

# RE-MEMBERING THE BIBLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

## Reading Strategies in a Postcolonial Context

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### Introduction

In the Preface to their study of the colonization of consciousness and the consciousness of colonization in South Africa among the Southern Tswana people, Jean and John Comaroff tell the story of how in 1818 the directors of the London Missionary Society sent a mechanical clock to the church at its first mission station among the Tswana. As the Comaroff's remark, this was no ordinary clock for two related reasons. First, the clock was peculiar in that the hours of the clock were struck by marching British soldiers carved of wood. Second, the clock represented "the measure of a historical process in the making".<sup>1</sup>

Clearly meant to proclaim the value of time in Christian, civilized communities, the contraption had an altogether unexpected impact. For the Africans insisted that the "carved ones" were emissaries of a distant king who, with missionary connivance, would place them in a "house of bondage." A disconsolate evangelist had eventually to "take down the fairy-looking strangers, and cut a piece off their

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xi.

painted bodies, to convince the affrighted natives that the objects of their alarm were only bits of coloured wood".<sup>2</sup>

However, the Tswana were not reassured; "indeed, they seem to have concluded that 'the motives of the missionary were anything but disinterested.' And they were correct, of course. In the face of the clock they had caught their first glimpse of a future time, a time when their colonized world would march to quite different rhythms".<sup>3</sup>

While the Comaroff's chart the coming of the imperial clock and trace "the processes by which Non-conformist Christian missionaries, among the earliest footsoldiers of British colonialism, sought to change the hearts and minds, the signs and practices, of the Southern Tswana", they do not analyze the arrival and reception of the Bible as a particular colonial icon. That the Bible is not treated separately from the arrival and reception of Christianity is not surprising, particularly as it can be argued that "involvement with the Bible is analytic in being a Christian".<sup>4</sup> I do not want to dispute this, but I do want to suggest that we should not assume that the reception of Christianity and the reception of the Bible amount to the same thing. Vincent Wimbush's interpretative history of the Bible among African Americans provides compelling reasons for treating the reception of the Bible separately from the reception of Christianity.

Drawing on Wimbush's account heuristically, I attempt in this article to trace and to analyze some of the interpretative strategies indigenous (black) South Africans have adopted in their transactions with the Bible throughout the colonial encounter and into the present postcolonial context. I realize that there are many significant differences between African American transactions with the Bible and indigenous South African transactions with the Bible; however, the similarities are striking and so, in the absence of an interpretative history of the Bible among indigenous South Africans, Wimbush's outline has heuristic value.

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<sup>2</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, xi.

<sup>3</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, Explorations in Theology 7 (London: SCM, 1980), 52.

## Encountering the Bible in the New World

The initial encounter with the Bible is characterized by Wimbush as a combination of rejection, suspicion, and awe of "Book Religion". During this period the story of European colonization and conquest of "the New World" is remarkably similar to that of their colonization and conquest of South Africa.

They conquered native peoples and declared that European customs, languages, and traditions were the law. The Europeans' embrace of the Bible helped to lend this process legitimacy. Since many of them through their reading of and reference to the Bible had already defined themselves as dissenters from the dominant social, political, and religious traditions in their native countries, they found it a rather natural resource in the context of the New World. The Bible functioned as a cultural image-reflector, as a road map to nation-building. It provided the Europeans justification to think of themselves as a "biblical nation", as God's people called to conquer and convert the New World to God's way as they interpreted it.<sup>5</sup>

While the Bible did play a role in the missionizing of African slaves, its role was not primary and so its impact was indirect. "It was often imbedded within catechetical materials or within elaborate doctrinal statements and formal preaching styles".<sup>6</sup> When African slaves did encounter the Bible, it was from the perspective of cultures steeped in oral tradition. From this perspective the concept of religion and religious power circumscribed by a book was "at first frightful and absurd, thereafter, ...awesome and fascinating".<sup>7</sup> As illiterate peoples with rich, well-established, and elaborate oral traditions, the majority of the first African slaves were suspicious of and usually rejected "Book Religion". However, as Wimbush notes, "[i]t did not take them long to associate the Book of 'Book religion' with power".<sup>8</sup> So early in their encounter with "the Book", before they began to appropriate the Bible in an empowering and affirmative manner, their "capacity and willingness to engage 'the Book' were significant, for they demonstrated the Africans'

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History" in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 84.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, "Reading Texts Through Worlds, Worlds Through Texts," *Semeia* 62 (1993), 130.

<sup>7</sup> Wimbush, "Reading Texts," 131.

<sup>8</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 85.

ability to adapt themselves to different understandings of reality", and so to survive.<sup>9</sup>

During what Wimbush classifies as the second period of encounter with the Bible, African slaves began to appropriate and own the Bible. With the growth of the non-establishment, evangelical, camp meeting revivalist movements Africans "began to encounter the Bible on a large and popular scale".<sup>10</sup> As significant numbers of Africans converted to Christianity, even establishing their own churches and denominational groups, they began to embrace the Bible.

What did not go unnoticed among the Africans was the fact that the white world they experienced tended to explain its power and authority by appeal to the Bible. So they embraced the Bible, transforming it from the book of the religion of whites — whether aristocratic slavers or lower class exhorters — into a source of (psychic-spiritual) power, a source of inspiration for learning and affirmation, and into a language world of strong hopes and veiled but stinging critique of slave-holding Christian culture.<sup>11</sup>

The point Wimbush is making here is that African slaves, like their conquered and colonized cousins in Africa, learned, appropriated, adapted, and added to the hermeneutic moves of the European "masters". African slaves would have noted the diversity of readings the Bible could inspire, including cultural, political, and denominational (religious) readings. They would also have observed the selective way in which the missionaries and preachers read the Bible; they read certain parts and ignored others.<sup>12</sup> The various forms in which readings of the Bible could be articulated were appropriated and amplified: "in song, prayers, sermons, testimonies, and addresses".<sup>13</sup> If their missionaries and masters could interpret the "the Book" under the guidance of the Spirit, then so could they.

And interpret they did. They were attracted primarily to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible dealing with the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, to the oracles of the eighth-century prophets and their denunciations of social injustice and visions of social justice, and to the New Testament texts concerning the compassion, passion, and resurrection of Jesus. With these and

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<sup>9</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 85.

<sup>10</sup> Wimbush, "Reading Texts," 131.

<sup>11</sup> Wimbush, "Reading Texts," 131.

<sup>12</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 86.

<sup>13</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 86.

other texts, the African American Christians laid the foundations for what can be seen as an emerging "canon". In their spirituals and in their sermons and testimonies, African Americans interpreted the Bible in the light of their experiences. Faith became identification with the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible and with the long-suffering but ultimately victorious Jesus. As the people of God in the Hebrew Bible were once delivered from enslavement, so, the Africans sang and shouted, would they be delivered. As Jesus suffered unjustly but was raised from the dead to new life, so, they sang, would they be "raised" from their "social death" to new life. So went the songs, sermons, and testimonies.<sup>14</sup>

These various forms — spirituals, sermons, and testimonies — reflect the hermeneutical processes whereby African slaves appropriated the Bible as their own property. They "reflect a hermeneutic characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves".<sup>15</sup> Wimbush goes on to offer a fuller description of this "looseness" and "playfulness".<sup>16</sup> A looseness and playfulness towards the text includes the following strategies: interpretation "was not controlled by the literal words of the texts, but by social experience"; texts were heard and retold more than read; texts "were engaged as stories that seized and freed the imagination"; biblical texts were usually interpreted collectively; biblical stories "functioned sometimes as allegory, as parable, or as veiled social criticism" in a situation where survival demanded disguised forms of resisting discourse;<sup>17</sup> certain texts in the canon were read and others ignored. In addition to offering a preliminary description of these formative hermeneutical processes, Wimbush also wants to argue that the array of interpretative strategies forged in this period of African American encounter with the Bible are foundational: all other readings would in some sense be built upon and judged by them. The beginning of the African American encounter with the Bible has functioned, according to Wimbush, "as phenomenological, socio-political and cultural foundation" for subsequent periods.<sup>18</sup> The Bible, understood as "the white folk's book", "was accepted but not interpreted in the way that white Christians and the dominant culture in general interpreted it".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 88.

<sup>16</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 88-89.

<sup>17</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 88; see also discussion below.

<sup>18</sup> Wimbush, "Reading Texts," 131.

<sup>19</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 89.

In the absence of an analysis and history of the early encounters of indigenous South Africans with the Bible, the first two phases of Wimbush's interpretative history are suggestive. His subsequent phases are far more context specific, and besides, the indigenous South Africa encounter with the Bible in more recent times is more fully documented. So I will leave Wimbush's analysis here and move to more local sources; but I will return to glean from Wimbush's work, especially in two respects. His characterization of the hermeneutics of encounter as "a looseness, even playfulness" towards the biblical text and his claim that such a hermeneutics is foundational for later phases in the ongoing encounter with Bible are particularly insightful and significant, and resonate with my own reflections on the South African context.

### **Encountering the Bible in South Africa**

The encounter between indigenous South Africans and the Bible is usually recounted in broad strokes: "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".<sup>20</sup> This account of the encounter, as Takatso Mofokeng argues, expresses more precisely than any statement in the history of political science or Christian missions "the dilemma that confronts black South Africans in their relationships with the Bible".

With this statement, which is known by young and old in South Africa, black people of South Africa point to three dialectically related realities. They show the central position which the Bible occupies in the ongoing process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation. They also confess the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by a Christian people and yet being converted to their religion and accepting the Bible, their ideological instrument of colonization, oppression and exploitation. Thirdly, they express a historic commitment that is accepted solemnly by one generation and passed on to another — a commitment to terminate exploitation of humans by other humans.<sup>21</sup>

Mofokeng's article which includes this account is one of the few works that discusses the interpretative history of the Bible in South Africa from an indigenous perspective. However, as I have already mentioned, this interpretative history is sketched in outline only. This

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<sup>20</sup> Takatso Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation," *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 34.

article, like those of other Black theologians of the 1970s and 1980s, concentrates on later phases of the encounter with the Bible. While the "silence" of the early phases of encounter between the Bible and indigenous South Africans is yet to be probed, the later phases of that encounter are documented and analyzed in detail.

Itumeleng J. Mosala's essay on "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology" is a particularly important essay in that he publically questions the status of the Bible in Black Theology.<sup>22</sup> Mosala's basic critique is directed at Black theology's exegetical starting point which "expresses itself in the notion that the Bible is the revealed 'Word of God'".<sup>23</sup> He traces this view of the Bible as "an absolute, non-ideological 'Word of God'" back to the work of James Cone.<sup>24</sup> He finds it even in the work of the "most theoretically astute of black theologians", Cornel West. More importantly, according to Mosala, "South African black theologians are not free from enslavement to this neo-orthodox theological problematic that regards the notion of the 'Word of God' as a hermeneutical starting point".<sup>25</sup> Mosala underlines the pervasiveness of this view of the Bible by subjecting Sigqibo Dwane, Simon Gqubule, Khoza Mgojo, Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu, and Allan Boesak to a similar critique.

Mosala's contention is that most of the Bible "offers no certain starting point for a theology of liberation within itself". For example, he argues that the book of Micah "is eloquent in its silence about the ideological struggle waged by the oppressed and exploited class of monarchic Israel". In other words, "it is a ruling class document and represents the ideological and political interests of the ruling class". As such there "is simply too much de-ideologisation to be made before it can be hermeneutically straightforward in terms of the struggle for

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<sup>22</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology," in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free*, ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Bhuti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986) and chapter 1 of Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 177 and Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> The work of James Cone played a significant role in the development of black theology in South Africa in the early 1970s. See Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988), 89-90 for a detailed discussion of the nature of this role.

<sup>25</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 179 and Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 17.

liberation".<sup>26</sup> The Bible, therefore, cannot be the hermeneutical starting point of Black theology. Rather, those committed to the struggles of the black oppressed and exploited people "cannot ignore the history, culture, and ideologies of the dominated black people as their primary hermeneutical starting point".<sup>27</sup>

However, this does not mean that Mosala totally rejects the Bible. While the Bible cannot be the primary starting point for Black theology "there are enough contradictions within the book [of Micah, for example] to enable eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities in the very absences of those struggles in the text". Because the Bible is "a product and a record of class struggles",<sup>28</sup> Black theologians are able to detect "glimpses of liberation and of a determinate social movement galvanised by a powerful religious ideology in the biblical text". But, he continues, it "is not the existence of this which is in question. Rather, the problem being addressed here is one of developing an adequate hermeneutical framework which can rescue those liberative themes from the biblical text".<sup>29</sup>

In a later essay Mosala gives some indication of how Black theologians ought to appropriate the Bible. He identifies two sources of Black theology: the Bible and African history and culture.<sup>30</sup> "Black Theology has roots in the Bible insofar as it is capable of linking the struggles of oppressed people in South Africa today with the struggles of oppressed people in the communities of the Bible", but because the oppressed people in the Bible "did not write the Bible", and because their struggles "come to us *via* the struggles of their oppressors", "Black Theology needs to be firmly and critically rooted in black history and black culture in order for it to possess apposite weapons of struggle that can enable black people to get underneath the biblical text to the struggles

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<sup>26</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 196.

<sup>27</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 197.

<sup>28</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 196.

<sup>29</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa" (Ph. D. diss., Cape Town University, 1987), 27-28. This section of his thesis contains some material not in Mosala, "The Use of the Bible" or in Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*.

<sup>30</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala "Ethics of the Economic Principles: Church and Secular Investment," in *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*, ed. Bhuti Tlhagale and Itumeleng J. Mosala (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 119.



of oppressed classes".<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Black Theology also needs to be "firmly and critically rooted in the Bible in order to elicit from it cultural-hermeneutical tools of combat" with which black people can penetrate beneath both the underside of black history and culture and contemporary capitalist settler colonial domination to the experiences of oppressed and exploited working class black people.<sup>32</sup>

In the article already referred to by Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible, and Liberation",<sup>33</sup> Mofokeng draws on Mosala's work and elaborates on certain aspects. For Mofokeng, like Mosala, the Bible is both a problem and a solution. The "external" problem of the Bible is the oppressive and reactionary use of the Bible by white Christians. The internal problem is the Bible itself.<sup>34</sup> Like Mosala he is critical of those who concentrate on only the external problem, those who "accuse oppressor-preachers of *misusing* the Bible for their oppressive purposes and objectives",<sup>35</sup> or who accuse "preachers and racist whites of not practising what they preach".<sup>36</sup> It is clear, Mofokeng argues, that these responses are "based on the assumption that the Bible is essentially a book of liberation".<sup>37</sup> While Mofokeng concedes that these responses have a certain amount of truth to them, the crucial point he wants to make is that there are numerous "texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature". What is more, any attempt "to 'save' or 'co-opt' these oppressive texts for the oppressed only serve the interests of the oppressors".<sup>38</sup>

Young blacks in particular, Mofokeng states, "have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core" and suggest that the best option "is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible". Indeed, some

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<sup>31</sup> Mosala, "Ethics," 120.

<sup>32</sup> Mosala, "Ethics," 120.

<sup>33</sup> Mofokeng's article clearly draws extensively on Mosala's work although there is no explicit reference to it.

<sup>34</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 37.

<sup>35</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 37.

<sup>36</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 38.

<sup>37</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 37.

<sup>38</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 38.

"have zealously campaigned for its expulsion from the oppressed Black community", but, he notes, with little success. The reason for this lack of success, Mofokeng argues, is

largely due to the fact that no easily accessible ideological silo or storeroom is being offered to the social classes of our people that are desperately in need of liberation. African traditional religions are too far behind most blacks while Marxism, is to my mind, far ahead of many blacks, especially adult people. In the absence of a better storeroom of ideological and spiritual food, the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence.

Given this situation of very limited ideological options, Mofokeng continues, "Black theologians who are committed to the struggle for liberation and are organically connected to the struggling Christian people, have chosen to honestly do their best to shape the Bible into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people".<sup>39</sup>

I would argue, and Mofokeng implicitly acknowledges, that such a position is possible precisely because of some significant continuity between the appropriative reading strategies of present black "readers" of the Bible and those their ancestors forged and passed on to them. So

when many Black Christians read their history of struggle carefully, they come upon many Black heroes and heroines who were inspired and sustained by some passages and stories of the Bible in their struggle, when they read and interpreted them in the light of their Black experience, history and culture. They could consequently resist dehumanization and the destruction of their faith in God the liberator. It is this noble Black Christian history that helps to bring out the other side of the Bible, namely, the nature of the Bible as a book of hope for the downtrodden.<sup>40</sup>

Later he elaborates, arguing that the experience and resources of black Christians enables them to

discover the silenced, ignored and marginalized people in the Bible and develop an affinity with them. They also discover the text behind the text of the Bible — a text that has been silenced but one that speaks through this silence about the struggles of the silenced and marginalized people of the Bible. As members of a people whose story of pain, fears and hopes has been suppressed, they are enabled, by their physical and psychological scars, together with the analytical tools they

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<sup>39</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 40.

<sup>40</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 38.

have chosen, to discover the suppressed and forgotten stories of the weak and the poor of the Bible. These seem, according to them, to be the stories wherein God is identifying with the forgotten and the weak and is actively retrieving them from the margins of the social world. It is through these stories that God the creator of humans is manifested as the God of the oppressed and accepted as such. This creator God acts incarnately in Jesus to end the rampant enmity in creation and restore real humanity to people. Only the reading of these stories of the downtrodden God among the downtrodden of this world strengthens the tormented faith of the oppressed of our time, as well as enhancing the quality of their commitment to the physical struggle for liberation. This discovery constitutes the liberation of the Bible from the clutches of the dominant in the Christian fold who impose the stories that justify their victories onto the oppressed.<sup>41</sup>

This paragraph of Mofokeng's resonates with the work of Wimbush cited earlier, but Mofokeng is less precise in his description and analysis of "the analytical tools they [black South Africans] have chosen". But he, like Mosala, is clear that black experience, or the experience of "blackness",<sup>42</sup> is the starting point. Mofokeng seems willing to acknowledge and even to allow for whatever analytical tools the black community chooses for the interpretative task, although there are indications that he also wants to insist that certain tools are more appropriate than others. Mosala definitely wants to insist on this point; in fact, the central thrust of all his work is to argue that the only appropriate analytical tools are historical-materialist tools. Briefly,<sup>43</sup> Mosala articulates a clear methodology which includes the following interpretive procedures. His initial procedure as far as the text is concerned is to use historical-critical methods to determine the text and its context. For Mosala the important consequence of applying these methods is that they place the text in its socio-historical setting. Having established the socio-historical setting Mosala then moves into a historical-materialist analysis of the text, which incorporates two related interpretive procedures: an examination of the material conditions of the text (which includes an analysis of the nature of the mode of production, the constellation of classes necessitated by that mode, and the nature of the ideological manifestations arising out of and referring back to that mode of production) and an investigation of the ideological conditions of the

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<sup>41</sup> Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 41.

<sup>42</sup> Frostin, *Liberation Theology*, 86-87.

<sup>43</sup> I have discussed Mosala's work in detail in Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995).

text (including the class origins of the text and the class interests of the text). Underlying these inquiries is the recognition that the Bible is a site of specific historical-cultural class conflicts. Not only are these two related procedures applied to the biblical text, they are also applied to the reader of the Bible. Inseparable from the material and ideological conditions of the text are the material and ideological conditions of the reader, and these need to be investigated in similar terms.<sup>44</sup>

The analytical tools Mosala has developed offer significant resources to indigenous South Africans in their encounter with the Bible. He has demonstrated that the Bible is an ideological product, and he has developed a theoretically well-grounded biblical hermeneutics of liberation based on historical-critical and historical-materialist methodologies. But while Mosala does seem to insist that these are the only appropriate analytical tools to be used in the encounter with the Bible, there are moments when he too alludes to other resources in the black community. He argues, for example, that the uncritical "Word of God" approach of many Black theologians to the Bible has been "surpassed by the largely illiterate black working class and poor peasantry who have defied the canon of Scripture, with its ruling class ideological basis, by appropriating the Bible in their own way using the cultural tools emerging out of their struggle for survival".<sup>45</sup>

Such statements, and similar allusions by Mofokeng cited above, require, I would suggest, more careful scrutiny.

### **Trained and Ordinary "readers" of the Bible**

What are the tools that ordinary African interpreters of the Bible use to appropriate the Bible? How do they read? Drawing on four case studies of ordinary indigenous "readers" reading the Bible,<sup>46</sup> I have demonstrated that while there may appear to be some affinities between the reading strategies and resources of ordinary "readers" and the modes of reading of socially engaged biblical scholars,<sup>47</sup> the situation is more

<sup>44</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 187.

<sup>45</sup> Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 184. Unfortunately, Mosala does not elaborate on this.

<sup>46</sup> West, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 174-200.

<sup>47</sup> My focus has always been on the work of socially engaged biblical scholars (engaged, for example, in liberation hermeneutics) rather than those biblical scholars who choose to hide their social commitments and interests.

complex. There are certainly interesting similarities, but we must recognise that something fundamentally different is going on in the reading processes of ordinary indigenous "readers".

Ordinary "readers" read the Bible pre-critically. My use of "pre-critical" is not perjorative; ordinary indigenous "readers" have little choice in how they read the Bible. They read it pre-critically because they have not been trained in the critical modes of reading that characterize biblical scholarship. There is no mystery here; biblical scholars are trained to ask structured and systematic sets of questions (whether they be historical-critical, socio-historical, literary, structuralist, deconstructist, canonical, etc.) and ordinary indigenous "readers" have not been so trained. In fact, many ordinary indigenous "readers" are not actually readers at all; they are illiterate hearers, interpreters, and retellers of the Bible. So although there may be important similarities between the modes of reading of ordinary indigenous "readers" and the modes of reading of trained readers, there is nevertheless this crucial difference, namely, that ordinary "readers" read the Bible pre-critically, while biblical scholars read the Bible critically (or post-critically). This difference is crucial; but again I must stress that my use of the terms "critical/pre-critical" carries no sense of "better/worse". I am using these terms in a carefully specified technical sense.

In noting this difference I am not denying that ordinary indigenous "readers" read (or hear) the Bible with a critical consciousness. However, while there is definitely a "critical consciousness" on the part of some ordinary indigenous "readers", this is not quite the same as the socio-historical approach advocated by Mosala. Ordinary indigenous "readers" may, and often do, have a general critical consciousness towards society and texts, but they do not have the historical and sociological tools to be critical of the biblical text in the same way as Mosala. When young black workers in Young Christian Workers (YCW) appropriate the Bible as the story of liberation they are doing so on the basis of selected texts (and not various redactional layers) and of selected historical and sociological information (and not a systematic reconstruction of the social system behind the text).<sup>48</sup> The political critical consciousness of some ordinary "readers" may predispose them to a critical approach to the Bible, but as ordinary "readers" this is not their mode of reading.

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<sup>48</sup> West, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 188-93.

Similarly, J. Severino Croatto seems to argue that the poor and oppressed actually read the Bible in the way that his in-front-of-the-text mode of reading articulates.<sup>49</sup> But once again it is important to recognise that while many ordinary "readers" do read the Bible thematically in its final form as a single canonical text, this is not quite the same as the linguistic-symbolic post-critical canonical approach of Croatto. When ordinary "readers" read the Bible thematically in its final form they begin with creation (and not exodus) and read selectively (and not along "a semantic axis"). So while poor and marginalized ordinary indigenous "readers" may be predisposed to such a post-critical in-front-of-the-text reading of the Bible, their own strategies and resources are different.

The "reading" processes of ordinary indigenous Africans are characterized, I would suggest, by what Wimbush refers to as "a hermeneutic characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves".<sup>50</sup> Mosala's concern is that such ways of appropriating the Bible

cannot be allowed to substitute for a theoretically well-grounded biblical hermeneutics of liberation. The reason for this is that, while texts that are against oppressed people may be co-opted by the interlocutors of the liberation struggle, the fact that these texts have their ideological roots of these texts in oppressive practices means that the texts are capable of undergirding the interests of the oppressors even when used by the oppressed. In other words, oppressive texts cannot be totally tamed or subverted into liberating texts.<sup>51</sup>

Mosala is worried about two things here. First, he is worried that black biblical hermeneutics might suffer from an "unstructural understanding of the Bible" and, second, that both as a consequence and as a reason, it might also suffer from an "unstructural understanding" of the black experience and struggle.<sup>52</sup> Central to Mosala's hermeneutics of liberation is the search for a theoretical perspective that can locate both the Bible and the black experience within appropriate historical

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<sup>49</sup> José Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African American," 88.

<sup>51</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 30. Nothing, Mosala later adds, "could be more subversive to the struggle for liberation than enlisting the oppressors and exploiters as comrades in arms" (33).

<sup>52</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 32; the phrase "unstructural understanding" is taken from the work of Norman K. Gottwald.

contexts.<sup>53</sup> For Mosala a historical-materialist understanding of struggle provides the tool for reading both black history and culture and the Bible.

Mosala's concerns are clear, but are they the whole story? What if ordinary indigenous Africans have both a more "structural" understanding of the Bible and their social context than we recognize? What if they have disguised their actual "structural" understanding in order to survive? And what if they have achieved this "structural" understanding using resources of their own? Surely the presence of such already existing resources would be significant, especially if as we are to use local resources, as for example Tinyiko Sam Maluleke urges us to, in the process of reconstructing our country?<sup>54</sup> But how can this be that they are already present?

When it comes to understanding the alleged silence or "unstructural" understanding of the poor and marginalised we find thick and thin accounts of ideological hegemony. The thick version emphasizes the role of ideological state apparatuses, such as education systems, the church, and government structures, in controlling the symbolic means of production, just as factory owners monopolize the material means of production. "Their ideological work secures the active consent of subordinate groups to the social arrangements that reproduce their subordination".<sup>55</sup> The thin theory of hegemony makes less grand claims for the ideological control of the ruling class. What ideological domination does accomplish, according to this version,

is to define for subordinate groups what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain aspirations and grievances into the realm of the impossible, of idle dreams. By persuading underclasses that their position, their life-chances, their tribulations are unalterable and inevitable, such a limited hegemony can produce the behavioral results of consent without necessarily changing people's values. Convinced that nothing can possibly be done to improve their situation and that it will always remain so, it is even conceivable that idle criticisms and hopeless aspirations would be eventually extinguished.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996), 3-19.

<sup>55</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 73.

<sup>56</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 74.

But, the argument continues, because "the logic of domination represents a combination of historical and contemporary ideological and material practices that are never completely successful, always embody contradictions, and are constantly being fought over within asymmetrical relations of power",<sup>57</sup> "organic intellectuals", who can learn with the poor and marginalized while simultaneously helping them to foster modes of self-education and struggle against various forms of oppression, are able to point to the spaces, contradictions, and forms of resistance that raise the possibility for social struggle. However, and this is a key element of this position, oppressed people's accommodation to the logic of domination may mean that they actively resist emancipatory forms of knowledge offered by organic intellectuals.<sup>58</sup>

Such accounts of ideological hegemony argue that "when oppressed people live in silence, they use the words of their oppressors to describe their experience of oppression. Only within the praxis of liberation and in dialogue with what Antonio Gramsci called 'organic intellectuals' is it possible for the poor to break this silence and create their own language".<sup>59</sup> So within liberation theologies, whether they be Latin American, black, womanist, or feminist, the role of the intellectual is crucial in breaking "the culture of silence" — in enabling a language (or, in Mosala's terms, in enabling a "structural" analysis).

But what if this analysis is inadequate and the poor and marginalized have not accommodated themselves to the logic of domination? What if they already have a language? James Scott's work on "domination and the arts of resistance" has been particularly useful here. Scott problematizes both thick and thin versions of ideological hegemony, and so to the role of the intellectual. In his detailed study of domination and resistance we find a more nuanced analysis, arguing that theories of hegemony and false consciousness do not take account of what he calls "the hidden transcript".

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The

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<sup>57</sup> H. A. Giroux, "Introduction" in P. Freire, *The Politics of Education* (London: Macmillan, 1985), xii.

<sup>58</sup> Giroux, "Introduction," xviii-xxiii.

<sup>59</sup> Frostin, *Liberation Theology*, 10.



powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of *both* hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination.<sup>60</sup>

The crucial point of Scott's detailed argument is that "[t]he public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. It is frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation".<sup>61</sup> So social analysis which focuses on the public transcript, as most social analysis does, is focusing on the formal relations between the powerful and weak,<sup>62</sup> but is not attempting to "read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups".<sup>63</sup> A focus on the hidden transcript, where it is accessible in the rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the poor and marginalized, or the more public infrapolitics of popular culture,<sup>64</sup> reveals forms of resistance and defiance. "Unless one can penetrate the official transcript of both subordinates and elites, a reading of the social evidence will almost always represent a confirmation of the status quo in hegemonic terms".<sup>65</sup>

But is there still not a case for Gramsci's notion of the dominated consciousness of subordinate groups? For Gramsci hegemony works primarily at the level of thought as distinct from the level of action.<sup>66</sup> Scott turns this around. He considers "subordinate classes *less* constrained at the level of thought and ideology, since they can in secluded settings speak with comparative safety, and *more* constrained at the level of political action and struggle, where the daily exercise of power sharply limits the options available to them".<sup>67</sup> So, he argues,

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<sup>60</sup> Scott, *Domination*, xii.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Scott, *Domination*, xii. See Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 261 for a similar point.

<sup>64</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 198.

<sup>65</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowel Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 333.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 91.

subordinate groups have typically learned, in situations short of those rare all-or-nothing struggles, to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure.<sup>68</sup>

This is because most protests and challenges — even quite violent ones — "are made in the realistic expectation that the central features of the form of domination will remain intact". Consequently, "[m]ost acts of power from below, even when they are protests — implicitly or explicitly — will largely observe the "rules" even if their objective is to undermine them".<sup>69</sup> He believes "the historical evidence clearly shows that subordinate groups have been capable of revolutionary *thought* that repudiates existing forms of domination".<sup>70</sup> However, because the occasions on which subordinate groups have been able to act openly and fully on that thought are rare, the conflict will usually take "a dialogic form in which the language of the dialogue will invariably borrow heavily from the terms of the dominant ideology prevailing in the public transcript". So we must "consider the dominant discourse as a plastic idiom or dialect that is capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive of their use as intended by the dominant".<sup>71</sup>

Given Scott's analysis, subordinate groups are already engaged in forms of resistance and already have a language. "The culture of silence" is a strategy and not the whole story. What is hidden is hidden for good reason, so any attempt to penetrate the disguise is dangerous. And when dignity and autonomy demand an irruption or an articulation, this must be done in ways determined by the dominated. There does not appear to be a silence to break or a language to create. This analysis suggests, in addition, that ordinary indigenous Africans already have their own resources for appropriating the Bible in ways that are empowering and affirming.

I am not suggesting, however, that there is no place for organic intellectuals and their critical resources. To the contrary, much of my own work demonstrates the creative and critical possibilities of a sharing

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<sup>68</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 96.

<sup>69</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 93.

<sup>70</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 101.

<sup>71</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 102-3, 138. See also Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation*, 31.

of resources between socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary African "readers" of the Bible.<sup>72</sup> My point here is that socially engaged biblical scholars can only enter into a meaningful and empowering alliance with ordinary African "readers" if they have genuinely recognized and acknowledged the resources those "readers" already have for appropriating the Bible. How can we "drink from our own wells"<sup>73</sup> when we denigrate them or deny their very existence and rely on imported, bottled water?

Perhaps ordinary African "readers" can help us recover readings of the Bible that our training blinds us to; perhaps, to return to an earlier example, ordinary African "readers" do have resources which tame and subvert what may have been originally oppressive texts.<sup>74</sup> Whatever their "original" intention — and we must not forget that the notion of "intention" is itself contested — there are host of strategies for reading texts against any alleged intention. Critical readers of the Bible have resources for doing this (for example, deconstruction), and, I am arguing, so do ordinary "readers" — however, we are not as adept at describing their resources as we are at describing our own.

Wimbush describes the interpretative strategies of African slaves as "characterized by a looseness, even playfulness" with respect to biblical texts.<sup>75</sup> This description does not seem to suggest the type of "Word of God" hermeneutics Black and African theologians are charged with by Mosala, Mofokeng and, more recently, Maluleke. I do not want to dwell on or develop this line of argument, but I do want to insist more careful analysis is required of exactly what particular Black and African theologians mean by their uses of the phrase "Word of God".<sup>76</sup> My main point here is to pick up on the contention of both Mosala and Mofokeng that ordinary Africans have their own resources for

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<sup>72</sup> Gerald O. West, "And the Dumb Do Speak: Articulating Incipient Readings of the Bible in Marginalised Communities," in *The Bible in Ethics*, ed. John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and Daniel M. Carroll, R. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 174-92.

<sup>73</sup> Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies," 3.

<sup>74</sup> Deciding whether a text was "originally" oppressive is not a certain science; see for example my discussion of Mosala's and Gunther Wittenberg's respective readings of the Cain and Abel story in West, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African American," 88.

<sup>76</sup> Some analysis of the different ways in which Mosala and Allan Boesak use this phrase can be found in Frost, *Liberation Theology*, 160-65 and West, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 122-24.

appropriating the Bible for their own purposes, including survival, resistance, liberation, and life. As already indicated, Wimbush's work would support this contention. While Wimbush has attempted to elaborate and support this contention, our problem in South Africa is that we socially engaged biblical scholars (and theologians) have not concentrated on the reading resources and strategies of ordinary African "readers" of the Bible, but have tended to analyze the methods and approaches of academically trained readers of the Bible. So when we discover that the interpretative tools and procedures of Black and African theologians resemble those of the missionaries and colonialists we should not be surprised — they have mastered their masters' training!

This does not mean, however, that academically trained biblical scholars and theologians are not able to turn their training against the agendas and ideologies of those who trained them. Mosala is an excellent example of a black biblical scholar who has used Western tools to dismantle dominant ideologies. Western modes of reading are not innocent, but neither are those who take them up as weapons of survival, resistance, liberation, and life! A similar argument can be made, I would argue, with respect to the Bible. The Bible is not innocent,<sup>77</sup> but neither are those untrained ordinary African interpreters who have appropriated it. Not only have wrested ways of reading from their missionary and colonial masters and mistresses, but they have also found and forged their own ways of "reading" the Bible in order to fuel the working theologies they live by.<sup>78</sup>

### **Re-membering the Bible**

In the remainder of this article I want to concentrate on a cluster of such interpretative strategies used by ordinary African "readers". My account is preliminary, but I hope it will contribute to the further work that needs to be done in this area. Throughout this article I have placed the term "reading" in inverted commas. This acknowledges that I am

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<sup>77</sup> Any claim that the Bible is a Western text is, of course, nonsense. Western imperial forces may have brought this book to most of Africa, but its origins lie elsewhere (including Africa). See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) for a discussion of the fall from innocence of classic texts, including the Bible.

<sup>78</sup> See Gerald O. West, "Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the the Discourses of the Dominated," *Semeia*, in press.

using the term both literally, to include literate African readers, and metaphorically, to include illiterate or partially literate African "readers". In most of the communities I work with<sup>79</sup> the majority of Bible interpreters are either partially literate or illiterate; and yet they hear, remember, and retell the Bible. What they hear, remember, and retell is, I want to suggest, a remaking or a "re-membering" of the Bible.

Responding to the damage done by the Bible in Africa, the Zimbabwean theologian Canaan S. Banana called for the rewriting of the Bible.<sup>80</sup> Once again, as both Mosala and Mofokeng note, ordinary Africans are ahead of their trained compatriots. While they do not rewrite the Bible they do "re-member" it. Ordinary African interpreters of the Bible are not as transfixed by the text as their textually trained pastors and theologians; as Wimbush has indicated, their hermeneutics is characterized by "a looseness" towards the biblical text. If they do speak of the Bible as "Word of God", they do so in senses that are more metaphorical than literal; "the Book" is more of a symbol than a text.<sup>81</sup> The Bible they work with is always an already "re-membered" "text".

I use the term "re-membering", obviously, because of its derivation from the more familiar "remembering". In the South African context ordinary African interpreters work with a remembered as well as a read Bible. As Mosala reminds us, ordinary Africans, particularly in the African Independent Churches, "have an oral knowledge of the Bible". "Most of their information about the Bible comes from socialization in the churches themselves as they listen to prayers and sermons".<sup>82</sup> The "re-membering" of the Bible is, therefore, a communal process. Hearing, remembering, and retelling are community acts. Although the Bible as text is not central to the corporate practice of "re-membering", it does

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<sup>79</sup> For a detailed account of what it means to work "with" communities of ordinary readers see West, "And the Dumb Do Speak".

<sup>80</sup> Canaan S. Banana, "The Case for a New Bible," in *"Rewriting" the Bible: The Real Issues: Perspectives from within Biblical and Religious Studies in Zimbabwe*, ed. Isabel Mukonyora, James L. Cox and Frans J. Verstaalen (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993), 17-32.

<sup>81</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa: A Case Study," Unpublished Paper.

<sup>82</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Race, Class, and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Churches' Appropriation of the Bible," *Semeia*, in press. Although Mosala's assessment here is based on African Independent Churches, it applies as well to the so-called main-line churches; see Jonathan A. Draper, "Confessional Western Text-Centred Biblical Interpretation and an Oral or Residual-Oral Context," *Semeia*, in press.

play a role. Even those who are illiterate have considerable exposure to biblical texts being read. The remembered Bible and the read Bible reside side by side. Both play a part in the process of "re-membering"; "re-membering" is not simply an oral activity.

The term "re-membering" embraces a range of strategies that have yet to be more fully described, but Wimbush's elaboration on "a looseness, even a playfulness" towards the text discussed above is a useful start. A less orthodox account, but in many ways a more appropriate account, of what I mean by "re-membering" can be found in Osayande Obery Hendricks' concept of "guerilla exegesis".<sup>83</sup> Guerilla exegesis, like "re-membering", takes whatever tools and resources are at hand, wherever they may come from, whether indigenous or imported, and uses them to sabotage and subvert hegemonic readings, to make new things out of old things, to find new truths in unexpected and familiar places, to redefine reality, to empower and inspire. "Re-membering", like guerilla exegesis, is eclectic and transgressive. "Re-membering" is bricolage, is improvisation. "Re-membering" is "[u]sing whatever means you have to free means struggling to be freed"<sup>84</sup> in our African realities.

Because the Bible as book — as symbol — is always present, even when it is not being read, the potential for the Bible as text to overwrite what has been "re-membered" is always a possibility. Perhaps this is what Mosala means when he warns that "oppressive texts cannot be totally tamed or subverted into liberating texts".<sup>85</sup> His use of the qualifier "totally" implies that he recognizes that texts can be partially subverted and tamed, but that the text (and its allegedly original intention) can always reassert itself. While text may be less malleable than memory, we must not underestimate the powerful presence of the "re-membered" "text" as it permeates the life of the community. As with the initial encounter with the Bible, its use by the dominant (whether they read it with or against its alleged original intention) can be countered by the many moves that constitute "re-membering". This, anyway, is my contention.

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<sup>83</sup> Osayande Obery Hendricks, "Guerilla Exegesis: A Post-Modern Proposal for Insurgent African American Biblical Interpretation," *Koinonia Journal* VII, 1-19. In what follows I have picked out those characteristics of guerilla exegesis that resonate with my understanding of re-membering.

<sup>84</sup> Hendricks, "Guerilla Exegesis," 6.

<sup>85</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 30.

Socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians have contributed and continue to contribute, in my view, to the tools and resources that constitute "re-membering". Because Africans were confronted, converted, and catechized with particular parts and peculiar interpretations of Bible it is these that have constituted the raw material of their "re-membering". Organic intellectuals and other socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians have brought additional parts and perspectives of the Bible into those communities. They also have brought different tools. Neglected and forgotten texts become available; those parts of the canon ignored by the missionaries and colonialists are now read. A plurality of perspectives open up and offer unexpected places of connection with the biblical past. Additional tools provide increased capacities for critical interpretation and appropriation.<sup>86</sup> The readiness with which ordinary African "readers" have embraced this rich variety of resources demonstrates their openness to critical resources.

However, the way in which ordinary African "readers" have taken up these critical resources demonstrates that they have not abandoned the array of interpretative resources they already possess. On receiving critical resources ordinary African "readers" do not become purists who pursue particular interpretative perspectives. They do not; they do not because they do not "read" the Bible in order to produce academic papers — they "read" for survival, liberation, and life. Our offerings as socially engaged biblical scholars may make a contribution to their struggle for survival, liberation, and life, but our contributions will be "re-membered" too.

A brief example may be useful to illustrate my arguments.<sup>87</sup> The woodcut (see illustration, p.62) by Azariah Mbatha, a South African artist and ordinary African Bible reader, is an example of "a looseness" towards the text - of "re-membering".<sup>88</sup> For example, Mbatha's interpretation locates the story in Africa, which is where most of the Joseph Story as told in Genesis takes place, and he reads the story from and for his African context. The characters, themes, and concerns are African, with the symbols and ideas coming specifically from the Zulu

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<sup>86</sup> See West, "Reading the Bible Differently".

<sup>87</sup> I have discussed this example in more detail elsewhere; see Gerald O. West, "Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story with Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), 152-70.

<sup>88</sup> The woodcut is used with the permission of the artist.

tradition and culture.<sup>89</sup> Mbatha's reading recovers and reclaims some of the "Africaness" of the Bible, and reminds us that the Bible belongs to Africa as well as the Western world. Mbatha's reading also remembers the pre-colonial past, a past which "we need to be reminded by and about", and which "we as Africans were compelled to forget".<sup>90</sup>

Creative figures in post-colonial contexts, like Mbatha, whether they work with images, mirrors, medicines, or the written word, are "experimental practitioners" in that they "try to make universal signs speak to particular realities"; "their activities are in fact a means of *producing* historical consciousness: they seek to shape the inchoateness, the murky ambiguity of colonial encounters into techniques of empowerment and signs of collective representation".<sup>91</sup> This re-making of universal signs in the specifically South African colonial matrix of missionary endeavour and the encroachments of modern capitalism has drawn readers like Mbatha "into a conversation with the culture of modern capitalism — only to find themselves enmeshed ... in *its* order of signs and values".<sup>92</sup> And yet, "even as they are encompassed by the European capitalist system — consumed, ironically as they consume its goods and texts — they often seek to seize its symbols, to question their authority and integrity, and to reconstruct them in their own image".<sup>93</sup> Mbatha's woodcut, both in its form and in its images, might be interpreted as being engaged in such reconstruction or "re-membering". The woodcut, an African form, seizes and remakes the left to right and top to bottom conventions of colonial text to tell an African story of struggle from a European brought book — the Bible.

## Conclusion

Biblical scholars, even socially engaged biblical scholars, may not approve of the ways in which ordinary Africans read the Bible. They

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<sup>89</sup> Azaria Mbatha, *Im Herzen Des Tigers: In the Heart of the Tiger*. Text by Werner Eichel. (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1986), 6.

<sup>90</sup> Mbatha, *Im Herzen Des Tigers*, 7; "It was European civilization which brought the end of African civilization and replaced it with its own. I cannot find the words to describe what a terrible crime this is" (8).

<sup>91</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, xxii.

<sup>92</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, xii.

<sup>93</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, xii.



may not like the manner in which ordinary African "readers" remake and "re-member" the resources that they have taken up from biblical scholars themselves. But, I would argue, we cannot ignore the modes of reading of ordinary African "readers". My argument and appeal in this article is that we try to understand the resources ordinary African "readers" use in their encounters with the Bible; in so doing we may learn something, both about the Bible, our interpretative methods, and ourselves — if we are willing to participate in their "re-membering". I would go further; unless we are willing to participate in the "reading" process with ordinary African "readers" we will lack the necessary local resources for recovering and rebuilding what the missionaries and colonialists dismembered.

## ABSTRACT

Although European missionaries and colonialists brought the Bible with them to Africa, it can be argued that the encounter with Christianity and the encounter with the Bible should be examined separately. The argument of this paper is that a careful exploration of the ways in which Africans appropriated the Bible will identify a range of interpretative strategies that enabled missionized and colonized Africans to "read" the Bible in an empowering and affirmative manner. Furthermore, it will be argued that the interpretative strategies forged in the colonial encounter have functioned as phenomenological, socio-political, and cultural foundations for subsequent periods. While a host of other, usually imported, interpretative strategies have been used in resisting colonialism and in affirming African dignity and identity, this paper will argue that we need to return and recover the indigenous resources developed by our African ancestors in their initial encounters with the Bible. These interpretative strategies, the paper argues, are essential indigenous resources for the process of reconstruction in Africa.

## 撮 要

雖然《聖經》是由西方宣教士及殖民者傳入非洲，但作者認為，與西方基督教相遇和與《聖經》相遇必須分而視之。本文的論述指出，一個對非洲人民不同的詮釋及應用《聖經》方法的嚴謹探究，能使被殖民化的非洲人自身有力及以尊嚴解讀《聖經》。除此以外，本文縷述，從殖民者手中得來的解讀方法，後來竟成為了非洲社會、政治及文化的基礎。另一方面，雖然亦有不少人從外引入一些抵抗殖民主義，及肯定非洲人民身分及尊嚴的解讀方法；但本文辯稱，非洲人民必須從他們祖先最初與《聖經》相遇的經歷及解讀方法，尋回及復原他們的本色化信仰資源。



The woodcut by Azariah Mbatha, a South African artist and ordinary African Bible reader, is an example of "a looseness" towards the text — of "re-membering".