

CAN A LITERARY READING BE A LIBERATIVE READING?

Gerald West
University of Natal

Abstract

Situating itself within liberation hermeneutics, this paper discusses whether a literary mode of reading can offer a theoretically well-grounded biblical hermeneutics of liberation. This question arises from the work of two black South African writers, Allan A Boesak, and Itumeleng J Mosala, particularly from their readings of the Cain and Abel story. The focus of the paper, however, is a discussion of the literary mode of reading of the feminist interpreter Phyllis Trible. The paper argues that by viewing her literary readings of the Old Testament as deconstructions of patriarchy, we have a theoretical framework for grounding a literary biblical hermeneutics of liberation. Finally, the paper sketches why it is that such analysis matters, particularly in the South African context, but also within biblical studies generally.

Introduction

At times, interpretations matter. On the whole, such times are times of cultural crisis. The older ways of understanding and practice, even experience itself, no longer seem to work. We can find ourselves distanced from all earlier ways. Then we need to reflect on what it means to interpret (Tracy 1987:7).

This is the purpose of this paper, to reflect on what it means to interpret the Bible in a context of crisis, a context where interpretations matter.

The particular context of crisis of this paper is the South African situation of struggle. By struggle I mean the struggle of the poor and the oppressed in South Africa for liberation from *apartheid* (Nolan 1988).¹

This paper is concerned specifically with those who are committed to reading the Bible from within and for the community of struggle, the community of those who are victims of and those who are opposed to the *apartheid* system. Although I will draw substantially on those engaged in a different but related struggle, feminist interpreters, the concerns addressed will arise from the work of two black South African writers, Allan A Boesak and Itumeleng J Mosala, particularly on their readings of the Cain and Abel story (Boesak 1984:149f; Mosala 1989:33f).

In particular, I discuss whether a literary mode of reading can offer a theoretically well-grounded biblical hermeneutics of liberation. Finally, I will sketch why it is that such analysis matters, particularly in the South African context, but also within biblical studies generally.

Similarities and differences

Clearly there are considerable differences between Mosala's mainly sociological reading and Boesak's mainly literary reading of the Cain and Abel story (West 1990a and West 1990b). However, an important similarity is their common commitment to read the Bible from within the community of struggle in South Africa. And, I would argue, this similarity, this common commitment to read the Bible from within the South African community of struggle and the related common commitment to the struggle shaping their reading interests, albeit differently, are sufficient grounds for dialogue concerning their differences.

More importantly, I would suggest that such dialogue is not only possible but also vital in the South African context, particularly among those who are committed to reading the Bible within and for the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Among those who share such a commitment are those who adopt a variety of modes of reading the Bible. At this time when the 'prophetic' voice of the Church is under attack by both 'State Theology' and 'Church Theology' (*Kairos* 1986),² the

1. From the outset it must be recognized that important as social analysis is for theologies of religion their analysis is still fragmentary. The key concept of 'the poor and oppressed' is still ambiguous, although there is consensus in liberation theologies that the distinctive characteristic of the poor is not economic statistics, but 'the underprivileged in the different power structures' (Frostbin 1988:9, 182-184). For a more detailed discussion of this and other questions raised in the paper, see West 1989.

2. I use these terms as they are used in *The Kairos Document*. Briefly, 'State theology' is the theology of the South African *apartheid* State, which 'is simply the theological justification of the *status quo* with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy' (p 6). 'Church theology' is in a limited, guarded and cautious way critical of *apartheid*. 'Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation' (p 11). *The Kairos Document* moves towards a 'prophetic theology', a theology which 'speaks to the

importance of dialogue among those who share a commitment to the struggle for liberation in South Africa is vital. Among those committed to reading the Bible within this community, with their differences, there are not only sufficient grounds for such dialogue and critique, but, I would argue, necessary grounds.

So it is with a clear recognition of the important similarities in their modes of reading (*contra* Loader 1987) that I now turn to some of the questions that the differences in their modes of reading raise.

A question of interpretive interests

An obvious question would be whether a particular commitment to a particular community of struggle demands not only a commitment to reading the Bible from within and for the community of struggle, but also certain interpretive interests? This is what Mosala seems to advocate in his critique of Boesak's reading of the Cain and Abel story. This is clear when he argues that 'The fundamental objection that is being raised ... against the biblical hermeneutics of black theology is that not only does it suffer from an "unstructural understanding of the Bible" but, both as a consequence and as a reason, it also suffers from an "unstructural understanding" of the black experience and struggle' (Mosala 1989:32). Although Mosala is here critiquing Boesak's mode of reading, he is not calling into question Boesak's commitment to the community of struggle.

The problem is basically one of contradiction. It has to do with the difficult area of the interface between personal existential commitments and structural-ideological locations as well as frameworks of political activity. It is not enough to be existentially committed to the struggles of the oppressed and exploited people. One has to also effect a theoretical break with the assumptions and perspectives of the dominant discourse of a stratified society (Mosala 1989:39).

Mosala recognizes that interpreters like Boesak are clearly correct 'in detecting glimpses of liberation and of a determinate social movement galvanised by a powerful religious ideology in the biblical text'. However, he argues, '...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. This task will not be successfully performed by a denial of oppressive structures which frame what liberative themes the texts encode' (Mosala 1989:40).³ So with respect to the Cain and Abel story Mosala

particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence, but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand' (p 18).

3. Mosala argues that '... biblical scholars have always been aware of the tendency in biblical literature to use older traditions to address the needs of new situations', but that until recently they have not recognized the cultic-ideological origins of the texts of the Bible. In other words, '...the issue that has not been faced squarely is what kind of additions [and whose] are they' (Mosala 1986:158-186, 195).

argues that 'Boesak's reading of this story is in complete ideological collusion with the text and its rhetorical intentions: to legitimate the process of land expropriation by the ruling classes of David's monarchy from the village peasants in the hill country of Palestine in the 10 th century B C E'. Mosala then exclaims,

Kgakgamatso! Mohlolo! What a miracle! Africans would say. The story of the oppressed has been stolen by the oppressors and is being used as an ideological weapon against the oppressed in subsequent histories. The point is that there is no historical basis in this period of Israel's history to support that the oppressors were made homeless, wanderers and vagabonds. Neither is there any historical evidence in any previous or subsequent epochs to support the assertion that oppressors can be made homeless, even by the death of the oppressed (Mosala 1989:34).

In other words, modes of reading like that of Boesak's

... 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 interlocuters of the liberation struggle, the ideological roots of these texts in oppressive practices mean that the texts are capable undergirding the interests of the oppressors even when used by the oppressed. In other words, oppressive texts cannot be totally tamed or subverted into liberative texts (Mosala 1989:30).

So, like Terry Eagleton's 'revolutionary cultural worker' (Eagleton 1981:113), Mosala argues, biblical interpreters in the community of struggle must not only be 'projective' and 'appropriative', but also 'polemical' in their reading of the Bible (Mosala 1989:32).

But are Mosala's interpretive strategies the only ones we ought to use in the South African context of struggle? Certainly there are those interpreters in the community of struggle who argue that the text, or more of it than Mosala would accept, does not mask but in fact reflects the struggle behind the text (Wittenberg 1987). But still the question remains: is there a '*theoretically well-grounded* [my emphasis] biblical hermeneutics of liberation' which could support something like Boesak's, or more generally, a literary mode of reading?

Three major concerns shape Mosala's arguments above. He is concerned that interpreters recognize the ideological nature of the text; he is concerned that readers develop the critical skills to analyze the text (and society) which will enable them to arrive at this identification; and he is concerned that such an analysis should be theoretically well-grounded. His own answer to these concerns is a historical-materialist sociological reading of biblical texts (and society).⁴

Similar concerns can be found in Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of Phyllis Trible and other feminist interpreters whose modes of reading focus on the text (Schüssler

4. Mosala is adamant that black theology's 'hermeneutics of liberation must be equally applied to black history and culture. Not to do so will amount to a mere nostalgic romanticism on the part of black theologians' (Mosala 1989:4).

Fiorenza 1983:14-26). The question, then, is whether a mode of reading which has its focus on the text can respond to these concerns for a 'structural' reading of the Bible and a related 'structural reading' of society in a coherent and theoretically well-grounded way. Although Tribble does not herself respond to this question, I have constructed a reply which arises from her reading practice. Such a reply clearly has relevance for aspects of Boesak's mode of reading.

Phyllis Tribble's (deconstructive) literary reading

Tribble recognizes that feminism, as a critique of culture and faith in the light of misogyny, as a prophetic movement which examines the *status quo*, pronouncing judgement, and calling for repentance, engages the Bible in various ways (Tribble 1984:3). One approach, similar to that of Schüssler Fiorenza, documents the case against women historically and sociologically. A second approach, characteristic of Tribble's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 'discerns within the Bible critiques of patriarchy. It upholds forgotten texts and reinterprets familiar ones to shape a remnant theology that challenges the sexism of scripture'. Yet a third approach, found in Tribble's *Texts of Terror*, 'recounts tales of terror *in memoriam* to offer sympathetic readings of abused women. If the first perspective documents misogyny historically and sociologically, this one appropriates the data poetically and theologically. At the same time, it continues to search for the remnant in unlikely places' (Tribble 1984:3).

Central to Tribble's approach is the metaphor of the 'Bible's journey': 'The Bible is a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present' (Tribble 1978:1). What she understands by this is that 'Composed of diverse traditions that span centuries, it embraces claims and counterclaims in witness to the complexities and ambiguities of existence. Similarly, it engages struggles and perplexities outside itself to generate varied applications throughout the ages' (Tribble 1978:1). This metaphor of the 'journey' of the Bible yields hermeneutical, methodological, and topical 'clues' for her particular approach. 'By exploring these clues we join the peregrinations of a text from an ancient to a contemporary setting' (Tribble 1978:1).

The first clue in Tribble's mode of reading is the 'hermeneutics functioning within scripture'. By tracing the 'pilgrimage' of a text, Tribble finds that 'a single text appears in different versions with different functions in different contexts. Through application it confesses, challenges, comforts, and condemns. What it says on one occasion, it denies on another. Thus, scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations of itself' (Tribble 1978:4).

Furthermore, this hermeneutic does not employ a single set of principles to achieve meanings. As our proclamation wandered through the centuries, it provided no map of its peregrinations. Seldom did it disclose precisely how it got from one time to another, from one setting to another, or from one meaning to another. Yet it did provide glimpses of numerous methodologies, such as compression, displacement, additions, omissions, and irony. Interpretation then, eschews systematizing. It invites participation in the

movement of the text, and it requires risk on the way to application. Though mute, a text speaks to attentive hearers in particular contexts. In turn, these hearers construe the text variously (Trible 1978:4-5).

It is from this 'inner hermeneutics' of the Bible that Trible derives a clue to 'the pilgrimage of the Bible in the world' (Trible 1978:5).⁵

Trible's second clue is the interaction between the Bible and the world. Her emphasis here is the recognition of 'a pilgrimage of understanding that is application' (Trible 1978:5). In other words, Trible recognizes that readers 'understand scripture from the perspective of contemporary issues; or, conversely, they view present interests in light of the Bible' (Trible 1978:5). Here too there are multiple interpretations, which leads Trible to argue that

All these contemporary interactions between the Bible and the world mirror the inner dynamics of scripture itself. The interpretive clue within the text is also the clue between the text and existence. Hence, the private and public journeys of the pilgrim named scripture converge to yield the integrity of its life. As the Bible interprets itself to complement or to contradict, to confirm or to challenge, so likewise we construe these traditions for our time, recognizing an affinity between then and now (Trible 1978:7).

For Trible 'hermeneutics encompasses explication, understanding, and application from past to present. Subject to the experiences of the reader, this process is always compelling and never ending. New occasions teach new duties' (Trible 1978:7-8). Among these 'new occasions' is feminism 'as a critique of culture in light of misogyny', a perspective from which Trible is committed to read selected biblical texts (Trible 1978:7-8).

However, while Trible demonstrates the thesis of interaction between the Bible and world, she argues that this interaction 'does not mean that the Bible has an "answer" for every contemporary issue or even speaks specifically to it'. 'Nor', she continues, 'does the fact of interaction *per se* legitimate an interpretation. Not all interpretations are valid, and not all valid interpretations are equally so'. A 'major criterion' for the evaluation of interpretations, according to Trible, is methodology (Trible 1978:24, n 10).

Trible accepts that 'hermeneutics employs many acceptable methodologies', but herself chooses rhetorical (or literary) criticism. 'According to this discipline, the major clue to interpretation is the text itself' (Trible 1978:8).⁶ This 'literary approach concentrates primarily on the text rather than on extrinsic factors such as historical background, archaeological data, compositional history, authorial intention, sociological setting, or theological motivation and result' (Trible 1978:8). Unlike some, however, Trible is not here rejecting these 'external concerns' (Trible 1978:27, n 41). 'To be sure, these external concerns supplement one's understanding

5. She adds that 'this clue is a process of understanding rather than a method of control' (Trible 1978:5).

6. Trible distinguishes her approach from structuralism. 'Throughout this study I am concerned with surface structures of literary compositions and not with the deep structures' (Trible 1978:26, n 37).

Thirdly, she argues that within the Bible there are countervoices, untold tales of terror, and neglected themes. And fourthly, she argues that this counterliterature can be recovered *via* a rhetorical-critical methodology to inform a feminist perspective.

Having briefly outlined Tribble's approach we can now analyze the link between her interpretive method, rhetorical criticism, and the feminist struggle to which she is committed.

From the outset Tribble recognizes that a focus on the stylistic and rhetorical features of the text presents problems for the feminist perspective.

Hebrew grammar employs masculine pronouns for God. Though grammatical gender decides neither sexuality nor theology, these distinctions are difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in our hearing and understanding. Consequently, masculine pronouns reinforce a male image of God, an image that obscures, even obliterates, female metaphors for deity. The effect is detrimental for faith and its participants. In my own writing, I avoid pronouns for deity; an occasional resulting awkwardness of style is a small price to pay for a valuable theological statement. As yet, however, I do not know how to resolve the dilemma posed by grammatical gender for deity in the scriptures themselves, since translation must answer to both grammatical accuracy and interpretive validity (Tribble 1978:23, n 5).

This problem is reiterated more starkly in her conclusion: 'Clearly, the patriarchal stamp of scripture is permanent' (Tribble 1978:202).

But, she maintains, and here we see the link between her methodological approach and the feminist struggle, just as clearly, interpretation of the Bible is forever changing, 'since new occasions teach new duties and contexts alter texts, liberating them from frozen duties and constructions' (Tribble 1978:202). The crucial factor then is the feminist experience and the feminist questions which Tribble brings to the text. Clearly, then, the hermeneutic clue between the text and world plays a significant role. Equally clearly, the hermeneutic clue within the text also plays a significant role. But what of the text itself? Does the text itself validate such feminist readings? In other words, does the text as form and content 'witness' to such feminist readings?

Tribble responds in the affirmative. She concludes an earlier article by arguing that '...in various ways they [the discussed texts and themes] demonstrate a depatriarchalizing principle at work in the Bible. Depatriarchalizing is not an operation which the exegete performs on the text. It is a hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself. We expose it; we do not impose it' (Tribble 1973:49). In the conclusion of her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* she restates this argument: 'Moving across cultures and centuries, then, *the Bible informed a feminist perspective*, and correspondingly, a feminist perspective enlightened the Bible. Shaped by a rhetorical-critical methodology, this interaction resulted in new interpretations of old texts; moreover, *it uncovered neglected traditions to reveal countervoices within a patriarchal document*' (Tribble 1978:202, my emphasis).

In making this claim Tribble realizes that this interaction does not 'eliminate the male-dominated character of scripture'; such a task, she continues, 'would have been both impossible and dishonest' (Tribble 1978:202).¹⁰ Her claim is more modest. She does not

... claim that the perspectives given here dominate the scriptures. Instead, I have accented what I consider neglected themes and counterliterature. Using feminist hermeneutics, I have tried to recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith. Though some of these treasures are small, they are nonetheless valuable in a tradition that is often compelled to live by the remnant (Tribble 1978:xvi).¹¹

In summary, Tribble finds an analogy of struggle, both a feminist and a wider liberation struggle (Tribble 1978:5),¹² in the text. While accepting that the dominant form of the text is patriarchal, she nevertheless finds clues to a feminist struggle, or remnants of such a struggle, in the text itself. Tribble is also concerned to recover and appropriate this struggle for the feminist struggle today. Indeed, it is her very situation of struggle which brings her specific experience and questions to the text. Her interpretive method which links the biblical context of struggle with her context of struggle is a close reading of the surface structure of the text.

But what of the concerns of Mosala and Schüssler Fiorenza? Have they been answered? As we have already noted, Tribble acknowledges that 'the patriarchal stamp of scripture is permanent' (Tribble 1978:202). However, within this patriarchal literature she finds a 'counterliterature' (Tribble 1978:xvi). She is not arguing here that this counterliterature is non-patriarchal; she is arguing that within patriarchal literature there are counter-discourses. What I am arguing, and this is not necessarily Tribble's understanding, although it reflects her practice, is that Tribble is deconstructing the biblical text.

David Jobling argues that deconstruction expresses both an attitude of mind and determines a method of interpretation (Jobling 1987:3). 'The attitude of mind is one which senses that human systems, and in particular the complex system which is "Western culture", are built up on arbitrary but established certainties which become near-impregnable defenses against alternative ways of being, doing, and thinking'. 'The method is to analyze a system, eventually "the system", from a perspective of what it must exclude in order to maintain itself as a system, and then to demonstrate its failure to achieve this exclusion' (Jobling 1987:3).¹³ Jobling gives the example of

10. In Tribble 1984 she highlights the oppressive, male-dominated, character of the Bible.

11. Her readings demonstrate this last point.

12. Here she discusses interactions between the Bible and black experience. 'When set in a context of the poor and the powerless, the Bible critiques every culture of injustice to proclaim the good news of liberation' (Tribble 1978:5).

13. Jobling gives the example of the Western system of rationality which has had to exclude various kinds of discourse - myth, dream, etc - in order to establish itself (Jobling 1987:3). Significantly, Jobling goes on to argue that 'text' and 'textuality' are 'privileged concepts of deconstruction'. 'Deconstruction is

the western system of rationality which has had to exclude various kinds of discourse - myth, dream, etc. - in order to establish itself (Jobling 1987:3). The problem, as Jobling notes, is 'that we can only analyze within terms the system gives us We do not escape the system' (Jobling 1987:3-4). In other words, 'Deconstruction is an insistent problematization of human constructions from within' (Jobling 1987:4).

Jobling's discussion indicates a distinction between two emphases within deconstruction.

On the one hand, it [deconstruction] may emphasize the *ungroundedness* of a system, its lack of justification outside of arbitrary axioms; this emphasis has much in common with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. On the other hand, it may emphasize the *endlessness* of the process of interpretation, suggesting (depending on the analyst) one of two extremes: a terror of the 'abyss' of meaninglessness, or a joyous self-abandonment to the 'free play' of meanings.

Jobling adds that '... though these emphases must eventually come together, their distinction is very important for analysis' (Jobling 1987:4).

These emphases, I would argue, do come together in Tribble's mode of reading. In her work, as has been shown, we find both the 'ungroundedness' of the patriarchal system and the 'endlessness' of the process of interpretation. What keeps Tribble from the nihilism of meaninglessness and the play of pluralism is her social and political commitment, her commitment to the feminist struggle.¹⁴

Tribble, then, conjoins two discourses: 'liberation' and 'deconstruction'. In the words of Jobling,

These two discourses, liberation and deconstruction, embody demands for freedom which are revolutionary *vis-à-vis* the established system. Liberation embodies the demand from the dominant culture's political and economic 'Other', both from the geographical outside, the Third World, and from within (movements of socio-political and personal liberation in the West).¹⁵ Deconstruction embodies the demand from the withinest of within, setting out to interpret what is really going on in freedom from the dominant culture's most basic assumptions, assumptions so deep that the culture doesn't notice them. The 'Other' which deconstruction makes heard is what has aptly been called the 'political Unconscious' of the West, the assumptions which generate our sociopolitical structures, and which these structures serve to conceal.

a possibility and a necessity because language itself is deconstructive - it exposes as illusory the determinacy of meaning upon which systems erect themselves - and it is in texts, with their open linguistic play, that this character of language is best displayed' (Jobling 1987:4).

14. Indeed, I would argue that it is only a commitment to a context of struggle which rescues deconstruction from its usual ahistorical and apolitical appropriation, evident particularly in North America. For a similar observation see Jobling 1987:6-8, where he draws primarily on French rather than North American deconstruction.

15. Jobling is thinking here specifically of feminism.

'Revolution from without and from within; these discourses belong together' (Jobling 1987:4); something Tribble's work demonstrates.

In conclusion, I am arguing that working within the system of the patriarchal literature of the Bible, Tribble uncovers and recovers a counterliterature which deconstructs the dominant patriarchal tradition.¹⁶ She does not claim that the perspectives given in her work dominate the Bible. Instead, she has given prominence to what she considers neglected themes and counterliterature. In so doing she enables marginalized discourses and marginalized groups to become counter-discourses and counter-movements.¹⁷ Tribble's selectivity is not a search for non-patriarchal 'essences' but an uncovering of those texts which deconstruct, and so render unstable, the patriarchal system. It is, to use Norman Gottwald's phrase, a 'restructuring of consciousness' (Gottwald 1983:199), with respect to both the past text and present society. Tribble's mode of reading is certainly not an 'unstructural understanding of the Bible', nor is it an 'unstructural understanding of the present'. Her literary-feminist reading of the text is a theoretically well-grounded hermeneutic of liberation which challenges the reader and the dominant methods in much the same way as the modes of reading of Mosala and Schüssler Fiorenza.¹⁸

In saying this I realize that the meaning of 'structural' shifts somewhat between Mosala on the one hand and Schüssler Fiorenza on the other, and then between Schüssler Fiorenza on the one hand and Tribble on the other. Nevertheless, there is an overlap in the sense of a common commitment to a critical approach to the text and society, and this, I would argue, is the crucial issue. This is in line with Gottwald's positive assessment of Schüssler Fiorenza's work mentioned above and his general positive assessment of feminist theology's 'critical' appropriation of the Bible. In other words, as far as Gottwald is concerned, the crucial issue is critical reading which constantly mediates 'between the patriarchal overlays and the feminist outcroppings within the Bible' and so incorporates a 'principle of canonical criticism driven along by a pre-understanding of the presence of divided and contradictory

16. In proposing a co-operation, albeit problematic, between liberation (including feminist) theology and deconstructive practice, Jobling asks, 'What else are liberation movements doing, at the level of theory, than deconstructing a tradition of oppression, unpacking its logic, to show that it is finally based upon nothing other than the monopolization of power?' (Jobling 1987:4).

17. This is particularly apparent in Tribble 1984, where at the end of each recovered story of terror she calls for repentance and challenges the reader to a new beginning.

18. In the 'Editor's Foreword' to Tribble 1984 Walter Brueggemann argues that Tribble's work 'makes clear how much the regnant methods, for all their claims of "objectivity", have indeed served the ideological ends of "the ruling class". What now surfaces is the history, consciousness, and cry of the victim, who in each case is shown to be a character of worth and dignity in the narrative. Heretofore, each has been regarded as simply an incidental prop for a drama about other matters. So Tribble's "close reading" helps us notice. The presumed prop turns out to be a character of genuine interest, warranting our attention. And we are left to ask why our methods have reduced such characters, so that they have been lost to the story' (Tribble 1984:x).

social and theological currents in the biblical testimonies themselves' (Gottwald 1985:11-12). Tribble clearly practises such a critical mode of reading.

The discussion so far has shown, I suggest, that there is no one mode of reading which has a privileged relationship to the context of struggle. While there is certainly more to be analyzed here, and while there are a number of questions still to clarify, each of these modes of reading, whether focusing behind the text, or on the text, or in front of the text, offers a coherent and theoretically well-grounded hermeneutics of liberation. Moreover, and this must be stressed, each of these modes of reading is a critical reading. Each offers a structural reading of the biblical text, although the respective emphases differ. Another important similarity is that their appropriation of biblical elements, whether behind the text, in the text, or in front of the text, is a critical appropriation.

The role of the ordinary reader

However, fascinating as this discussion has been, and will continue to be, it is largely a discussion among trained readers. Given that interpreters within contexts of liberation have argued for the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed (Frostin 1988:94f), surely their voice should be heard?

Significantly, both Boesak and Mosala, each in their own way, recognize this. James Cochrane argues incisively that Mosala's concerns raise

... the practical matter of facilitating a critical consciousness among oppressed people in order that they may be assisted in taking up the chains of the oppression and breaking them. This is crucial because - as in the best work of the independent black-led trade unions - it concerns the empowerment of people who have been dispossessed and dehumanized.

Moreover, it contributes to the process of building the communicative competence necessary for a democratic society free from domination and [the] maximizing of the participation of its citizens. Mosala recognizes that critical consciousness and democratic activity is not spontaneous (though always potential), but are learned. Longergan's understanding of the cumulative, progressive processes of insight by which insight is gathered upon insight in a learning process is relevant here. One may say, therefore, that Mosala represents an approach which has taken praxis into itself as the most penetrating way of uncovering the strategies of domination (Cochrane 1989:30).¹⁹

'But', Cochrane continues, 'what makes Mosala's hermeneutic difficult in the context of oppression (though it would not change outside of this context, it appears) is that the vast majority of the people he has as his intended base of operations appear to read texts and events somewhat differently'. Cochrane then adds, 'Story is the

19. Cochrane is here reflecting on the challenges of Boesak's and Mosala's work as represented in my analysis in West 1989.

fundamental linguistic form, and it seems to be the form of linguisticity as well (ritual, dreams - all things analogous to language)' (Cochrane 1989:30).²⁰

Here, in his focus on the text and on the liberation story, lies Boesak's strength, continues Cochrane,

... for though he is aware of, and has been trained in, the critical tradition, he easily sets a large part of it aside in turning to the text or the event through narrative. He relates to the narrative character of the experience, and thereby links himself to the liberative memory of the past (which may appear in the text as text despite the author) through this strategy. In this way, Boesak represents an approach which takes linguisticity into itself as the most general way of presenting the legitimacy of liberation (Cochrane 1989:30).

While Cochrane is probably right in his location of the ordinary reader with respect to the respective modes of reading of Boesak and Mosala, the really incisive point he is making is that both Boesak and Mosala show some awareness of the challenge of the ordinary reader. Their responses, however, are different. By focusing on a critical method, Mosala seeks to empower the reader to develop a structural understanding of the Bible as well as a structural understanding of the black experience and struggle. By focusing on the liberation story in the biblical text, Boesak seeks to empower the reader to recognize the liberation axis or theme running through the Bible.

Each in their own way is clearly wrestling with the question of the role of the biblical scholar or intellectual in their context, a question which arises with particular urgency in contexts of liberation.

Conclusions

So there are still a number of questions to ask and to answer in the South African context of liberation, the crucial one being the nature of the relationship between the trained reader and the ordinary reader.²¹ While I have argued that there is sufficient in common for a constructive dialogue to take place between the different modes of reading the Bible in the South African context of struggle,²² unless this dialogue includes the poor and oppressed it will prove to be largely irrelevant to the transforming of our country. So if it is true that the Bible is 'the basic source of African theology' but only when read 'in the context of our struggle for humanity'

20. Cochrane may be right here, but the role of story in ordinary readers' reading of the Bible certainly requires further research.

21. In an important work Matthew Lamb refers to this relationship as 'an ongoing dialogue and mutual learning process with the poor, oppressed, exploited races, classes and sexes within histories and societies' (Lamb 1982:87).

22. For a similar discussion within the Latin American context, see Segundo 1985.

(Appiah-Kubi and Torres 1979:192,197), then surely the voices of the poor and oppressed must be heard.²³

Where the different modes of reading in the South African context of struggle, and in all contexts of struggle, clearly do converge is in the conviction that the primary function of Biblical Studies is to serve the community, particularly the community of the poor and oppressed. And it is with this challenge that the paper concludes. The challenge is to move away from the notion of biblical studies as the pursuit of disinterested truth to something more human and transformative, something which is shaped by a self-critical solidarity with the victims of history.²⁴

23. Particularly if *vox victimarum vox Dei* - the cries of the victims are the voice of God (Lamb 1982:1).

24. A contextual theology should remain critical and prophetic with regard to its own situational experience. The phrase 'solidarity with victims' is taken from Lamb 1982.

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