through the relationship of difference with other signs, inaugurated the intended wrongly spelled concept *différance*. Leitch (1983, p. 41) summarises the intended meaning of the concept or term as follows: “(1) ‘to differ’ – to be unlike or dissimilar in nature, quality, or form; (2) ‘differe’ (Latin) – to scatter, disperse, and (3) ‘to defer’ – to delay, postpone.” Derrida’s core intention with the introduction of the term “*différance*” was to avoid using a term which has direct representation in reality. In fact, the multiple probable meanings associated with the term emphasise the indeterminable nature of the sign in general. With the term Derrida criticises the *phonocentric* nature of the Western literary interpretive tradition ruled by speech and the metaphysics of presence.

With his criticism of the presentation in written language Derrida intends to break away from what was coined an “orthodoxy of understanding”, determined by philosophical trends in the West. Particularly worrying in the “orthodoxy of understanding” is the fact that texts are still read with a view to understanding the intention of the author. The text can become open to new reading and understanding once it has been removed from its production stage and becomes a “reader affair”. Belsey (1980, p. 104) shows the text “becomes plural, open to rereading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning”. The meaning of the text even becomes irretrievable for the writer him- or herself. (Merrel, 1985, p. 115)

The understanding of signs within deconstruction becomes vital for understanding of a text particularly when the “deferral” aspect and the “delaying” aspect are taken into account. Misreading of texts does not only occur because of the misunderstanding of the intention of the author but also because of the fact that texts are created within certain circumstances which prompt an author to write

what is written. An author may well include into text that which is unspoken or unwritten. Texts are representations of other texts, which may include circumstances of time and ideology. For that reason the Derridean notion of “intertext”, reading through other texts, diachronically and synchronically, opens up the possibility for the representation of other notions, which may at first glance be obvious or intended and thus not immediately read or interpreted as such. Unintentional meaning is created through intertextual knowledge and through intertextual chance, many times unwittingly.

Deconstruction at work as literary critical approach has been much criticised, if not condemned in the past. Several such criticisms can be quoted, ranging from “some kind of mass culture phenomenon” to being “anti-intellectual” and “despairing scepticism” (cf. Newman, 1985, p. 31). The notion of intertextuality has, however, been absorbed by many disciplines and scholars, albeit not always in the deconstructive sense. Many understand the notion outside of the understanding of “text” in the Derridean sense, where “text” is understood as open, without “borderlines” (See e.g. Derrida, 1977).

Intertextuality, as understood in the deconstructive approach, of course, opens the text to numerous other interpretive possibilities. One of these possibilities is ideology, often read into a text without necessarily intended by the interpreter but also often intentionally. After all, there is no such thing as an objective or uninvolved reader. This intended ideological interference in the text has been at work in many readings, such as feminist readings, African readings, and many others. The postcolonial reading of the text is one of the latest to be added to these ideological readings of the text.

Postcolonial interpretation

The term postcolonial first became popular in the literary departments of North America. In the meantime the term is widely used in interpretational studies with the inclusion of Biblical interpretation and particularly “seeks to recover the silenced voice of those who were dominated by an imperial power” (Nyirimana, 2013, p. 172). It seeks to read “in the light of African contemporary realities” (*ibid.*, p. 173). Thus understood, postcolonial interpretation offers no excuse for openly bringing the *Sitz im Leben* into the Bible, instead of seeking the *Sitz im Leben* of the Bible, as done by historical critical exegesis.

Mbembe (2001, p. 4f.) describes the West’s obsession with Africa as the other as follows:

... Africa (thus) stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of ‘absence,’ ‘lack’ and ‘non-being,’ of identity and difference, of negativeness – in short, of

nothingness ... here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which *to differ* is not simply *not to be like* (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also *not to be at all* (non-being). More, it is *being nothing* (nothingness)." Flying in the face of likelihood or plausibility, these systems of reading the world attempt to exercise an authority of a particular type, assigning Africa to a special unreality such that the continent becomes the very figure of what is null, abolished, and, in its essence, in opposition to what is: the very expression of that nothing whose special feature is to be nothing at all.

Against this kind of Western thought West and Dube claim (2000) to give a voice to Africa with their African readings of the Bible, with which Western interpreters of the Bible could realise and understand that which they did not know before about Africa's involved, and involvement in, biblical interpretation.

The following statement comes from Gaylard (2005, p. 61): "... it can be argued that the crisis in Modernism giving rise to postmodernism was primarily engendered by the success of the anticolonial resistance movements and the 'final collapse' of the enlightenment dream." He quotes Pieterse who states in 1995: "To a certain extent, the post-structuralist and deconstructionist turn in Western thinking has been influenced by the impetus of the anticolonial movements."

In the light of similarity of the philosophical turn to postmodernism and postcolonialism, one can certainly argue that literary criticism also took similar turns. I would argue that the similarity in deconstruction and postcolonial criticism is mainly to be found in Derrida's argument about text with its close accomplice, intertext. In concurrence with the argument that was given above, intertextuality refers not only to the diachronic and synchronic physical textual reference found in a particular text, whether they are known to the reader or not, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the idea world of context and intertext.

It is this, the intertext as an open, often indeterminable interplay between textuality and reader that allows ideological interpretations to be as much a part of the interpretive exercise as any "purely" linguistic observations, such as the structuralist paradigms of thinking would suggest. It is also this, the openness of a text to the idea world surrounding it and the idea world surrounding the author, that allows biblical criticism in the postcolony (a word used and defended by Achille Mbembe in 2001) to open up the text for embracing the idea world of the postcolony and also therefore that of postcolonial Africa.

From the point of view of intertextuality, defence can be forwarded for the Bible to be interpreted through the eyes and ideas of the world of today. This, it should be warned, does not give a free flow of ideas into every part of the text. West

(2010, p. 884) has caution this as follows: "But (the) socially engaged biblical scholar must also be careful to respect the detail of the text, resisting the urge to over-determine the detail of the Bible with our own ideo-theological interpretive frameworks." Engagement into the text may be something completely different from engagement with the text.

On the other hand, Derrida has argued the "... sign ... will always lead to another sign. Thus, a language is a chain of signifiers referring to other signifiers, in which each signifier in turn becomes what is signified by another signifier. And because the textual location in which a signifier is embedded constantly changes, its meaning can never be fully determined." (Cf. Grentz 1996, p. 144) This, the constant changing of the sign and its signification, is what makes the intertextual play of the sign changing constantly as well. Thus, the reading of the sign will undergo continual and even continuous change. The intertextual play on the context of the reader and from the context of the reader therefore undergoes the same change. Post-colonial interpretation (hyphenated) fits this latter interpretation of intertextuality even better. It also fits in well with the sign as deferred temporarily, postponing, creating and indicating meaning for the time of the interpreter. This understanding of the sign creates a linguistically sound platform for interpretation in the postcolony. The sign of the times determining the interpretation of the time.

An interpretive example from Namibia

The celebrated Namibian artist John Muafangejo, who sadly died at a very young age in 1987, was well known for his linocuts with "social commentary" often appearing in his pictures. One such picture is printed here and "comments" on the sad situation of women and children when the women divorce their husbands or when the husband dies in the traditional inheritance and justice system. Women and children have very little right or reprieve when something would happen to the husband whilst away. Normally property would be inherited by the oldest surviving male in the kinship group and the extended family can grab property when the husband dies. "Children often mainly inherit small, personal and non-wealth producing property." (Jauch, Edwards & Cupido, 2009, p. 20)

In the picture of Muafangejo printed below (picture from Vale, 2010), this destitute situation of a divorced woman is expressed and telling about the picture is that the caption reads: "She divorced her husband together with her children". She is moving away from the homestead because she has no further right to stay there and no further part to play in the homestead. She is taking the children with her because they essentially stay part of her and therefore her fate becomes their fate too.



An interesting example from the Old Testament is the case of Boaz and Ruth. Boaz acquires the role of redeemer of the land Naomi and Ruth want to sell. When buying the land, Boaz announces the following: "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records..." (Ruth 4:9,10).

In this instance, the family and family name are of utmost importance to the person who acquires the land, so much so that trouble is taken to maintain the family name of the property, even though the owner of the land has died. The family name is maintained through the widow, Ruth, whom Boaz marries. The family is

thus not disowned or moved from the land. Instead, through a special legal agreement with witnesses from the town, the family is honoured and kept on the land through the widow of the deceased.

In this case the picture of Muafangejo makes the same social commentary as the Old Testament and the Old Testament becomes applicable to the situation in as far as the social justice for women and children is concerned. Such an interpretation would not be out of place from the text of the Old Testament because of contextual and intertextual referral. Linguistically, from the perspective of the intertext, an interpretation is forced onto the 2000 year old text from the contemporary context and can be justified.

Conclusion

Postcolonial interpretation, theoretically argued through intertextuality, makes linguistic sense. Deconstructive interpretation was blamed for its emphasis on the multiple meanings and eventually meaninglessness found in texts. It was criticised for not wanting to assign specific meanings to texts, especially as sought in structural interpretation.

In a previous book (Hunter 1995), the argument was presented that individuality of meaning can be argued through the interpretation of the sign in deconstruction, as well as through textuality and intertextuality as argued by Derrida. The argument was especially based on the argument about the temporal deferral of the sign and this temporality of signification is also the basis upon which sound linguistic interpretation can be argued in postcolonial interpretation as well as in post-colonial interpretation.

On the basis of intertextuality and the temporality of the sign postcolonial interpretation is no futile exercise as was argued of deconstruction by a number of mentioned scholars. It makes sense and enhances our interpretive insights in the Bible.

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