

J, E, D, P AND THE RDP: BIBLICAL SOURCES FOR TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

At a time when enigmatic titles are trendy there is no need to account for a title such as this article carries. But I do want to explain how I came to the title because the explanation has at its center a major (implicit) concern within Biblical Studies. What are biblical scholars doing when they read the Bible? This is a complex and difficult question to answer, but we can begin to approach an answer by briefly examining a case of a biblical scholars reading. Carol Meyers, for instance, is interested in a detailed historical and sociological reconstruction of the society behind the text and of the life of women in such a society. In order to accomplish this task an interdisciplinary approach including feminist scholarship and social scientific (mainly sociological, anthropological, and archaeological) research is used.¹

Introduction

Meyers recognises that the Bible 'as a source presents problems of omission in its treatment of women as individuals or as a group. Its androcentric bias and also its urban, elite orientation mean that even the information it contains may be a distortion or misrepresentation of the lives of women removed from urban centers and bureaucratic families' (Meyers 1988:13). However, a behind the text reading recovers the average Israelite woman, who is neither named nor described in the biblical text (Meyers 1988:14).

In her readings, Meyers concentrates on the premonarchic period for two reasons: first, it is the period of Israelite existence which is best known in terms of its social configurations, and second, and more significantly for the purposes of this paper, it is the formative era in the long story of the biblical people (Meyers 1988:14). Her detailed and careful reconstructions of the life of ordinary women in this period lead her to conclude that while incipient gender hierarchies may have existed even in earliest Israel, and were certainly present in the monarchic period, yet, female power deriving from the various roles (economic and other) played by women in the complex peasant households enabled them to minimize or offset whatever formal authority was held by males. Assumptions of male dominance and female subservience in ancient Israel, derived from formal texts and from postbiblical traditions, may be part of the 'myth' of male control masking a situation of male dependence. Gender relationships are the consequence of complex influences, involving specific social and economic arrangements; reconstructing the internal dynamics of a society thus is the only legitimate way to dispel the

1 This does not mean that Meyers pays no attention to literary aspects of the text; quite to the contrary, Meyers demonstrates considerable sensitivity to the literary dimensions of the text (Meyers 1988:chapters 4-5).

'myth' and to increase the visibility of Eve. Our examination of Israelite society allows us to see Eve as a figure no less powerful than her male counterpart (Meyers 1988:181).

What Meyers' does is clear. In the Bible, which is the ideological record of ancient Israel, we glimpse traces of the lives of powerful ordinary women (Meyers 1988:71). But their lives can only be rediscovered and reclaimed by reading behind the text. What this mode of reading reveals is a picture of ordinary women in their context. Meyers continually makes the point that understanding biblical texts requires that we interpret them from the perspective of their ancient context and not from the perspective of our modern context. Understanding the contextual reality of the Israelites, particularly the contextual reality of Israelite women, is thus 'central to interpreting the original message and function' of a particular text (Meyers 1988:93,120).

What this mode of reading contributes to women's struggles today Meyers expresses as follows:

If the egalitarian values and patterns that ~ prevailed during those prestate centuries are to have any meaning for later generations, including our own, this recovery of Everywoman Eve's life and context should make the nonhierarchical position of women a visible and enduring model, as are the other widely acclaimed theological and social innovations and accomplishments, of early Israel (Meyers 1988:188).

And as Meyers' final comments indicate, other scholars too have found 'visible and enduring models' for today in ancient biblical sources. Norman Gottwald makes a similar point, from a slightly different angle, when he argues that as socio-scientific study of the origins of Israel penetrates more and more deeply to the circumstances and dynamics of Yahwism's emergence, the integral social-revolutionary character of Yahwism comes more clearly to light and thereby once again challenges the synagogues and churches with the disturbing implications and consequences of claiming continuity with a religion sprung from such roots (Gottwald 1979:597).

For Meyers biblical sources provide useful resources for women today who are struggling against oppression and marginalisation and who choose to stay in continuity with the biblical tradition. For Gottwald biblical sources provide a challenge to those who claim to be in continuity with the biblical tradition but who participate in and perpetuate systems of domination.² For both scholars biblical sources are a resource for present communities in continuity with the biblical tradition.

We know that it is not only scholars who use biblical sources as resources. Although they do it differently, ordinary readers of the Bible use biblical sources regularly to construct the 'working' readings and theologies that they live by. This process of re-using received sources is also a part of the biblical tradition itself. There are many examples, but a readily recognisable one is 'the Exodus'. Gottwald charts an early occurrence of 'exodus' sources, what he calls 'the Moses traditions', being of use to the newly emerging Israelite society in Canaan.

2 Each would also support the emphasis of the other.

The full dimensions of the socioreligious attraction of the Moses traditions for the confederacy of Israel ... has to be explained with reference to lines of connection drawn between the *critical problems* faced by the Moses group and by later Israel and with reference to the lines of connection between the *socioreligious strategies* for coping with those problems developed respectively by the earlier migratory and later sedentary communities

These earliest of sources, comprising a religio-political contract or covenant, socio-economic and ritual laws, and God-as-Yahweh, become resources for subsequent communities, and in the process are taken up into other more familiar sources (J, E, D, and P), which in turn are used again and again in various forms by communities in continuity with these traditions, including Mark's New Testament community (Draper 1995) and present communities in many contexts, perhaps even for us and the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme),³ whenever 'lines of connection' can be found.

This is what biblical scholars do: they trace 'lines of connection' between texts and between ancient contexts and texts. Socially engaged biblical scholars go further; they also identify 'lines of connection' between past texts and contexts and texts and contexts of present communities. So J, E, D, P and the RDP are not that far apart; there are possible 'lines of connection' between them. Having got from J, E, D, P to the RDP I can now concentrate on a more detailed analysis of the 'lines of connection' that link them.

Interpretative interests

Biblical scholars have a range of what can helpfully be called interpretive interests (see Stout 1982 and Fowl 1990). In order to bring some clarity into discussions about textual interpretation Jeffrey Stout proposes that we use a form of Quinean explication with regard to the problematic term 'meaning'. Explication can be seen 'as a means for exchanging more troublesome for less troublesome terms. Good explications ... tell us how to translate theories from familiar but confusing idioms into idioms better suited to our purposes' (Stout 1982:2).

What, then, might our concerns be when we inquire about the meaning of a text? We might, for example, be interested in the author's intentions in a text, or in the narrative shape of a text, or in the text as a product of a particular mode of production (see Lategan 1984).

So, then, we can replace the term 'meaning' with the term 'interpretive interest'. While different uses of the term 'meaning' in Biblical Studies, for example, 'all bear in one way or another on the interpretation of texts', they do not, Stout argues, 'pick out the same aspect or feature of texts as the common

3 'The RDP is an instrument for transforming government and society. It is intended to make government more transparent and accountable to the people. It also transforms society to take the leading role and responsibility for their own development in the process of reconstructing South Africa. The RDP is an integrated programme, based on people, that will provide peace and security for all and build a nation. It links reconstruction and development and deepens democracy - these are the basic principles of the RDP' (from an information brochure issued by the Minister without Portfolio, 21 September 1994).

topic for inquiry'. 'Interpretive interest' points to what 'meaning' hides (Stout 1982:6).

The aim, for Stout, of explicating 'meaning' in terms of interpretive interests is to show that some of our most intractable disagreements about textual meaning are not really disagreements about the same thing. What we thought to be one topic is really several topics (see Fowl 1990:385). So Stout's proposal is that we dissolve disputes about the meaning of texts by explicating these disputes in terms of interpretive interests (see also Rorty 1985 and Mailloux 1985).

This analysis is helpful in clarifying the plurality of interpretive interests that constitute the terrain of Biblical Studies. Elsewhere, I have taken the analysis further, following Stout and Stephen Fowl, and argued that there are no grounds for granting any particular interpretive interest epistemological privilege, even in contexts where the Bible is used for struggles of survival, liberation, and life (West 1995:131-173). I now want to revisit this discussion, but with another question: why do poor and marginalised readers of the Bible find the interpretive interests of socially engaged biblical scholars useful?

This question arises from my work in the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB). The ISB is an interface between socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible in poor and marginalised communities. Although the ISB has a particular history, it shares with other similar interfaces in different contexts the remarkable reality that poor and marginalised readers of the Bible invite socially engaged biblical scholars to read the Bible with them. Why is this? What is the usefulness of the interpretive interests of biblical scholars for such communities?

Interpretive interests and social interests

The readings that take place in such an interface are not easy to track, and so my reflection on these questions is tentative and preliminary. But a useful place to start addressing these questions is where the interpretive and social interests of the socially engaged biblical scholar intercept.

Most biblical scholars are fairly overt about their interpretive interests, even if they do not reflect analytically on them. However, biblical scholars are usually much more covert about their social interests. Fortunately, the advocacy stance of socially engaged biblical scholars foregrounds social interests, and so one is able to examine the relationship between their interpretive and social interests.

The biblical scholars who are called by the poor and marginalised to read the Bible with them tend, as I have indicated, to be those who are in solidarity with them as they struggle for survival, liberation, and life. They also tend to be those who stand in some form of continuity with the Bible (West 1995:103-130). Of course, their interpretive interests shape the form that this continuity takes. Those, like Meyers and Gottwald, who have interpretive interests behind the text in history and sociology, for example, emphasise continuity with aspects of the reconstructed societies that produced the text. Similarly, those with various types of literary interests concentrate on continuity with elements of the world of the text.

The social interests of socially engaged biblical scholars, partially constituted as they are by their solidarity with the poor and marginalised, shape the questions that they bring to the biblical text, but they do not necessarily determine their interpretive interests. So, for example, biblical scholars in solidarity with the struggle of women will bring the experiences, needs, questions, and resources of women to the Bible, but they do this differently. Elizabeth Schyussler Fiorenza reconstructs the social reality of first century women (Schyussler Fiorenza 1983), Phyllis Trible tells untold tales of textual terror in which women are victims (Trible 1984) and Sandra Schneiders inhabits the world of God's project of liberation for women in front of the text (Schneiders 1989). While some socially engaged scholars would want to privilege their particular reading methodology (see Fiorenza 1983 and Mosala 1989), this, I would argue, is not their crucial contribution. The usefulness of their readings to others lies in the various forms of continuity with (parts of) the biblical tradition, whatever the mode of reading used, that their readings generate. This statement requires further explanation, especially the words in brackets.

Socially engaged biblical scholars are probably more aware than most that the Bible is no innocent text. Mosala, for example, 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 they have not always recognised the ideological agendas of the dominant classes that usually direct the new usage (Mosala 1989:101). From her literary perspective Trible makes a similar point, stressing that 'the patriarchal stamp of scripture is permanent' (Trible 1978:202). And the in front of the text readings of Schneiders too confront 'the oppressiveness in the text' (Schneiders 1989:9). Consequently, continuity - 'lines of connection' - with the biblical tradition is no easy matter.

But because the biblical tradition is in some sense still 'meaningful, powerful, and true' (Cady 1986) for such socially engaged biblical scholars, they use their interpretive interests to locate *parts of* the biblical tradition which they can remain in continuity with. This task is not only shaped by their solidarity with the social interests of the poor and marginalised communities that partially constitute their experience, but also by their accountability to the scholarly communities in which their interpretive interests are situated. In the case of Mosala, for example, this involves using historical-critical and sociological (historical materialist) tools in order to locate those layers or sources that are the products of the oppressed classes. Trible uses the resources of a literary approach - the rhetorical formation of sentences, episodes, and scenes, as well as overall design and plot structure, and the portrayal of characters (Trible 1984:3-4) - to uncover a counterliterature of neglected themes and untold tales. By understanding the text 'as a mediation of meaning that takes place as event in the reader' (Schneiders 1989:5), Schneiders decontextualizes and then recontextualizes the text by bringing different experiences and questions to the reading process and in so doing is invited to inhabit a symbolic structure with a surplus of meaning.

Different interpretive interests, therefore, provide different ways of locating parts of the biblical tradition that are meaningful, powerful, and true for socially engaged biblical scholars. And, I want to argue, it is precisely these resources that are potentially useful to poor and marginalised readers. So we will need to return

now to the interface between poor and marginalised readers of the Bible and socially engaged biblical scholars.

Articulating incipient readings

Contextual Bible study work in South Africa has begun to recognize that something like James Scott's more nuanced analysis of domination and resistance is a more adequate and accurate understanding of our experience. Subordinate groups, it seems, are already engaged in forms of resistance and already have a language. 'The culture of silence' of the poor and marginalised 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 is done in ways determined by the dominated.

There does not appear to be a silence to break or a language to create. Resisting and potentially liberating and life-giving readings (and theologies) are already present *in some form* in communities of the poor and marginalized, even if they are often *incipient* (see Cochrane 1995). It would seem that the interface between socially engaged biblical scholars and poor and marginalised readers of the Bible, as found for example in the work of the ISB, provides group processes, critical resources, and a safe social site in which the unarticulated (and primarily religious) responses to domination of individuals are given expression in language, symbol, and ritual, and, if they carry effective meaning for the group, become the social property of the group (see West 1996).

There are a number of elements which can be identified here. Contextual Bible study seems to provide a *safe sequestered site* in which an offstage subculture can articulate a counterideology. For each subaltern, to use Spivak's term (Spivak 1988), who knows more or less what attitudes and values lie behind her 'working' readings and theology and, if less reliably, what lies behind those of other subalterns in her group (Scott 1990:67), contextual Bible study provides both a place and the democratic group processes for discerning whether her 'working' readings and theology resonate with and are representative of the group.

The hidden transcript, as Scott reminds us, is never a language apart. It is in constant argument with dominant discourses (135), continually demanding some form of response to material exploitation, colonialism, sexism, and racism, even if this response must often take a disguised form. But because the argument demands a presence in the public transcript it must of necessity 'borrow heavily from the terms of the dominant ideology prevailing in the public transcript'; however, in the artful hands of the dominated the dominant discourse 'is capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive of their use as intended by the dominant' (102-103). This explains why in contextual Bible study initial responses of participants to texts and themes may appear to conform to the public transcript. The contextual Bible study group is, after all, not initially a secure site, often bringing together as it does people who may not already have close relationships. However, as trust grows a more nuanced listening usually discloses a more ambiguous and polysemic expression that is capable of two readings, one which is innocuous, so providing an avenue of retreat if challenged, and one which is subversive, 'smuggling ... portions of the hidden transcript, suitably veiled, onto the public stage' (157).

The presence of socially engaged biblical scholars is another element in this process of what is incipient becoming the social property of the group. There is, it would seem, a role for Gramsci's organic intellectual or Max Weber's 'pariah-intelligentsia' (Weber 1964). Not only are they the bearers of additional useful critical resources (see below), but they usually *inhabit the boundary regions* which are the site of 'unremitting struggle' between the dominant and the dominated (Scott 1990:14). Boundaries are dangerous, precisely because of their ambiguity (Schreiter 1985:66), and so are those who cross boundaries. So, as I have repeatedly argued, it is only the 'called' and 'converted' biblical scholar who may be of service to poor and marginalised communities - those who have betrayed the hidden discourse of the dominant and who have chosen to be partially constituted by the hidden discourse of the dominated.⁴

Boundary crossers not only contribute spatially, helping to chart more clearly where the boundaries are; in crossing the boundaries between communities of the poor and marginalized in time, socially engaged biblical scholars are able to identify 'lines of connection' between particular past and present communities of faith (Schreiter 1985:18). Which brings me to my main point.

Contextual Bible study also offers *additional critical resources* for readings that resonate with the lived experience and working theologies of poor and marginalised believers. Our research has shown that while poor and marginalized ordinary readers do have critical resources for interpreting their texts and contexts, they do not have the historical, sociological, literary, or symbolic tools to be critical of the biblical text in the same way as biblical scholars (West 1995:198-200; Scott 1990:116; Wimbush 1991). These various interpretive interests provide systematic and structured sets of questions which can be brought to the biblical text and which might enable what is incipient to become the social property of the group. Let me explain more fully.

Alternative access to the tradition

Local communities of poor and marginalised believers have their own hermeneutics of survival with which they 'read' the Bible and construct their 'working' theologies (see Williams 1993:194-199). In some cases these readings and theologies resonate with the readings and theologies of their churches; but often they do not, and so they have to be disguised and hidden. People then, for example, belong to the Anglican church by day and to a Zionist church by night - if they are fortunate enough to find a place to belong to by night where their incipient 'working' theology resonates with the 'official' theology of the church. Yet even here, in this marginal site, there may not be a place for the readings and theologies of some - for example, of women.

When official or received readings are not meaningful, powerful, and true, then ordinary readers only have their own resources for rereading the biblical tradition. For many this may mean a constant sense of discontinuity between their 'working' readings and theologies and the tradition as they have encountered it.

4 I am not sure that intellectuals from without the community ever have access to the hidden transcript; the zone between the hidden and public transcripts, what Scott calls 'infrapolitics' (Scott 1990:xiii), may be all we ever have.

However, in an interface with socially engaged biblical scholars they meet other resources, resources which offer other possibilities for continuity with parts of the tradition. The interpretive interests of socially engaged biblical scholars offer forms of access to the biblical tradition that are not available to ordinary readers, and in so doing they provide opportunities for 'lines of connection' between the 'working' readings and theologies of poor and marginalised believers and previously inaccessible aspects of the biblical tradition. Myers's reconstructed Eve and Gottwald's reconstructed Moses group are potential places in which present readers can locate themselves.

Different interpretive interests offer different forms for finding a place in the biblical tradition with which to establish continuity. Continuity may be with reconstructed sectors and their struggles behind the text, with untold stories, neglected themes, and unfamiliar characters in the text, or with potential worlds projected in front of the text which intersect with the experiences readers bring to the reading process. In these and other ways, ordinary poor and marginalised readers can make 'lines of connection' with the whole of the biblical tradition, particularly those parts which are not usually resources for dominant readings and theologies.

Although the elaborated examples of biblical scholarship I have used include interpretive interests located largely behind the text, actual reading practice demonstrates that a variety of interpretive interests are useful to poor and marginalised readers in their search for coherence and continuity. This search constitutes a part of their struggle to articulate and own the 'working' readings and theologies that they live by.

Appropriation and risk

It must be stressed, again, that what I have called 'reading with' (West 1995:213-214; West 1994) the reading interface between two vigilantly foregrounded subject positions in which structures are in place through which power relations are acknowledged and mediated - assumes that the Bible is a significant text which is meaningful, powerful, and true for the readers. Some socially engaged scholars are of the opinion that the Bible should not be used by the poor and marginalised because it is inherently and thoroughly oppressive (see Mosala 1989; Mofokeng 1988; Daly, 1973). In the ISB our position is different. We have chosen to be partially constituted by the reality of the poor and marginalised communities that call us to read the Bible with them, and the Bible is meaningful, powerful, and true for them. Our interpretive interests seem to offer them additional resources for appropriating parts of the biblical tradition that resonate with the presence of God with them. And they in turn offer us socially engaged biblical scholars their resources for reading, including whatever ways they have of locating 'lines of connection' with the biblical tradition.

Because our scholarly modes of reading are critical modes of reading - in that they ask structured and systematic sets of questions about the Bible - the process of appropriation is not uncritical, but it does involve risk. I use 'risk' here in a way similar to Sharon Welch, who speaks of an 'ethic of risk' (Welch 1985:26) which requires *both* that I recognise the partiality of my particular choices *and* that I continue to struggle with particular communities of the poor and oppressed.

Like Welch I recognise the risk in the particularity and partiality of my forms of social engagement; but I also recognise the risk in the acts of selection and combination I make when I use scholarly resources. Part of what constitutes my continuity with the biblical tradition are the resources of biblical scholarship, and so I am accountable to that community. And although I am also accountable to local communities of the poor and marginalised, I cannot simply allow my social agenda to be read into the biblical tradition.

Accountability to the community of biblical scholarship requires that I use their resources responsibly, but the risk remains in that I must choose from among (the undeniably indeterminate) resources of biblical scholarship. Because there are no longer 'assured results', only tentative preliminary approximations with no prospects of convincing solutions (Watson 1994:58), many scholars refuse to choose.⁵ But I must choose because I am accountable to those who have called me to read the Bible with them, and my choices are shaped both by my interpretive and social interests. So, in this sense too, the risk is one of particularity and partiality (West 1993).

Conclusion

The 'connecting lines' between J, E, D, P and the RDP are not read-ily apparent. But in those places where socially engaged biblical scholars and poor and marginalised readers of the Bible read together there are indications that the various interpretive interests of socially engaged biblical scholars can provide alternative access to parts of the tradition that may source poor and marginalized communities. Sources for survival, liberation, and life in the biblical tradition may be scarce, and we may have to search for them in the cracks, gaps, and absences of the forms of the tradition we have received. But, it seems, there are places in which socially engaged biblical scholars and readers of the Bible in poor and marginalized communities can locate 'lines of connection' and where subjugated and incipient readings and theologies can be articulated and owned, where we can discover whether our 'working' readings and theologies resonate with those of others we live and work with, and where we share our resources and give shape to resisting and reconstructing readings and theologies that bring survival, liberation, and life.

5 Scholars may also refuse to choose for other reasons, although usually they do make undeclared, covert, choices.

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