

## THE ROLE OF THE 'ORDINARY READER' IN GERALD O WEST'S HERMENEUTICS

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### Abstract

*This essay explores the role of the "ordinary reader" in Gerald O West's hermeneutics. Firstly, it offers a brief overview of the background context of liberation from which West developed his hermeneutics. Secondly, West's hermeneutics of liberation in its South African context is explored. Thirdly, the role of the so-called "ordinary reader", especially in the interpretive process, in West's hermeneutics of liberation, is examined. The essay argues that the voices of the "ordinary readers" in the collaborative reading need to be clearly evident, so that it does not seem as though the socially engaged biblical scholar is simply reading through the "ordinary readers".*

**Key Concepts:** Hermeneutics, Gerald O West, ordinary reader, liberation

### 1. Introduction

Gerald O West's<sup>1</sup> hermeneutics of liberation arose out of the context of black struggles for liberation in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> As a hermeneutic that arose out of the "crucible" (Mosala 1986:178) of black struggles in South Africa, its focus is on the "ordinary reader" from the oppressed and marginalized communities of the black peasants and working class in South Africa. By "ordinary reader", West generally alludes, in one sense, to "all those who read the Bible pre-critically" and in a particular sense, to "those readers who are poor and marginalized" especially from black communities in South Africa (West 1999a:10, 1999b:37). Therefore, like Mosala (1986, 1989), West believes that the material condition of the poor and marginalized people of South Africa constitutes the most viable exegetical

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\* The initial comments on this article from Jeremy Punt, Louis Jonker, Dirkie Smit and Gerald O West, which helped to improve the work, are hereby acknowledged. However, I take full responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> According to his own description, West (of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) is a member of the middle class and therefore does not belong to those generally regarded as poor in the South African context. As a white man, West was a member of the privileged group during the time of black oppression in South Africa during apartheid. Therefore he sees his role as primarily that of reading "with" the poor and oppressed and empowering them to "read" for themselves. As a biblical scholar West is obviously not an "ordinary reader", because he has been trained to "read" skilfully, differently and critically, using resources and tools not available to the poor and marginalized "readers" of the Bible (see West 1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b, 1999a, 1999b, 2000 and 2002). West himself acknowledges that the mere fact that he chooses to read with the marginalized group in South Africa does not make him a marginalized white male. For says West, "I am not sure it is useful to speak of white males as being marginalized because they have chosen to work in solidarity with the marginalized" (1999d: 95). Hence, when he speaks of the "reading" strategies and resources of the "ordinary readers", he is speaking as a close observer who is involved with the "ordinary readers" but is not himself one.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Segovia of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, also argues that West's hermeneutics "belongs within the framework of traditional liberation hermeneutics – a socio-economic hermeneutics with direct and explicit reference to the context of South Africa, both in general and in particular, given its specific reference to KwaZulu-Natal" (2000:68).

starting point for any hermeneutic of liberation in the South African context.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will first offer a brief overview of the situation of the black poor and oppressed readers of the Bible in the South African context as it relates to West's hermeneutics of liberation. Next, I shall attempt to explore West's hermeneutics of liberation and the role of the "ordinary reader" in it. In the last part, I shall examine the role of the "ordinary reader" in West's hermeneutics of liberation.

## 2. The Situation of the 'Ordinary Reader'

The apparent complex and ambiguous role of the Bible in the *historical* crisis in South Africa is best expressed in an anecdote, which appears in most of West's publications on the hermeneutics of liberation,<sup>4</sup> but also has appeared in the work of the South African black theologian, Takatso Mofokeng. It says that when the white man came into our country [South Africa], he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us "Let us pray". After prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible (Mofokeng 1988:34). It is believed that both young and old among the indigenous black populations of Southern Africa know this story.<sup>5</sup> West reports that in one of its retellings, the Archbishop Emeritus, Desmond Tutu, adds: "...and we got a better deal" (1997:108-109, 1999b:9, 2002a:31).<sup>6</sup> West notes that with the above remark, Tutu clearly "lays claim to the Bible as an African book that is essentially about liberation and wholeness and therefore on the side of black South African struggles" (2002a:31).<sup>7</sup>

In the second half of the 1980s KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) – which serves to a large extent as a hermeneutical laboratory for West's Biblical hermeneutics of liberation in the South African context – was in deep political crisis (see West 1999a:34-35 for a description of the extent and nature of this political crisis).<sup>8</sup> West believes the then political situation in KZN

<sup>3</sup> In one of his most recent works (2004), West argues for a central position of the text in the interpretive process. For, he emphasises, "To circumvent the text disempowers ordinary readers of the Bible and they are forced to become dependent on the scholar" (2004:129).

<sup>4</sup> Segovia argues that the role of the Bible in the South African context as West describes it in his hermeneutics of liberation is as follows: "First, the Bible functions as a significant text in South Africa – a text that has shaped and continues to shape its history and thus a text that has played a central role in the lives of many". On the second level, argues Segovia, "the Bible also functions as an ambiguous text in South Africa – a text that has been used for both oppressive and liberating ends, that is, for and against apartheid. Third, among the poor and marginalized, the Bible has functioned and continues to function as a symbol of the presence of the God of Life in their midst" (2000:68).

<sup>5</sup> Mofokeng asserts that in this anecdote black people in South Africa, both young and the old, point to three dialectically related realities: First, they show the central role that the Bible played in the then ongoing process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation. They also confess, he claims, "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". Lastly, they express the historical commitment, says Mofokeng, "to terminate disinheritance and eradicate exploitation of humans by other humans" (1988:31).

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Tutu remarks after retelling the anecdote as follows: "On the surface, it would appear that we struck a bad bargain. However, the fact of the matter is that we came out of that transaction a great deal better off than when we started. The point is that we were given a priceless gift in the word of God, the gospel of salvation, the good news of God's utterly unconditional love for us" (1996:165).

<sup>7</sup> In several works (1976, 1978, 1984), the South African black theologian, Allan Boesak, argues that the Bible reveals God as God of the poor and oppressed. However, within Black theology itself, Itumeleng Mosala and Mofokeng reject what they call the "exegetical starting point of Black theology" based on Black theology's assumption that the Bible is the "Word of God" and so, it is essentially a book of liberation (see Mosala 1986, 1989; Mofokeng 1988 and Maluleke 1996).

<sup>8</sup> In all the research reports of the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) – a community-based research institute with which West and other biblical scholars from the University of KZN hope to "serve the poor and

impelled the *Kairos* theologians to challenge the church in South Africa to return to the Bible (whatever that meant)<sup>9</sup> “to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today” (West 1991:31, 1999a:35).<sup>10</sup> The response to this challenge within black theological circles intensified the existing interpretive crisis in South Africa. In the South African context of apartheid and struggles against it, depending on how the Bible was interpreted, it was regarded as an ideological weapon of colonization and oppression of the African indigenous people on the one hand, and as a potential weapon of liberation for the poor and oppressed, on the other. While Boesak and Tutu, among others, within the Black theology project conceded that the Bible is the “Word of God” Mosala (1986, 1989), Mofokeng (1988) and more recently Maluleke (1996) contended the Bible itself could be a problem for those who want to be free, since it played a crucial but ambiguous role in the “land theft”.<sup>11</sup> What became crucial for black theologians committed to the struggle for the liberation of blacks in South Africa was to seek for the most helpful way of interpreting the Bible so that it could become a potential weapon of struggle for the liberation of the black oppressed.

While the battle for the most helpful hermeneutical starting point for a biblical hermeneutics of liberation raged within black theology, for the uneducated black Christians, the Bible was a “potential source of power”: While it has served the white people as an ideological weapon of oppression, the blacks – especially within African Independent Churches – claim the Bible as a source of life. As an instrument of oppression and weapon for liberation, the Bible is regarded among the indigenous black people of South Africa as *poison onion, icon and oracle* (Draper 2002:39-56).<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the encounter between the Bible and blacks in the South African context is characterized by suspicion, rejection and acceptance. Hence, toward the end of the 1980s Mofokeng reports that there was a view within black theological circles that a “struggle for the control of the Bible that contains the means for ideological and spiritual subsistence” (Mofokeng 1988:39), was not the best way of dealing with the historical and interpretive crisis in South Africa. The most helpful thing to do, Mofokeng asserts, was to “insist on finding and controlling the tools of opening and interpreting the Bible as well as participating in the process of interpretation itself” (Mofokeng 1988:39). Here too the “ordinary readers” would depend on the work of trained theologians; therefore, their voice(s) were not heard, if not marginalized in Black theology’s biblical hermeneutics of liberation. For a true hermeneutics of liberation and reconstruction in the post-apartheid South Africa, therefore, West insists that the voice and role of the “ordinary readers”, the poor and oppressed (including women) of South Africa should not be sidelined or suppressed (1992a:9). His biblical hermeneutics of liberation is precisely aimed at

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oppressed” (West 1991:174) – it is clearly stated that a community of the poor and marginalized in the Pietermaritzburg area in KZN is the laboratory for West’s research on hermeneutics (see, for example, West 1991: *Appendix A and B*, 1992b, 1999a: 143-153).

<sup>9</sup> Maluleke made the same comment (1996b: 19).

<sup>10</sup> The “cry” of the *Kairos Document* was that “The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come” (*Kairos Document* 1986:1).

<sup>11</sup> For these theologians, “there are stories and texts which are basically oppressive and whose interpretation (not misinterpretation) only serves the cause of oppression”. They contend “it is (in fact) their interpretation and use for liberation that would constitute misinterpretation and misuse” (Mofokeng 1988:37).

<sup>12</sup> As Jonathan Draper of KZN University observes, while interesting readings of black theologians like Boesak and Tutu, Mofokeng and Mosala abounded, the angry black youths outside the gates of the Church asked why they should indeed read the Bible (in Maluleke 1996b: 19).

identifying the voice of the “ordinary readers”, on the one hand, and to locate the role of the “ordinary readers” in the interpretive process in biblical hermeneutics in (South) Africa, on the other. The next section offers a broad overview of West’s biblical hermeneutics of liberation in the South African context.

### 3. An Outline of West’s Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation

West’s hermeneutics emerged from his relationship with the poor and the marginalized, those he refers to as the “ordinary readers” of the Bible (1991:1). However, his project with the “ordinary readers” from a poor and marginalized community in the Pietermaritzburg area is motivated by the readings of Mosala and Boesak within black theology in the last half of the 1980s. Generally, as in Mosala, his biblical hermeneutics fall within the stream of liberation hermeneutics itself located within the post-modern paradigm. But since Mosala’s hermeneutics emerged as a possible alternative to Boesak’s hermeneutics, West attempts to build a bridge between Mosala and Boesak’s hermeneutics by drawing heavily on both Mosala and Boesak in his hermeneutics of liberation (cf. West 1991:41-141). Over and over, West refers to the works of Mosala and Boesak, among others, in the South African liberation context. Also, he draws heavily on the American biblical scholar, Vincent Wimbush (1993) from the tradition of liberation hermeneutics and on the American theologian, David Tracy (1987) from the tradition of post-modernity. A most helpful way of reading West is to first understand where he is coming from. The above preliminary comments are meant to help the reader understand West within his context.

West begins by exploring two modes of reading the Bible in the South African context of liberation. He classifies a biblical hermeneutics of liberation in the South African context according to the different modes of reading the Bible (his example is the Cain and Abel story) espoused mainly by Boesak and Mosala.<sup>13</sup> West asserts that Mosala reads the Cain and Abel story from *behind the text* and argues that Mosala locates the struggle for liberation from the behind text of Scripture, while Boesak locates liberation *in the text* and *in front of the text* (1991:45-59). He contends that all these three modes of reading the Bible in the South African context are shaped by the social and pragmatic factors arising from the situation of the poor and oppressed in South Africa. However, he argues, the voice(s) of the poor and the marginalized for whom biblical interpretation was done in the South African context is silenced in the three modes of reading the Bible in black theological circles

<sup>13</sup> The terms “modes of reading”, the “ordinary reader” and the relationship between the readings – “behind the text”, “the text” and “in front of the text” – are not self-explanatory. Therefore, it is important to first define briefly, what these terms mean. Modes of reading the text refer to the different sociological and historical readings of the biblical text. In West’s categorization these readings would include reading behind the text, reading the text and reading in front of the text (1991b:88). The ordinary reader is used to allude “to the shift in hermeneutics towards the reader” (1991b:89). West uses the phrase “reader” metaphorically also to include “the many who are illiterate, but who listen to discussions and retell the Bible” (1991b:89). The term “ordinary” is used generally and specifically to include “all readers who read the Bible pre-critically” and to “designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, these readers who are poor and oppressed (of course including women)” (1991b:89). The liberation paradigmatic shape of West’s hermeneutical method gives the “particular usage precedence over the general usage” (1991b:89). The “relationship between” refers to the differences and similarities that exist between the ordinary untrained (those whom West sometimes refers to as non-persons) reader and the trained biblical readers (1991a:139-141, 1991a:89-91, 1992b:5-10). The reading behind the text includes historical and sociological modes of readings. The focus here, says West, is “on historical and sociological reconstructions themselves”. Put differently, this refers to “reading the text in the light of historical and sociological reconstructions” or, as in the case of Mosala (1989), a “particular historical and sociological analysis of method” (West 1991a:88). Reading in front of the text focuses “on the themes of the biblical world produced and projected by the text” (1991b:89).

(1991:142). Since the situation of the poor and oppressed is the central axis upon which the whole liberation hermeneutical debate in the South African context rotates, West insists that the voice(s) of the poor and marginalized cannot be ignored. His conviction is that, whether one subscribes to the paradigm of Boesak and others that the Bible is the revealed “Word of God” (1976, 1978 and 1984), or to the historical materialist paradigm identified with Mosala (1986 and 1989), or to the historical pragmatic method of Maimela (1991), the “ideological nature of all interpretation [and] all texts (including the biblical texts)” and the role of the “ordinary reader” in the interpretive process are no longer in dispute (West 1992b:4, 1999a:64-65).<sup>14</sup> But since the “ordinary reader” is “unstable” – just as the historical situation of all blacks (interpreters) makes it difficult for them to offer a stable interpretation – West contends that the unstable memoirs of the poor and oppressed can be recovered through the behind the text reading of Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, West suggests that we recover the past by reading the Bible within at least three parameters: i) the ideological nature of the biblical text, ii) accountability to “ordinary readers” of the Bible in present communities of faith and struggle in South Africa, iii) continuity with the ordinary people in the past communities of faith and struggle *in* and *behind* the biblical text (1991a:143-16 and 1992:3, 1991b:87-110). He agrees with Gustavo Gutierrez (1973), associated with liberation hermeneutics, and with Michael Foucault, with the post-modern tradition, among others, that absolute objectivity and neutrality are impossible. West notes that “the influence of reader-response criticism in biblical studies, the commitment to grant an epistemological privilege to the poor and oppressed in the liberation paradigm, and the consensus in post-modernism that there is no epistemologically privileged position, variously challenge us with the voices of the poor and oppressed. The poor and oppressed cannot and will not be ignored” (1992a:3, see also his argument in 1991a:140-180). Since there is a consensus at least within the liberation paradigm and within the tradition of post-modernism that the biblical text is not free of ideologies, West proposes that the role of the “ordinary reader” could best be elucidated by identifying at least two moments in the interpretive task: i) a hermeneutical task which requires “a hermeneutic of suspicion through which we have to face the actuality of the ideologies in ourselves and in the Bible itself”, and ii) “a hermeneutic of trust which includes *accountability* to the present communities of faith and struggle, and continuity with the past communities of faith and struggle in and behind the biblical text” (1992b:5 cf. 1999a, 1999b). A most helpful way of doing this, West claims, is to follow in the footsteps of scholars such as Tracy (1987), Mosala (1986, 1989), Cain Hope Felder (1989) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), among others, who argue for *critical modes of reading* the Bible, irrespective of the way they read, i.e. “whether their focus is behind the text, on the text, or in front of the text” (1992b:5) they all seem to be committed to the situation of the poor and oppressed in the text and in their various contexts (1992b:6).

West asserts that the unanimous decision in post-modernism to grant an epistemological option for the poor and oppressed is ethical. Given the post-modern state of the poor and

<sup>14</sup> West here concurs with David Tracy, when the latter asserts that “we are in the midst of a deconstructive drive designed to expose the radical instability of all texts and the inevitable intertextuality of all seemingly autonomous texts. The once stable author has been replaced by the unstable reader” (1987:12).

<sup>15</sup> However, West argues consistently for an equal place to be given to literary modes of reading because literary modes of reading are more “egalitarian” and “empowering” than socio-historical approaches especially when reading “with” “ordinary readers” of the Bible (2004:128). Elsewhere in this same work he states emphatically that “I do not want to grant any privilege to historical modes of reading”. (2004:131). This represents a shift away from West’s earlier position (1991, 1992a, 1992b) that stresses historical modes of reading the Bible.

oppressed – especially in the South African context – West argues that it will be out of place to think that the option for the poor and oppressed is an epistemological question and not an ethical one, as Frostin apparently argued (1988:6 cf. West 1992a:2-3). Hence, West maintains that “there are no objective and universal grounds on which to grant the poor and oppressed an epistemological privilege; rather the decision to grant the poor and oppressed an epistemological privilege is an ethical decision” (1992a:3). However, he does not state the objective and universal grounds upon which the ethical decision to opt for the oppressed is based. Rather, he argues that “whereas Western biblical and theological hermeneutics would see such a decision as too particularistic, liberation hermeneutics embrace the particular historical consciousness of the poor and oppressed”. (1992a:2). He concurs with Welch (1985) and argues that such a choice is an “ethic of risk” but adds quickly: “From a post-modern perspective, the risk lay not in having made a particular choice, but in taking sides and standing in solidarity with marginal communities”. This is because, for Welch, “those who choose to stand with the universal humanity tend to stand with the status quo and an *ethic of control*” [my italics] (cited in West 1992a:2-3). West argues in favour of liberation hermeneutics and insists that the “epistemological privilege” of the poor and oppressed is his starting point.

Therefore, he identifies two moments of the poor and oppressed in liberation hermeneutics. They are “continuity and accountability to present communities of the poor and oppressed” (1992a:2). Within the matrix of continuity and accountability, West attempts an exploration of the role of historical consciousness in liberation hermeneutics from two perspectives. First, he does so from the perspective of “the role of the suppressed or subjugated historical consciousness in the development of biblical tradition”. Secondly, he does so from the perspective of “the place of subjugated historical consciousness in the development of a constructive hermeneutics for a transformed South Africa” (1992a:2).

With the above proposal, West attempts to replace what is “missing”, according to him, in his South African context: The “voice(s) of the poor” or the voices of those whom he calls the “ordinary readers” (1991b:87-110). In an essay, “The Relationship between Different Modes of Reading (the Bible) and the Ordinary Reader”, West provides what he calls an “interface” between the trained reader and the “ordinary reader”. Put in another way, he explores the “responses of ordinary readers to the different modes of reading emerging from biblical scholarship” (1991b:87). Hence, West proposes that liberation hermeneutics should take place within the parameters of the ideological nature of the biblical text, continuity with past and present communities of faith from behind the text and accountability to the present communities of faith (1991, 1991b, 1992a).

Methodologically, West suggests that we begin by identifying with “ordinary readers” of any given community of faith. He contends that “ordinary readers” of the Bible (at least a majority of them) read the Bible “pre-critically”. This is because “ordinary readers”, West argues, have little choice in how they read the Bible (1991b:90, 1992b:8-12). He further argues that “ordinary readers” in the South African context read the Bible pre-critically, because they have not been trained “in critical modes of reading” (1991b:90). Regarding the relationship between the “ordinary readers” and expert readers, West argues that although there are important similarities between the modes of reading of “ordinary readers” and the modes of reading of expert readers, there are nevertheless crucial differences, namely, that “ordinary readers” read the “Bible pre-critically, while the three modes of reading I have outlined are all critical (or post-critical) readings of the Bible” (1991b:90). In this way, West concurs with Mofokeng (1988) that the historical materialist mode of reading proposed by Mosala (1986, 1989) is too advanced for the ordinary

working-class peasants of South Africa.<sup>16</sup> He uses the term “ordinary readers” sometimes to designate the poor and oppressed and the ordinary working-class peasants (1992b:10). He argues on the basis of results obtained from the research conducted by his Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) that ordinary people appropriate the Bible literary (pre-critically). They read the Bible in the context of their perceived reality, with a commitment to the Bible community and to socio-political transformation (1992b:10-11).<sup>17</sup>

Emphasizing the role of the “ordinary reader”, West suggests that for a proper understanding of how “ordinary” Africans read, receive and appropriate the Bible, we need to return to the early contact of the African indigenous people with the Bible in its formative years (2002a:23-37). He argues in this essay (2002a:23-37) that in the early reception of the Bible Africans appropriated the Bible to their culture literary. West shows in that essay how the people of Southern Africa received the Bible as a *Bola*.<sup>18</sup>

West and Frostin argue for the commitment to the past and present communities of faith (Frostin 1988:6-10; West 1991, 1991s; 1992b). For them the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed, beginning with their view of reality and their experiences, needs and questions, is the starting point for theological hermeneutics of liberation in Africa (West 1992b:11). Hence, West proposes that the historical understanding of how the indigenous poor and oppressed people of South Africa received and appropriated the Bible is crucial for liberation hermeneutics in the South African context.

Since West opts for an interpretation of how the poor and oppressed in Africa read and appropriated the Bible in formative years of the Bible in Africa, he also argues that an African biblical hermeneutics should take place within the parameters of continuity with the past and present communities of faith. The present realities of the poor and the oppressed communities of faith should be linked, West suggests, to the realities of the poor and oppressed communities of faith silenced in the text, but retrievable through the “behind the text” mode of reading (1991b:96). Thus, West contends that identification of the ideological nature of the biblical text is a *sine qua non* for a viable hermeneutics of the poor and oppressed but that should not be done at the initial stage of reading “with”. He also stresses the importance of giving an equal place to the literary mode of reading since most “ordinary readers” from marginalized communities read “pre-critically” (1995).

A reading “behind the text” is important to the poor and oppressed communities of faith in Africa because it helps, among other things, to check the abuses of the text by the poor and others, West asserts (1991b:90-96). He notes from the report of ISB that “it was felt that some knowledge of the historical and socio-political context of the text would empower the communities not only to interpret the text against their background themselves, but also to identify when others misuse the text against them” (1991b:96). West states, however, that the “behind the text” reading requires resources and training that the “ordinary reader” communities do not have. The danger is that the “ordinary readers” will have to depend on conclusions drawn by “experts” with all the manipulations of the “outside expert input” (1991b:96 cf. 2004:129,131,132). According to the report, the reading of the text facilitates accountability to the “ordinary readers”. This is because

<sup>16</sup> Compare a similar comment made by Maluleke (1996).

<sup>17</sup> If “ordinary” Africans read the Bible in the context of their perceived reality, is it not to say that they are reading the Bible “critically,” or better put, in an African “critical” way? Perhaps they will raise questions as to what the texts have to say to their perceived realities. This is in a way critical thinking.

<sup>18</sup> A *Bola* is a dice that the old indigenous Southern African people hung around their necks to enable them to see and predict the future. Since the Bible speaks about the future hope and life of the Christian, the Africans regarded the Bible as the Bola of the white man.

reading the text starts with the text as “ordinary” people know it, and would read the text as it is which is the way in which most “ordinary readers” read the text (1991a:142-163, 1991b:96, 2003:23-23-37; cf. Draper 2002:39-56). The reading of the text also, according to the report, encourages the critical reading of the Bible that will further discourage selective uses of the Bible among communities of “ordinary readers” and by their oppressors (1991b:97). One problem with the reading of the text is that there might still be a problem in engaging the communities of the poor with the text, especially as it may be difficult to determine the relevance of the text to the contexts of the communities of the poor and oppressed (1991b:97).

The reading “in front of” the text encourages “ordinary readers” to concentrate on specific themes visible in the text. This facilitates easy appropriation of the text to the readers’ context (1991b:98). The weakness of this mode of reading, says the report, is that unless the “ordinary readers” read the Bible as a whole, the “in front of” the text reading selects themes in an isolated text and would not promote the dominant theme of liberation from the “in front of” the text mode of reading (1991b:98). For continuity with the past and present communities and future reconstruction, West suggests that it is crucial to provide a discourse on the poor and the dominated through an interpretation that takes place within the parameters he identified.

As a way forward in the ongoing process of reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa, West believes (cf. Cochrane 1991:63) that “there is no hope where the memory of suffering is silenced, leaving traces of suppressed dialogue, festering in the bloodstreams of the social whole” (1992a:8). Therefore, he maintains that “at this time in our history, the church in South Africa is in need of a prophetic vision which goes beyond protest and which is prepared to be selective. Neither the *Kairos Document* nor the *Road to Damascus* [his emphasis] really go beyond protest, yet our present situation calls for a prophetic vision of the future, which arises from and is constituted by the historical consciousness of the poor and oppressed”. In the same way, West continues, “the poor and the oppressed (including women) interpreters of the Bible have reconstructed or refurbished their Christian faith through the reconstruction, recovery, and arousal of their suppressed past, so too the suppressed past of the poor and oppressed (including women) in South Africa must play a significant role in the reconstruction of our society” (1992b:9).

With the above point West contends that the task of the church (and by implication that of the biblical interpreter) is not only to identify and constantly remember the “dangerous memoirs” of the poor and oppressed subjugated people of Africa, but to also reconstruct them in hope for the future. Hence, West insists that biblical interpretation in Africa should take place within the matrix of accountability to the past and present communities of faith and the reconstruction for future communities of faith (1991a, 1991b, 1992b, 1996, 2002b). The last section briefly offers my own comments on, and evaluation of, what West calls the role of the “ordinary reader” in his hermeneutics.

#### **4. Evaluation of the Role of the ‘Ordinary Reader’**

As previously, mentioned, West’s main interest is to explore and discover the interpretive “interface” between socially engaged biblical scholars and the “ordinary readers” of the Bible, and the creative reading resources they both bring to the reading “with” (2004:127). Methodologically he has discovered, among other things, “an important place for socio-historical resources” in the collaborative reading between the “ordinary readers” and the socially engaged biblical scholars. There is also an interpretive interface between biblical

scholars and “ordinary readers” of the Bible. Although “ordinary readers” do not have the skills the trained biblical scholars have to adopt critical modes of reading the Bible, it is clear from West’s works that the “ordinary readers” of the Bible have their own reading resources that they bring to the reading encounter with biblical scholars. Therefore it is arguably clear that, at least methodologically, there is an interpretive “interface” between “ordinary readers” – who read pre-critically – and socially engaged biblical scholars – who read critically – in the context of struggles and reconstruction in (South) Africa. It is clear (from West’s works) that reading “with” has helped the “ordinary readers” to discern the presence of poor and marginalized communities (like them) in the text and behind the biblical text with whom they could identify. Whether the “ordinary readers” are able to do that on their own remains to be seen.

In many of his publications, West emphasizes the point that the “ordinary readers” are not trained in the critical way of reading the Bible (1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). This explains why he suggests that “ordinary readers” develop [“with” socially engaged biblical scholar] critical tools so that they are empowered to do their own critical analysis of the text (context) (1992b:6). Yet, it is clear from a study done by West’s Contextual Bible Study group that the “ordinary readers” in fact, do read the Bible and their own context critically (1999a:144-153). If this is the case, are these Africans then reading as “ordinary readers”? Compare West’s definition of “ordinary readers” at the beginning of the essay. Responding to the view that “critical” is a Western concept and not an African concept, West argues that “critical is a Western concept in so far as it refers to the legacy of modernity, characterized by various forms of criticisms like critical thinking, historical critical biblical scholarship and so on” (2002b:147-148). If this is so, why is West using the concept “critical” to describe the way that “ordinary” Africans read the Bible? If the concept “critical” is understood as modern critical thinking and historical criticism that are obviously removed from African constructs and way of thinking, how could one imagine that Africans were to read the Bible critically? In addition, if this is not expected of Africans, then is it fair to say that they read the Bible pre-critically or un-critically? Can there be another way of describing an African way of reading the Scriptures without necessarily using Western criteria to determine their ability (or lack thereof) to read the Bible critically? Just because Africans do not read the Bible critically in the Western sense of the word does not necessarily mean that they read the Bible literary.

Perhaps West is speaking of the historical materialist reading of Mosala, which insists the liberating message of the Bible emerges from behind the text. If this is the case, by critical reading in this sense West means to allude to the “behind the text” mode of reading the Bible. But West more recently argues in favour of literary reading than historical modes of reading especially when it comes to reading “with” “ordinary readers”. Referring specifically to the weaknesses of historical modes of reading in collaborative reading, West says: “The first remark I want to make has to do with the danger such modes of reading present to the collaborative reading process. Socio-historical modes of reading tend to retain an aura of objectivity that is missing with literary modes”. For, he continues, “ordinary readers quickly realize that they can contest the interpretation of text, particularly when they are working with Bible translations in their own vernaculars”. Nevertheless, “even well organized and articulate ordinary readers tend to defer to the socio-historical expert in their midst” (2004:132). This is so especially because what good will it do – in the present context of reconstruction with the need for “healing” of the past wounds – for “ordinary readers” to simply discover – from socio-historical reading – that the Bible is an

ideological book? Will this not lead to more suspicion of the Bible and its subsequent rejection than acceptance? Perhaps these hypothetical questions may have contributed to West's critique of Mosala's materialist mode of reading, where he remarks "one could argue that the truth for a reading which focuses behind the text is the social scientific evidence which supports that reading, but what kinds of truth claims could one make concerning literary, canonical, or thematic/symbolic readings?" (1991a:60). More importantly, West asks what are the implications of Boesak's affirmation of the Bible as the "Word of God" in his literary reading of the Bible and Mosala's suspicion (perhaps even rejection) of the biblical tradition' in his historical materialist mode of reading in the black communities struggles? There is no doubt that the Bible remains an important book for the "ordinary readers" in Africa. It is also clear from West's publications that "ordinary readers" do read the Bible in their own way (1996b:40-49).

However, in the interpretive encounter between the "ordinary readers" and the socially engaged biblical scholar, the contributions of the "ordinary readers" are limited, in most instances, to selection of text and literary application of those texts to their context. A question may be raised as follows: What is the precise influence of the "ordinary readers" on the biblical scholars, especially during the collaborative reading? West makes it clear what difference it makes (for socially engaged biblical scholars) when they read with "ordinary readers", but it is not clear from his works what difference it made for "ordinary readers" to read with biblical scholars (see, for example, 1991a:173-180, 1999a:109-142, 1999b:40-49, 1999c:94-100, 1999e:49-66). A further question to ask would be who does the analysis of how the "ordinary readers" read with the socially trained biblical scholars? It is obvious that it is the biblical scholars that have the skills and resources necessary to do this kind of analysis (see West 1991b). If this is the case, when could "ordinary readers" be able, on their own, to compare the readings of the biblical scholars against their own? I propose that in the interpretive process, the "ordinary readers" should be allowed to test their own reading over against those of the biblical scholars. The "ordinary readers" should preferably compile their own reports of such an exercise. In this way their role in the interpretive process will be more self-evident. In addition, the "ordinary readers" will be better placed to serve the biblical scholars by providing them with the opportunity to see how much of a critical reading they could do.

While West is outstanding among contextual biblical scholars in the South African context – for his commitment to "ordinary readers" of the Bible and how they do "read" the text and their contexts – it is not clear in his hermeneutics where (how) "ordinary readers" have done their own self-critical reading of the Bible. Perhaps it is not the goal of West to make "ordinary readers" critical biblical scholars, however, as he rightly observes (1992a, 1992b), for effective transformation to take place in South Africa after a decade of democracy, it is time that the "ordinary readers" actually speak for themselves as to how they are reading the Bible. Such works should show both self-criticism as well as criticisms of the biblical scholars by the "ordinary readers". I say this because I am persuaded that, in their own way, the "ordinary readers" too read critically.

At this time of biblical scholarship in Africa – when the majority of "readers" of the Bible, though untrained, teach, preach and retell the Bible – it is imperative to learn from the "ordinary readers" themselves how they do their own "reading". It is time to "walk", for "the Child itself feels it must walk ...". (Jeremiah Mzimba cited in Maluleke 2000:229). While I contend that the "ordinary readers" will always need the services of the biblical scholars, it is nevertheless necessary for the "ordinary readers" to begin to walk by themselves, so that in the future they will not have to always lean on the biblical scholars. In the

meantime, they should articulate with their own “voices” to let the *others* see how they read with biblical scholars and among themselves. This is important, so that it would not seem as though the socially engaged biblical scholars are simply reading through the “ordinary readers”, but the “ordinary readers” are actually doing their own reading.

## 5. Conclusion

In the first part I tried to explore the context of West’s hermeneutics of liberation and reconstruction in the South African context. In the second part I offered an overview of West’s hermeneutics. The third part briefly explored the role of those whom West describes as “ordinary readers” in the interpretive process. The next section offered a review of the role of the “ordinary readers” in the interpretive process. I argue that the voices of the poor and marginalized (“ordinary readers”) need to be clearly heard. I propose that other African biblical scholars (especially from north of the Limpopo River) should consider contributing to this very important project, so that in the near future, “ordinary readers” from all of Africa could “read” on their own. For the “ordinary readers” too must “walk”!

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