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THE RHETORIC OF WISDOM AND POSTCOLONIAL HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

Critical wisdom literature in ancient Judah offers a paradigm for understanding the rejection of the teachings of the justice of God and retribution. This negation of foundational sapiential teachings provides the basis for a moral paradigm of postcolonial hermeneutics in which there is a movement towards the establishment of social justice for the poor and marginalized in native cultures.

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to accomplish three things. First, it sets forth a basic definition of rhetoric grounded in social materialism. Second, it uses social materialism to articulate a basic survey of wisdom literature as it moves from traditional scribal wisdom of Proverbs to the critical wisdom texts of Job and Qoheleth. And third, it expresses the view that the major features of critical wisdom's social materialism may open one door to postcolonial theology in South Africa and in other former colonies.

2. Definition of materialism

Social materialism is both an ontological and an epistemological theory, ontological in that it asserts that the data of the world are in their essence material and epistemological in affirming that knowledge derives from understanding the social nature of ideas. These two features, ontology and epistemology, are entwined. Social and historical experience of human beings represent both an encounter with the materials (both data and ideas) of the physical world and are themselves the embodiment of matter.[1]

Language is part of human culture, making language essentially material in character.[2] Culture develops out of the physical realities of the world, especially political, social, and economic spheres. Literature, among a variety of cultural expressions, is thought to express unconsciously the social materialism present in and embodied by a society. The worldview of a text is thought to be naturally true. Literature and other cultural expressions become the means by which societies and their ruling classes shape their social world and their role within it. Truth is not external as realists would argue, but rather is created. Subsequently, literature and other forms of art become the means by which a ruling class, in control of

1. Social materialism is not only a theory of being, but also an epistemology. According to Jürgen Habermas: "Labor or work is not only a fundamental category of human existence but also an epistemological category" [*Knowledge and Human Interests* (2nd ed., London: Heinemann, 1978) 28].
2. For important studies of social materialism and cultural expressions in art and literature, see Chris Bullock and David Peck, *Guide to Marxist Literary Criticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1980); Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1998); *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1986); Philip Goldstein, *The Politics of Literary Theory: An Introduction to Marxist Criticism* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 1990); Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1988); and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

culture, expresses its values, justifies the current social structure, and legitimates its status of wealth, power, and control. This is not propaganda in the sense that literature becomes the means by which the ruling class and its artistic defenders intentionally sought to justify their positions. The writers became the ones who, through their literary legitimation of the prevailing social world, were rewarded with their own status and well being in the social structure. However, their interpretation of the numerous interactive data of a society was an unconscious activity that eventually became the ideology of a culture's self-expression. The major features of this ideology came to be understood as self-evident to the various groups and classes in a society. This included not only those who were in possession of power, wealth, and control over economic production, but also peasant farmers, day labourers, and slaves, both impoverished Hebrews and foreign captives taken in war. The political realities gave shape to the variety of modes of production that protected the economic interests of their ruling social classes. With the establishment of the monarchy of the House of David, peasants slowly lost their land to the ruling class and forced to toil for the new owners in order to survive.

The only real means for the creation of social change regarding power, wealth, and status was class conflict pursued by the workers against the owners who were in control. Thus, literature, in this case the Hebrew Bible, may become an important lens through which to view class struggle. In addition, some biblical literature become critical of the prevailing ideology, bringing into question many assumptions of a society that, up to this point, have been regarded as self-evident. This questioning of prevailing social values and beliefs reflects their contestation in the larger society.

3. The materialism of wisdom literature: the traditional sages[3]

Although some scholars have pointed to the family and tribe as the earliest setting that continued well into the post-exilic period,[4] traditional wisdom is better understood as a moral and theological system that originated in the royal court and continued an association with the ruling classes, kings and later Zadokite priests, even into the period of Imperial Rome.[5] This system was expressed in their conservative literary tradition that then was

3. Detailed studies of the wisdom literature include Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); James L Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, revised and enlarged (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998); Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); John G Gammie and Leo G Perdue, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990); Maurice Gilbert (ed.), *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament*, 2nd ed. (BETL 51; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990); Leo G Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation. The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); and Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

4. Erhard S Gerstenberger, *Wesen und Herkunft des sogennanten 'apodiktischen Rechts' im Alten Testament* (WMANT 20, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965); Carole R Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study* (Bible and Literature 5; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982); "The Sage in Family and Tribe," *The Sage in Israel and the ancient Near East*, 155-164; "Wisdom in Proverbs," *In Search of Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Westminister/John Knox) 100-107; C Westermann, *Wurzeln der Weisheit: Die ältesten Sprüchen Israels und anderer Völker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

5. The best examples of royal instruction comes from ancient Egypt: "The Wisdom of Imhotep" (*AEL* 1 58-59; *AEL* 340; "The Instruction of Kagemni" (*AEL* 1 59-61; *LAE* 177-179); Papyrus Lansing (*AEL* 1 167-175; *AEL* 2 175-178); "The Instruction of Ptah-hotep" (*ANET* 412-414; *AEL* 1 61-80; *LAE* 159-176); "The Instruction for King Merikare" (*ANET* 414-118; *AEL* 1 97-109; *LAE* 180-192); "The Instruction of King Amenemhet" (*ANET* 414-418; *AEL* 1 135-139; *LAE* 193-197); Also see RJ Williams, *The Sage in Israel and the ancient Near East*, 95-98). That the Israelite and Judahite sages were familiar with some wisdom literature from ancient Egypt is apparent in the dependence of Prov. 22:17-24:22 upon "The Wisdom of Amenemopet" (*ANET* 421-425; *AEL* 2 146-163; *LAE* 241-265.

written for students to learn the language and insights of sapiential ideology. Finally, this literary ideology was transmitted through the wisdom schools for the education of both the children of the aristocracy and the bureaucrats training for service to the king (Prov. 16:10-15; 17:7; 19:10, 12; 20:2, 8, 18; 21:1, 22; 22:11; 23:1; 24:5-6, 21-22; 25:1-7, 15; 27:23-27; 28:2, 15-16; 29:2, 4, 12, 15; 29:2; 4, 12, 26: 30:1-9; cf. 1 Kgs. 12:6-12).[6] In this way, the social ideology was routinized in wisdom thinking that was passed down through the generations among the rulers, their political entourage, and eventually the Zadokite priesthood, all of whom were the major creators of traditional culture. Royal and temple scribes wrote literature that was shaped by the interests of the royal ruling houses and the Jerusalem temple. Thus, any egalitarian features of pre-monarchic Israel, including the נחלה ("inherited land") of individual families and tribes, were eliminated in favor of the establishment of classes based on hierarchy.

The traditional sages engaged in their search for knowledge in the world by beginning with the affirmation of "the fear of God" (Prov. 1:7; 14:27; 9:10-11; Sir. 1:11-21; 7:21-29). "The fear of God" represented in traditional wisdom the foundational belief that God was the creator who established a divine cosmic and social order, brought life into existence, and oversaw and maintained this order through the principle of retribution (Prov. 29:23; 31:30).[7] All of life was good, except for that of the wicked and the fool who experienced punishment and, at times, even destruction (Proverbs 10-15).[8]

The literary expressions of traditional wisdom, found primarily in Proverbs and later Ben Sirah, may be read through the major features of socio-critical analysis. The sages of Israel sought out patterns of unchanging facts in human existence, including political, social, and economic systems.[9] This order (Prov. 26:11; 26:20; and 30:15-33) included human events and institutions as constituent parts of social data. Israelite society, with political and economic control in the hands of the rulers, was understood as grounded in this divine order of the cosmos. The God who created the world also created the society that reflected this cosmic order. This ideology of the traditional sages was considered to be self-evident. Through their writings in the various sapiential forms, the sages unconsciously supported the social world that consisted of a ruling class and its subjects who were to be obedient to royal commands in Proverbs and, according to Ben Sirah, to the instructions of the temple priesthood in the Torah.

According to the traditional wisdom literature, God was believed to rule the cosmos and society through the principle of causality, i.e., orderly, righteous, and wise behavior led to successful results, while punishment met the disorderly, foolish and wicked. In Proverbs, a just God established the social order with kings, nobles normally consisting of relatives of the monarchs, craftsmen and merchants, peasants, servants, and slaves. This divine order (חדקה) of the cosmos and human society was considered to embody and operate according

6. Walter A Brueggemann, "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* , 117-132; Brian W Kovacs, "Is There a Class-Ethic in Proverbs?" *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. James L Crenshaw and John T Willis (New York: KTAV, 1974, 171-190); RN Whybray," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East,* 133-140; and André Lemaire, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East,* 165-184.
7. Roland E Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation, *JBL* 104 (1985) 3-11; Hans Heinrich Schmid, *Altorientalische Welt in der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974); and Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1964) 146-158.
8. Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972). However, von Rad prefers to speak of the "orders" of creation and not a single, cosmic order.
9. Leo G Perdue, "Cosmology and Social Order in the Wisdom," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East,* 457-478.

to justice.[10] Those Jews with major social control for Ben Sirah were the Zadokite priests. To disrupt the social order was an effort to overturn the divine social order and thus rebel against God and God's chosen leaders. Most often wealth is assumed to be one of the rewards of the righteous, wise, and orderly, since their actions are in line with divinely instituted cosmic order. By contrast poverty is generally considered to be the consequence of disruptive, foolish, and wicked behavior.[11] This regularity of acts and events in the cosmos underscored the sages' rhetoric of materialism in which God ruled the cosmos in such a way as to reward the righteous and wise and to punish the wicked and foolish. While the experience and critical reason of individual sages was important, the wise still primarily depended on their inherited tradition for authority.

For the traditional sages, i.e. the authors of Proverbs and Jesus ben Sirah, the correlation between the cosmic order and its social embodiment was self-evident. God was the creator of the organs of understanding (Prov. 20:12), yet he remained hidden from human view (e. g., Prov. 16:9). Thus, the experience of the world and reflection on its order led to the understanding of the nature and activity of God. The sages affirmed that God, while often mysterious, was nevertheless the one who established and maintained both cosmic and social order that was considered to be beneficent for the wise and righteous, but harmful to those who were foolish and wicked (3:19-20; 14:31; chps. 15-20; 17:5).[12]

4. The materialism of wisdom literature: The critical sages

The collapse of traditional wisdom most likely occurred due to the transformation of the socio-political order initiated first by the Babylonians (587 BCE; Job) and then by the Ptolemies (200 BCE; Qoheleth). The experiences of Judah's conquest by the Babylonians led to the demise of the traditional teaching found in much of Proverbs, at least 10:1-31:9 if not the entire book, which, in our estimation most likely was written during the periods of the Israelite and Judahite monarchies. With the fall of the monarchy to the Babylonians, some of the sages continued in the role of counselors, only now they advised the governors appointed by the foreign kings and the temple priests. Others taught in wisdom schools, likely attached either to the temple or to local political institutions that were under the control of foreign governments.[13] The poetic Book of Job is probably produced in the

10. Hartmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit* [Tübingen: JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1958]; and HH Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (BHT 40; Tübingen: Mohr, 1968).
11. See Norman Habel, "Wisdom, Wealth, and Poverty Paradigms in the Book of Proverbs," *Bible Bhashyam* 14 (1988) 26-49; Raymond van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992) 25-36; J David Pleins, "Poverty in the Social World of the Wise," *JSOT* 37 (1987) 61-78; Harold C Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs* (SBLDS 142; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); and RN Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (JSOTSup 99; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). Pleins argues that the views of poverty in wisdom texts suggest the ethos of a ruling elite that cultivated wisdom.
12. Note the emphasis on the maintenance of the accepted social and political order as traits of traditional wisdom in Prov. 30:21-23. For a discussion of this social conservatism, see Perdue, *The Sages in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 472-474.
13. This role of advice to foreign kings is represented by Ezra, the priest, who was the "Scribe of the Law of God Most High." In our judgment, Ezra was appointed by Artaxerxes I to establish the Torah as the basis for temple worship (Ezra 7). At the Festival of Booths, he read the law to the assembly in 458 BCE. (Nehemiah 8) and issued the investigation of Jews married with non-Jews that continued through the spring of 457 BCE. (Ezra 9-10). This likely led to the inclusion of the Torah, temple worship, and the Zadokite priesthood in ben Sirah (e.g., Pss. 1; 19A; 119; and Sirach 24; 51). Helge Stadelmann, *Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter: Eine Untersuchung zum Berufsbild des vor-Maccabäischen Sofer under Berucksichtigung seines Verhältnisses zu Priester, Propheten, und Weisheitslehrtum* (WUNT; Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1980) argues that ben Sirah was a scribal priest.

context of a wisdom school, especially since the dialogues make use of the disputation, a sapiential form in which sages debate the authenticity of a fundamental teaching. In this case, what is debated is the principle of retribution grounded in the justice of God. Qoheleth, who, according to the Epilogue was a teacher of the "people" (12:9-14), also likely taught in a wisdom school. This text may have been written as late as the beginning of the 2nd century, BCE for a school of scribes by a sage who had witnessed the replacement of the Ptolemies (200 BCE) by the anti-Jewish Seleucids due to their victory at Panium. This teacher presents himself fictionally as a "son of David," likely Solomon, who instructs his students in critical wisdom.

This assault on traditional wisdom was centred on the theory of retribution and its presentation of the justice of God, the creator and sustainer of the social order.[14] At the heart of the traditional sages' literature was the teaching that the wise and righteous were in power, and thus wealthy, while the fool and the wicked, were sure to experience their downfall. The latter category often consisted of those who were impoverished and without socio-political power. The poor were thought to be those who were ordained by God to serve in subjection to their rulers. The disruption of the social order led to disarray in the cosmos (see Prov. 30:21-23). However, the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians and the later rule of the Seleucids led to a strong repudiation in certain political, social, and sapiential quarters.

5. The wisdom of critical sages: Job

The bankruptcy of traditional wisdom and its teaching grounded in retribution and in the justice of God as creator of both the cosmos and human beings is reflected in the creation of a new series of sapiential texts that speak of conflict and the denial of the values and affirmations of the monarchial political and social order.[15] The earlier of these is Job (6th century, BCE).[16] The ideology of the previously uncontested values and affirmations in traditional wisdom is represented by the "friends of Job" who argue that God is a just deity who is sure to reward the righteous and punish the wicked.[17] This negates any negative protests like, for example, those of the Accusatory Psalms (e.g. Psalms 10), the laments in the Psalter (Pss. 6:3; 13:1-2; 22:1; 43:2; 44:23-24; 74:1, 11; and 88:14), the Complaints of Jeremiah (11:18-20; 12:1-6; 15:15-18; 18:19-23; and 20:7-12), the Book of Lamentations (5:20), and a variety of scattered texts that indict God for injustice, misrule, or impotence (e.g., see Isa. 43:26-28). Thus, the opponents of Job in the poetry present an even greater emphasis on retribution and the justice of God than did their predecessors in the Book of Proverbs, thus suggesting that the adverse reaction against these central tenets are likely widespread in post-exilic Judah. Job, presented as a man of great wealth and status who lost all that he had (Chps. 29-30), responds, at least prior to his repentance, that God was a

14. Klaus Koch (ed.), *Um das Prinzep der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht der Alten Testaments* (Wege der Forschung 125; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972).
15. Rainer Albertz, *Weltschöpfung und Menschenschöpfung* (Calwer Theologische Monographien, Reihe A: Bibelwissenschaft 3; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1974).
16. WAM Beuken (ed.), *The Book of Job* (BETH 114; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994); David J. A Clines, *Job 1-20* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989); Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* (KAT 16; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963); Norman C Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; London: SCM, 1985); Hans-Peter Müller, *Das Hiobproblem. Seine Stellung und Entstehung im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*, 2nd ed. (Erträge zur Erforschung 84; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988); and Artur Weiser, *Das Buch Hiob*, 8th ed. (ATD 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988).
17. Hans-Peter Müller, *Hiob und seine Freunde. Traditionsgeschichtliches zum Verständnis des Hiobbuchs* (ThS 103; Zürich: EVZ Verlag, 1970).

destructive tyrant who sought to destroy both creation and the wise righteous. Thus, Job rails against the traditional teachings of the justice of God at work in the cosmos and human society and its supporting principle of retribution by using his own experience as evidence to the contrary.[18]

In the theophany (38:1-42:6), Yahweh appears from the thunderstorm and admits that he struggles with chaos for rule over the earth. This strengthening of the power of chaos into a contestant for kingship over the cosmos is an early step towards the development of a satanic power (cf. Isa. 45:7.[19]

The prose narrative is an early example story of traditional wisdom prior to the Babylonian captivity (Job 1-2; 42:7-17). This older tale is taken by the exilic poet of Job and rewritten into a dialogue in which traditional wisdom teachings are strongly contested. Once finished, the Epilogue concludes, ironically, that Yahweh is angry at Eliphaz and his two friends for not having spoken "correctly" (נכנה) about him. This rereading of the older, traditional tale of Job suggests the poet has affirmed the authenticity of Job's repudiation of retribution and the unchallenged justice of divine rule in his speeches with his friends (3-27) and in his direct challenge of Yahweh (chps. 29-31). He may repent, following each of the two divine speeches, but one has to wonder if the repentance is done to demonstrate that Yahweh is not in control of the cosmos and that retribution is a false attestation.[20]

6. The wisdom of critical sages: Qoheleth[21]

Several centuries later, after several foreign powers had controlled Judah (the Babylonians, the Persians, the Ptolemies, and finally the Seleucids), a sage, who came to be known only by his office, "Qoheleth" (קהל, "one who assembles;" see 12:8),[22] argues against any assertion that the political and social order are ruled over by righteous rulers (4:1-3) and that cosmic rule is presided over by a just deity. His opponents were probably temple scribes and apocalyptic sages, the former of which looked to the past and the Jerusalem cultus as the guarantee of divine favor, while the latter looked to the future as a time of a "new heaven and new earth" when divine salvation and exaltation of Israel and the righteous would occur. It is likely that temple scribes[23] and apocalyptic sages[24] were active

18. Leo G Perdue, "Job's Assault on Creation," *HAR* 10 (1986) 295-315; Valerie Pettys, "Let There Be Darkness: Continuity and Discontinuity in the 'Curse' of Job 3," *JSOT* 98 (2002) 89-104.
19. Second Isaiah makes this move towards theodicy, indicating that the exile was the time some Judahites rejected traditional teaching about the justice of God. For the Yahweh speeches, see Otto Keel, *Jahves Entgegung an IjoB Eine Deutung von Ijob 38-41 dem Hintergrund der zeitgenössichen Bildkunst* (FRLANT 21; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978); Hans-Peter Müller, "Gottes Antwort an Ijob und das Recht religiöser Wahrheit," *BZ* 32 (1988) 210-231; and Jürgen van Oorschot, *Gott als Grenze. Eine literar-und redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Gottesreden des Hiobbuchs* (BZAW 170; Berlin: W de Gruyter, 1987).
20. Dale Patrick, "Job's Address of God," ZAW 91 (1979) 268-282; and JB Curtis, "On Job's Response to YAHWEH," *JBL* 98 (1979) 497-511.
21. Anton Schoors (ed.) *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL, 136, Leuven, The University of Leuven, 1998); Thomas Krüger, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2000); and (c.f. Whitley, *Koheleth. His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin, W de Gruyter, 1979).
22. Cf. 7:27; Ezra 2:55-57; Neh. 7:59. However, Qoheleth is used by another redactor as a personal name (1:1-2, 12; 12:9-10). For a discussion of different positions on the meaning, see James L Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes (OTL*; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987). In our view the meaning changes from originally that of an office eventually to a personal name.
23. Armin Lange has argued that Qoheleth engages in debate with the temple sages of the third century, BCE. [4:17-5:6; see "In Diskussion mit dem Tempel. Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kohelet und Weisheitlichen Kreisen am Jerusalemer Tempel," *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. Antoon Schoor (BETL, 136), Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988, 113-159].

in the third century, BCE Temple scribes (the predecessors of Ben Sirah) pointed to the combination of wisdom, temple worship, and the revelation of the Torah as the basis for cosmic and social order based on the justice of God. Apocalyptic sages, who were the forerunners of texts like 4Q Instruction at Qumran, used traditional wisdom to provide for daily living and apocalyptic to point to a new eschatological reality in which justice and order would prevail over the present period of injustice and disorder. For Qoheleth, any hope in a just social and political order in the present world is repudiated by his own experience and understanding.[25] This sage teaches that the transcendent deity is unpredictable, even capricious (1:13; 3:18; 7:14; 9:1-6; 11:5), although he certainly is a power to be feared (5:6).[26] The one teaching that Qoheleth offers about God is that one should "fear him." For Qoheleth, it is better to go to the temple to listen than it is to offer the sacrifices of fools (4:17) and the making of unwise vows (5:3-4). In this instruction (4:27-5:6), Qoheleth does not totally negate the validity of temple worship, but he does stress the fear and trembling that should accompany any who engage in its activities. Qoheleth does so in order to emphasize that temple worship may be a way of opening oneself to divine examination.

Qoheleth argues not only against the justice of God, the principle of retribution, and cosmic and social embodiments of order, but also against the notion that there will be a final judgment in which the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked punished. He also denies the teaching that wisdom will enable one to know when and how to act successfully. Indeed, for Qoheleth, both the righteous and the wicked, along with the wise and the foolish, face the same fate: death. From death there is no escape, in spite of some apocalyptic teaching at the time that pointed to either resurrection or immortality. The one boon of human existence, provided by God to anesthetize the pain of suffering and the anxiety of living, is the joy that one may experience. If it does occur, it is to be relished.[27]

Qoheleth points to an ideology that is obviously at work in certain social circles that negates the basic affirmations of traditional wisdom, Torah scribes, and apocalyptic sages. Wealth, power, and status do not come to the righteous wise, but only to the wicked and unjust rulers. Qoheleth does not articulate a program of social conflict designed to bring about political change, but rather is resigned to passivity.

7. The materialism of wisdom: The Neo-Traditionalists

Shortly thereafter, Ben Sirah (circa 200 BCE), who operated a wisdom school for the children of the wealthy, Torah scribes, political bureaucrats, and aspiring teachers restated much of traditional wisdom, only now he fashioned wisdom, the Torah, and salvation history into a new theological synthesis.[28]

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24. See Leo G Perdue, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth," *Wisdom and Apocalyptic*, ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez (BETL ???; Leuven: The University of Leuven, 2003, forthcoming).
25. Frank Crüsemann, *The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Qoheleth*, ed. Wily Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *God of the Lowly* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984, 55-77); Hartmut Gese, "Die Krisis der Weisheit bei Koheleth," ed. Jean Leclant, *Les Sagesses du Proche-Orient Ancien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961, 139-151); and Aarre Lauha, "Die Krise des Religiösen Glaubens bei Kohelet," *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Martin Noth and D Winton Thomas (*VTS* 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955, 183-191).
26. H-P Müller, "Wie sprach Qohälät von Got?," *VT* 18 (1968) 507-521.
27. H-P Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit.' Zum Denken Qohäläts," *ZAW* 90 (1978) 238-268.
28. Helga Stadelmann, *Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter* [WUNT II, 6; Tübingen: JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1980]; and EJ Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul* [WUNT II, 16; Tübingen, JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1985].

The library of Qumran indicates, however, that the wisdom literature, both traditional and critical, was written for and transmitted to the members of the community whose original founders were opponents of the Zadokite priesthood. This literature contests the ideology of the temple priesthood given expression in the Torah, Torah Psalms, and Ben Sirah. The Qumran community looked forward to their installation as the "Sons of Light" (non-Zadokite priests) into the priestly control of the temple and to the return of a royal descendant of David who would rule from Jerusalem as the surrogate of God over the "heavens and earth."

The last sapiential book, "The Book of Wisdom," was likely written by a sage to a Jewish audience in Alexandria, Egypt at the time of Imperial Rome's control of Palestine and Egypt (30 BCE), during the period of another crisis when Egyptian Jews were being persecuted by pagan Hellenists (Gentiles and some former Jews) in this Greco-Roman province.[29] The traditional ideology of Judaism is given new shape in the form of a paranetic address of Hellenistic rulers by tying together Jewish wisdom, apocalyptic, the exodus from Egypt, and Greek popular philosophy.

8. Wisdom rhetoric and post colonial hermeneutics

We begin our venture into postcolonial hermeneutics with an important assumption and a question. While affirming that humans are made in God's image, it is true, from the social scientific perspective of materialism, that they unknowingly create deities in their human image and especially that of their particular social groups.[30] The question that emerges is "How does the interpreter, both the trained scholar and the ordinary reader, understand the Bible?" One way is through the lens of "socio-critical hermeneutics," the sociological theory of scholars like Jürgen Habermas.[31] In his succinct analysis of Habermas, Thiselson[32] explains:

> *Socio-critical hermeneutics* may be defined as an approach to texts (or to traditions and institutions and institutions) which seeks to penetrate beneath their surface-function *to expose their role as instruments of power, domination, or social manipulation. To use Habermas's terms, 'critical' hermeneutics (which looks back to Marx) and 'depth' hermeneutics (which looks back to Freud) aim to achieve the liberation of those over whom this power or social manipulation is exercized.* This approach leads not only to

29. John J Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); and Johann Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel* (BBB 37; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1971); and David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979).
30. Norman Gottwald, "Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel," *The Bible and Liberation*, rev. ed. (Norman K Gottwald, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1983, 26-37); and Bruce J Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *The Bible and Liberation*, 11-25.
31. See *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (6th ed.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968); *The Theory of Communicative Action* 1 & 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984-87); *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT, 1990); *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); and *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). For detailed studies of Habermas, see John B Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: a Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981); David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialect of Reason* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987); and Stephen K White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas. Reason, Justice, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988, 1989).
32. Anthony C Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 379-409.

the liberation of the marginalized in society, but also to the liberation of culture, particularly in a literate society in texts.[33]

This is true of culture in ancient Israel and in the literature of the sages. For Habermas, the ontological character of hermeneutics, in particular socio-materialism, there must be the opportunity to reject the negative features of human society and its culture. In Judah his would especially be the emphasis placed on the domination, wealth, and control of the ruling class and the high priestly families. This criticism of the social world of the royal, priestly, and traditional wisdom social groups would emerge from prophetic texts that were written against the social elite of Judah (e.g., Amos) and exilic and post-exilic sapiential texts that gave voice to the marginalized poor by undercutting the teachings of the justice of God and the doctrine of retribution (Job; Qoheleth).

Norman K. Gottwald uses social materialism, conflict theory, and liberation theory as a social paradigm for understanding the society, religion, and culture (especially literature) of ancient Israel.[34] This model sets forth the view that social change comes from competing groups that possess a variety of different values indigenous to group self-interest. Operating out of a largely Neo-Marxist social scientific paradigm of materialism,[35] Gottwald argues that the stimuli for the producing of his collection of essays, *The Bible and Liberation*, were two-fold:

- "To bring to light the actual social struggles of our biblical ancestors and to locate the human and religious resources they drew upon in the midst of those struggles."
- "To tap the biblical social struggles and religious understandings as important resources for directing us in the social struggles we are presently engaged in."[36]

For Gottwald, history is conceived, not in terms of philosophical romanticism or idealism, but rather materially as an economic struggle that moves history toward liberation. Social struggle becomes a key principle of Biblical hermeneutics. Liberation involves the use of power in order to advance the self-interest of the oppressed in terms of life's necessities. These include the wiping out of hunger, the sharing of economic resources, and the free and equal access to positions of status and influence by the socially

33. Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis. The Challenge of Liberation Theology in Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1990). Major studies on liberation theology in Latin America that normally use social materialism as a theoretical, philosophical base include Gutavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971); *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducting Liberation Theology* (Maryknowll, NY: Orbis, 1987). African-American liberation theology includes James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969); *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: JB Lippincott, 1970); J Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelpia: Westminster, 1981); and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982). For major studies on liberation in South Africa and other postcolonial countries, see below.

34. Much of the theoretical basis for Gottwald's work was the neo-Marxian social theory represented by the Frankfurt School. Habermas, as a second generation of this school, was especially important in the development of this approach. Gottwald's theoretical framework is set forth in his essay, "Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel," *The Bible and Liberation*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman K Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983) 26-185. For a critical review of Gottwald's work, see Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancien Israel," *JBL* 98 (1979) 161-185.

35. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1967); Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (New York: Humanities Press, 1954); and Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1970). Gottwald's classic study is found in his monumental text, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

36. "The Bible and Liberation: Deeper Roots and Wider Horizons," *The Bible and Liberation*, 2.

marginalized, heretofore, the victims of oppression and exploitation. Gottwald stresses that the major force at work in history is the material conditions of life, not religious idealism. According to him, this competition for life's resources does not come through compromise and debate used to reach mutual agreement, but rather through the conflicts between competing groups. These conflicts are expressed in the literature of ancient Israel and early Judaism.

Those in power generally shape unwittingly deities that legitimate their claims to power and material goods. This is true in ancient Israel and later Judah. Royal culture produced a theology that maintained monarchical control over subjugated groups in their society. Israel, so Gottwald argues, began as a revolutionary movement of slaves and the exploited against their Canaanite lords. These slaves rebelled against the Canaanite economic model of the Asiatic mode of production in which rulers exploited their slaves, land-holders, and herders.[37] These indigenous groups were joined by freed slaves from Egypt who worshipped a deity of liberation (Yahweh). This successful revolution in Canaan, he contends, led to a loosely knit association of tribes who came together, though only rarely, for military and economic purposes. Thus tribal peasants and former slaves combined to retribalize Israelite society. This early Israel was a movement in the direction of egalitarian social organization in which extended families had "equal access to resources," while the family was the social unit for sexual reproduction and thus the raising of young land-owners and the necessary laborers for the household.[38] Gottwald does admit that this world was still predominantly patriarchal, although women did have important roles in the household economy of the tribes.

However, this experiment of some two centuries was undone by what Gottwald calls the development of counterrevolutionary Israel. The increase in power and affluence of certain families and priesthoods led to a battle for control, resulting in the establishment of the royal monarchy for the household of David. David and Solomon initiated a socio-political organization that would continue well after the breakup of the United Kingdom.

Gottwald stresses four major social changes that accompanied the establishment of the monarchy:

- "Political centralization in the royal house in Jerusalem gave to the king powers of taxation and conscription. A standing military and royal bureaucracy became the instruments of royal rule."
- "Social stratification led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a 'parasitic nonproductive class' consisting of the royal family, merchants, and landed nobility."
- "Land ownership slowly transferred from families to the upper class, with former owners becoming day laborers and tenant farmers. This led to the undermining of the tribal character of Israel."
- "Monarchial rule led Israel into foreign adventures involving trade, diplomacy, and war. Growing failures in these efforts brought increased economic exploitation of the people, a process aided by political propaganda."[39]

37. Norman K Gottwald, "Early Israel and the Canaanite Socioeconomic System," *Palestine in Transition: The Emergence of Ancient Israel*, ed. David Noel Freedman and David Frank Graf (Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2; Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 25-37.
38. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 285f.
39. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 323-325.

For Gottwald, there are various ideological bases for the empire, including the "promise to David" (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89), i.e. Yahweh's eternal covenant with this ruling house, and Zion theology in which Jerusalem is seen as the cosmic mountain, the place where Yahweh dwells amongst his people (Psalms 46, 48; 76). Thus, the temple of Solomon, under royal control, continued to legitimate dynastic rule for the house of David in its rites and services, requiring true worship to be carried out in what, in essence, was a royal chapel.[40]

Postcolonial theology is, consequently, "from below," i.e. from the marginalized poor and powerless of human peoples and their own cultures. In West's words: "Liberation hermeneutics requires that cognizance of and commitment to the experience of these non-persons is a necessary condition for reading the Bible and doing theology."[41] The poor and powerless comprise the huge majority of human groups in the world, including South Africa. However, they are largely marginalized by the rich and powerful groups of Europe and America whose white western gods legitimate their control of most of the world's resources while relegating third world people of color to positions of subjection. Many of these marginalized people of colour, in the present period, are no longer willing to bow the knee in subjection to their former overlords' western gods who are largely white and male. Instead, they are asserting their own theology, grounded in their own culture's and group's experiences, values, and interests. Liberation theologians are to enable the marginalized to find a language with which to speak.

Since Gottwald's premise of social materialism and conflict theory are used in combination with liberation theology, what of the traditional wisdom literature written to legitimate the social order dominated by the monarchy? It seems without question that most of Proverbs is written by a scribal class who served in the royal government, from the chief royal counselor (חספר) to a lowly copyist (ספר). This class taught its views of justice, for which the king was ultimately responsible, in royal schools located in Jerusalem and probably also in Samaria when the city became the capital of the Northern Kingdom in the 9th century, BCE.[42] These "men of the king," as it were, supported the royal monarchy until its end when the Assyrians conquered the North in 722 BCE and the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 587 BCE. For the traditional sages, swift retribution was to be meted out to those who defied divinely legitimated rule, for "inspired decisions are on the lips of the king" (Prov. 16:12). Thus, Israel's early sages in the Book of Proverbs created a deity who was made in the self-image of the monarchy, making inseparable the king and his God. This meant that the livelihood of the sages depended on the good favor of the king. The poor and oppressed in Proverbs, who are to be treated with charity, still are not offered by God equal access to the material goods of life or higher ranks in society. They have divine

40. For a detailed critique of Gottwald's thesis of revolutionary Israel during the period of the "conquest," see my work, *The Collapse of History* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and Werner E Lemke, "Interpreting Biblical History through the Eyes of Sociology and Politics: The Work of George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald," *Conservative Judaism* 39 (1986) 67-80. Especially questionable are two of his hypotheses: a peasant revolt at the end of the LB period that led to the overthrow of the Canaanite overlords and a subsequent egalitarian, village society that existed throughout Iron I until the rise of chiefdoms and eventually the dynastic kingship of David. Lawrence Stager has argued that Israel experienced inequality even before the rise of the Israelite monarchy, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985) 1-35.

41. Gerald West, "Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated," *Semeia* 73 (1996) 26. Also see McGlory T Speckman and Larry T Kaufmann (eds.), *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology. Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001).

42. André Lemaire, *Les Écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (OBO 30; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1981).

protection, only if they are denied their right by the rulers and the well-to-do to have the means necessary to exist. Indeed, these sages imply that economic factors, including poverty, are a common result of the principle of retribution. Their texts, especially found in much of Proverbs and Ben Sirah, tend to set forth a sapiential ideology that affirms the power, wealth, and control of the ruling and elite classes, the monarchy and the priesthood in the pre-exilic period, and the imperial rule of foreign governments along with the priestly Sadducees who supported them.[43]

The rise of critical wisdom was occasioned by conflict: the end of the monarchy with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The Book of Job, at least the poetic speeches, appear to have responded to this conquest by a strong contestation of both the portrait of a just deity overseeing the cosmos and the principle of retribution. This means that the poetic Job, followed by Qoheleth at the time of the shift from Ptolemaic to Seleucid rule, both viewed God as a destructive tyrant over cosmic and social order. The God of Proverbs who was shaped to legitimate the royal social order is now repudiated by the experiences of these sages. While these two critical books undercut the traditional sapiential affirmations of divine justice, a righteous cosmic order, and retribution, they do not move forward to determine their own social agenda. Social ethics, especially geared to the establishment of justice for the marginalized, a plea of prophetic preaching, becomes once again a task to be carried out by later Judaism and Christianity in the modern world. In the modern articulations of morality, God must once more become a deity of justice who requires humans to act in such a way as to create a just and benevolent reality that includes the marginalized.

In regard to hermeneutics in the postcolonial world of South Africa and similar former African colonies, one should combine social materialism, contextual theology (liberation), conflict theory, the understandings of ordinary readers in their African context, and Afro-centrism in countries that have moved from a recent colonial status to assert their own religious values and understandings. Justin S. Ukpong has pointed to the development of African hermeneutics since the 1930s.[44] His insights into this approach during the 1990s are clearly articulated. For Ukpong, this hermeneutic is characterized by three major features: the African context as subject of biblical interpretation, liberation theology, and enculturation. It is true that historical critical methodology continues to be used in biblical interpretation. However, the objective of the hermeneutical understanding of the text is the African context. In addition, "the *ordinary African readers* (that is, non-biblical scholars)" are recognized "as important partners in academic biblical reading, and seeks to integrate their perspectives in the process of academic interpretation of the bible."[45]

Itumeleng Mosala has argued, "…a people's liberation is not purely moral or spiritual; it is *material*."[46] This means then that the materials produced by human labour are neces-

43. Norman Gottwald, "Two Models for the Origins of Ancient Israel: Social Revolution or Frontier Development," *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. Herbert B Huffmon, FA Spina, and ARW Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 5-24.
44. Justin S Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," *The Bible in Africa*, ed. Gerald O West and Musa W Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 11-28.
45. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 23.
46. Itumeleng J Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 67. He begins his third chapter, "The Historical and Cultural Struggles of the Black People as a Hermeneutical Starting Point for Black Theology," by quoting Amilcar Cabral's understanding of liberation: "Liberation of the people means the liberation of the productive forces of our country, he liquidation of all kinds of imperialist or colonial domination of our country, and the taking of every measure to avoid any new exploitation of our people… We want equality, social justice and freedom… Liberation for us is to take back our destiny and our history" [*Revolution in Guinea* (Kent, England: Stage 1, 1979) 83].

sary for existence just as much as spiritual values make for freedom. Inextricably linked are the destiny, history, and freedom that flow from the *productive forces* of a people.[47] Liberation and postcolonial theology changes the ruler's deity into a God who is at work among the oppressed.[48]

For Mosala, "Black theology needs to be firmly and critically rooted in black history and black culture in order for it to possess apposite weapons of struggle, that can enable black people to get underneath the biblical texts to the struggles of oppressed classes." Mosala sets forth the struggle of Black South Africans into three major epochs that are characterized by important differences in the understanding and practice of production and their affect on the formation of social community: the communal mode of production, the tributary mode of production, and the capitalist mode of production. In the communal mode of production, property is owned by the community whose products are communally shared.[49] The first two fit well the socio-economic development of Israel during the Iron Age through the Roman period into the 1st century, CE. In ancient Israel of the premonarchic period (1200 BCE to 1000 BCE), society was largely egalitarian, although the major cooperative group was the family, the primary social unit which formed village clans, the tribe which consisted of several clans thought to be blood-related or at least the descendants of a common ancestor, and the tribal federation which ideally numbered twelve. Thus, social relationships were based on an ideology of kinship. Land and pastoral animals were a part of the household of the family and did not belong to the larger units. However, associations of families were formed for cooperation in the production of crops and goods and the carrying out of protective warfare. The theology is found in the legislation incorporated in Numbers 26 (see esp. vv. 53-56): holy war, the size of tribes, and the casting of lots by which the decision of Yahweh was determined.

The second mode, the tributary mode of production,[50] was based in the Hebrew Bible on communal ownership of the household supplemented by the giving of tribute to the social elite who were at the top of the economic and power structure of the society. This led to the establishment of chieftainships and eventually the monarchy and the royal state.[51] Military service became compulsory as did corvée labour from the tribes to build royal projects. Land increasingly became a part of large royal estates owned by the king, his family, high placed statesmen, and his main supporters. The Jerusalem temple, staffed by a Zadokite priesthood loyal to the monarchy and later to the foreign empires, existed as a parasitic class dependent on royal patronage and gifts and offerings from the populace. Dominance now replaces egalitarian relationships and the sharing of needed goods by the household, village clans, tribes, and tribal federation. Social relations are based on something approximating class. The theology is grounded in such texts as 2 Samuel 7 ("The Promise to David") and Pss. 46, 48 (the "Zion Hymns"). The struggle of the dominated became a conflict over power and distribution of goods against the overlords of the society in the effort to return the social and economic system to one of the familial household. This

47. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, 69.
48. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. He argues: "The need for a biblical hermeneutics of liberation rooted in the cultural and political struggles of the black oppressed and exploited people is underscored when we realize that black theology's propensity to appeal to the same ideology as do its oppressors in fact represents the extent of its slavery (p. 26)." One should realize that there is a struggle that runs throughout the discourse of the biblical text (p. 27).
49. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, 69-80.
50. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, 80-85.
51. See David C Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985).

struggle was doomed to failure, both during the period of the Israelite and Judahite monarchies and the rule of the empires (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Roman). Even the Kingdom of the Maccabees still operated with a socio-economic system that continued the tributary mode of production. While a household economy could be carried out on a local scale, the primary mode was the tributary one that required support of ruling houses and their loyal priesthoods.

Black Christianity, in both South Africa and the United States, has traditionally been closely associated with the Bible.[52] It is important that Black South Africans learn to identify with the struggles of the oppressed in the biblical texts.[53] However, as Gerald West has noted concerning South Africa's indigenous populations and other peoples of color, "the Bible has been both oppressor and liberator."[54] The same Bible has been used by both the oppressor and the oppressed. How to break the back of oppressive misreadings of the Bible that ignore the themes of justice and the integrity of the poor becomes the question. Like Mosala, West has noted that there must be and is now developing an engagement of critically trained and socially engaged biblical scholars with ordinary readers consisting largely of the poor and marginalized who are struggling for their political and economic freedom. This social interaction and conversation has given a new vitality to biblical studies in postcolonial South Africa. Thus, there are biblical and theological resources in the Bible that may be used to assist the marginalized who have been oppressed by colonial empires for centuries even as the readings of the poor give new insight into the biblical text to scholars. Ordinary African readers develop the ability to engage the text and biblical scholars in conversation.[55]

At the heart of this emerging postcolonial hermeneutic is the role of afrocentricity, defined by the American scholar, Cain Felder: "the land mass that the ancient Romans routinely called Africa and the peoples of African descent must be understood as having made significant contributions to world civilization as prospective subjects within history rather than being regarded as merely passive objects of historical distortions."[56] The denigration by Westerners of African cultures that began in the 17th century CE has been traced, among others, by A Furioli.[57] It is a distortion of the Bible to base hierarchy on race or ethnic identity.[58]

This afrocentric biblical hermeneutic rejects the portraits of the western gods who are the creators of first world culture and wealth and affirms a deity who is impassioned about justice for the third world and the marginalized. The indigenous populations of the world, most of which are in economic subjugation to the West, must continue to develop their own distinctive view of Scripture, not that seen through the lens of eurocentric and American cultures. Thus, Biblical interpretation engages in the social, religious, and cultural issues of

52. Itumeleng J Mosala, "Race, Class, and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Appropriation of the Bible," *Semeia* 73 (1996) 43.
53. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology," *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, ed. I. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986) 175-199.
54. One should remember the anecdote that illustrates this two-edged sword of biblical readings: "When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'Let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible."
55. See Mogomme Alpheus Masoga, "Re-defining Power: Reading the Bible in Africa from the Peripheral and Central Positions," *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology*, 133-147.
56. Cain Hope Felder, "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentism and biblical interpretation," *Black Theology: A Documentary History* 2, ed. James Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis) 188.
57. "Mission and Church," *African Ecclesial Review* 34 (1994) 176.
58. Cain Hope Felder, *Stoney the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 127f.

Africa. Thus, authentic interpretation involves addressing the Bible from the perspectives of both the culture and the interpreter.

This is the contribution that the critical wisdom tradition of Job and Qoheleth makes to this effort, at least by analogy. From the context of foreign oppression, the deity of the ruling class is rejected as unjust and as an exploitator of the poor. Retribution is no longer simply viewed through the lens of righteousness and wickedness, injustice and foolishness. The Bible, including especially the critical wisdom tradition, contains its own internal self-criticism.[59] This means hermeneutically in South Africa as well as in other postcolonial cultures that those in power no longer may call on divine legitimation, including an appeal to the Bible, as justifying in a self-evident fashion their rule and to explain the poverty of the economically deprived. It also means that the imperial power of the eurocentric and America cultures in modern biblical studies to legitimate hierarchical rule has been demystified and abandoned.[60] Now, ordinary readers are to gain the skill to engage in interpretation from their context and then in conversation with biblical scholars. There is, encoded in the Bible, an authentic message of liberation, but it may be ascertained only through a proper hermeneutic of liberation of the oppressed. Black theologians strive to use the Bible, including I would argue the critical wisdom texts, as "a weapon in the hands of the oppressed."[61] One should remember the common metaphor that one should "use the white man's tools to tear down the white man's house."

Afrocentric hermeneutics, if it is Christian, should set forth a blending of native culture with the Gospel. Or in the words of my South African student, Makhosazana Nzimande,

> Postcolonialism in the South African context should pay specific attention to not just raising black consciousness but also to the issue of intertextuality. I believe that such readings should draw largely from the African folklore traditions and African indigenous religions than from secular colonial writings. The postcolonial readers in South Africa would have to engage in the interpretations of biblical texts based on their social and cultural locations. To the African readers, what this task entails is the unearthing and foregrounding of their rich cultural heritage, which the crosscurrents of Westernization have thus far failed to extinguish, namely, the notion of African corporate existence.

She emphasizes that biblical hermeneutics must be contextual. Struggles dealing with race, class, gender, and cultural have arisen in order to address life in South Africa.[62] Contextual biblical interpretation includes the affirmation that the issues of Blacks in South Africa must be addressed by their interaction with the struggles for liberation in the Bible. Biblical scholars, of course, need to be socially engaged with the struggles of Black South Africans.[63] In doing so, the values and traditions of South Africans tribes that comprised the cultures of its precolonial history need to be blended with the message that Christ came to free the oppressed from bondage. These values of the poor and marginalized need to be addressed by Scripture.

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59. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology*, 27.
60. RS Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible*, *The Bible and Postcolonialism* I (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
61. Gerald O West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation," *The Bible in Africa*, ed. Gerald O West and Musa W Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 33.
62. West, "Contextual Bible Study in South Africa." Pp. 595-610 in *The Bible in Africa*.
63. Gerald O West, *The Academy of the Poor. Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Interventions 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

9. Conclusion

Indeed, the direction of history, to use Gottwald's language, is the evolution toward liberation. Struggle or conflict is inevitably a part of liberation. However, there is the ever present temptation of the oppressed who are liberated to become themselves the oppressors. Indeed, if liberation is ultimately achieved in South Africa, the temptation of the descendants of the former oppressed people to develop their own hierarchy must be rejected. The key is whether there is free and equal access to goods and status regardless of race or color, or whether there will be a new elitist hierarchy that emerges that leads ultimately to the deprivation of other groups who become marginalized. Can the newly liberated still read the biblical text with a critical eye that recognizes that the God of the oppressed opposes the God of the oppressor? Post colonialism points to the convergence of the values and rights of both the former colonizers and the colonized and their own very different experiences and worldviews. This is the question for South African theologians to ponder in the continuing development of a new South African understanding of the Gospel.[64]

64. See Gosnell L Yorke, "Biblical Hermeneutics: An Afrocentric Perspective," *Journal R & T* 22 (2000) 1-11 (published by Unisa Press of the University of South Africa); Gerald O West, "On the Eve of an African Biblical Studies: Trajectories and Trends, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997) 99-115. For a comprehensive overview of Black theology in South Africa, see Tinyiko S Maluleke, "Theology in (South) Africa: How the Future has Changed," *Towards an Agenda for Textual Theology*, 364-389.