POSTCOLONIAL ANXIETIES AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM IN (SOUTH) AFRICA

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Abstract

This article responds to the concerns of West (2008) about postcolonial criticism. It endeavours to suggest a place for postcolonial inquiries within biblical studies, emphasizes parallels with the work of Mosala (1989), returns to West’s (2000) question about the contribution of the church to transformation in South Africa, and also purposefully extends the remit of postcolonial research, in order to include the pre-colonial archive.

1. Introduction

Gerald West (2008) is a worried man. His main anxiety centres upon the fear that postcolonial biblical criticism, commentary, and exegesis has been appropriated by a diasporic intellectual enclave, whose influence may occlude indigenous projects, projects that emerge from an authentic postcolonial material existence and are theorized about in this same locality around the campfire when the sun sets (Gutierrez 1973, 11). This worry arises out of both a puzzling lacuna: “Why has (South) African biblical scholarship shown so little interest in postcolonial discourse?” (West 2008, 148, original emphasis); as well as a growing consternation that regional scholars, perhaps unwittingly, may collude in this neo-colonial plunder and, rather than their own discursive inquiry informing and constituting a local discussion and debate, the theorizing will be undertaken on distant shores, and the evidence will be filed in the studies of scholars in the dusty West. Rightly, he wants to resist the Schliemanns and Lord Elgins of our world.
not only from purloining our local artefacts, but, more importantly, from pronouncing authoritatively upon them from the comfort of their occidental armchairs. In addition, West (2008, 151) worries about the elision of a Marxist reading of our experience, arguably “a doctrine with the same metaphysical and moral scope as Christianity” (Maclntyre 2006, 146), and which is forthright in its challenge and extends a promise of justice and equality.

2. Discourse in the Diaspora

West (2008, 150-4) notes the rather tiresome invocation of the holy trinity of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha whenever the word “postcolonial” is uttered, an annoyance that is all the more wearying because postcolonial biblical criticism, of the sort that is fertile and productive—adjectives with a locative quality—emerges, at a foundational (the word is used advisedly) level, out of a critique of Said’s Orientalism (1978). Either it was the failure of Said, or it is the failure of those who continue to revisit his thesis, to emphasize the subtitle of his work: “Western Conceptions of the Orient.” The “oriental” is a Western category, an interposition, and Said’s (1978) purpose is to highlight this label and its dubious and pejorative provenances and consequences within Western societies—from its generation and documentation by travellers, soldiers, and colonial administrators to the establishment of schools of Oriental Studies, which define and analyse “the oriental” through Western lenses, and the subsequent authoritative pronouncements which are delivered upon the “oriental nature” in Western parliaments, churches, schools, homes, and, by extension, and often more insidiously, in name-calling amongst children in the playground. This very purpose, as commendable as it may be, is seized upon by Young (2001, 383-94) as a failure in a transformatively beneficial sense, because it lacks the dimension of materiality of what it means to live, not simply as a Westerner who names, classifies, and analyses
outsiders, nor as a foreigner in a culture that interpellates one in a particular manner, but to live in ‘a local habitation and have a name.’ Said (1978), for Young (2001, 389), focuses less upon reality—the reality of those whom he documents—than upon a simulated “virtual reality,” and thereby is complicit in “forgetting that discourses and representations have materiality” (Mbembe 2001, 5).

Nonetheless, the defining importance of an existentially locative materiality lies not simply in one’s place in, and membership of, a particular society or community, but it also lies—an operative iteration—in the labels, categories, and names inscribed upon one, as well as the verbal and gestural responses enacted by one, in the wider, if often unwelcome, context (see Snyman 2008, 115-6). Regrettably or not, this is a context that cannot be ignored.

Therefore, more crucially central to the set of anxieties about postcolonial biblical criticism is the manner in which local scholars respond to the theoretical abstractions that are generated through the appropriation and interpretation of indigenous fieldwork studies both by the local academy, which ought not to escape scrutiny, and by the foreign one. Whilst the matter is a complex one, and, arguably, may involve a project informed by

The central assumption ... that the peculiar “historicity” of African societies, their own raisons d’être and their relation to solely themselves, are rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized (Mbembe 2001, 9)

the material consequences for the enchorial inhabitants are quite different to those which may impact upon the global community. For when, in situ, the sun rises the next day, the theorizing of the night before around the campfire informs the practical tasks of daylight, and the fragments that are found, and the evidence that accrues, potentially may affirm or deny the enrichment of life for the resident heirs of that specific archaeological site.
It may bear repeating that postcolonial studies focuses primarily upon societies once subjected to colonial conquest, and retraces that “history of European expansion and occupation of most of the global land mass between 1492 and 1945” (Young 2001, 5). Amongst its tasks is the endeavour to reclaim the cultural knowledges (plural) and mores, rationalities (plural) and practices of previously colonized peoples through acts of archaeological retrieval. This endeavour is site-specific, painstakingly slow and detailed, and its discoveries often are difficult to verify, except by means of comparisons and contrasts. But of greater significance for postcolonial researchers is the contention that these acts of recovery do not merely contribute to an understanding of conquest and subjugation; they also highlight the implications and consequences of colonization, and, furthermore—probably too ambitiously—involves the procedure of de-marginalizing the jettisoned accounts and reintegrating them into the narratives of the sited community, with implications for the society which surrounds that community, as well as for the nation to which that community belongs. Postcolonial criticism also generates an impetus to, and finds points of contact with, other, and more specific, inquiries of the colonial legacy with respect to, inter alia, customs of social intercourse and sexual relations, of medical practices, of literary forms, and of the relationship to the physical environment and the animal world. But it is proposed that, as in the area of biblical studies, these inquiries demand not merely returning to the discourses inhibited during the colonial era, but also of (re)visiting the pre-colonial trajectories, some of which were repressed and prohibited, and, in addition, and importantly, to place under scrutiny the discursive formations which are countermanded, forbidden, as well as those sanctioned, by the postcolonial liberators, who, in turn, modify, refine, and impose their own “grilles de spécification” (Foucault 1969, 58), which, once again, may oppress and exclude.
3. Hermeneutics @home

It is entirely apt that some anxiety is prevalent in the academy about an avenue of research that, whilst professing to be ‘postcolonial,’ may both be, and appear to be, a neo-colonial form of plunder, and the raiders, more treacherously, may retain a residual sense of superiority informed by a First World ethnocentrism. But, short of closing the intellectual windows of our neo-classical academic towers and fencing in our excavation sites, there may be little that local scholars can do, except to insist that the pre-colonial and colonial archives are thoroughly quarried and the ostraca and marginalia given due attention.

Moreover, before projecting our fears onto foreign bodies and minds, one suggests that, perhaps, where local scholars, and scholars not only of Biblical/Religious Studies or Theology, but also of Philosophy, Ethics, Politics, Sociology, Psychology, and the Classics, ought to direct their inquisitorial probing is not only to themselves in a confessional inquiry as to their complicity in the seamless transition concluded between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ in our country in 1994, but also to the beneficiaries of, what may be labelled, a neo-liberal élite pact. To return to an earlier and important question asked by West (2000, 55)—”why has the church had so little success in making a sustained contribution to the reconstruction and development of (South) Africa?”—entails, in turn, asking quite specific contextual questions not simply of how and why did the mainstream Christian denominations sanction the 1994 settlement, but also how and why did biblical criticism, in which so much energy had been directed, arguably, fail us, or, less boldly, disappoint some of us, when, possibly—here the adverb must bear the burden of our lost hope—an opportunity to forge a more fair, just, and equitable future presented itself.

One of the many reasons, one avers, is contained in West’s (2008, 150) more than apposite emphasis of Punt’s (2006)
contention that “there are vested institutional, ecclesial, scholastic, economic, and power interests in the status quo of South Africa[n] biblical scholarship.” For, although prior to the transition from a racial oligarchy to a democracy in South Africa, the liberal, largely white, English-medium tertiary educational institutions were funded, via the taxpayer, by the National Party Government, one observes that their “interests” were “vested” in the high profile proponents of liberation. Thus, it was almost inevitable that a work like that of Mosala’s (1989)—critical, exciting, but, above all, liberating in a radical and innovative manner—engendered in so many the deflected gaze of the gospel’s passers-by (Luke 10:29-37), because, on the one hand, it held to account the biblical interpretation of Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak; whilst, on the other hand, it envisaged a project that “eschews the intellectual laziness or the deliberate ideological choice that simply colludes with the text without much ado” (Mosala 1989, 192). But, of course, the galvanizing of intellectual energy and the evasion of collusion, in order to tease out the “liberating themes the texts encode,” do not necessarily involve rejecting “the oppressive structures that frame” the text (Mosala 1989, 40).

Therefore, the journey envisioned by such a thesis takes the inquirers beyond, behind, and around the text, and enjoins them to embark upon an alternative pilgrimage that may involve many wrong turns and, probably, only tentative findings, which would hardly suit the dogmatism with which scholars enjoy presenting their papers. Without denying the efforts of researchers who do undertake such unrewarding, provisional, yet invigorating projects, a task, one concedes, that may involve “some radically hypothetical assumptions” (Thiselton 1992, 426),1 perhaps to energize the biblical academy to revisit the seam of rock, and to scrutinize the vein from which the valuable ore—the valued

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1 Those “assumptions” may be more in evidence with regard to Boesak’s reading of Gen 4:1-16, than in Mosala’s (1989, 38) charge against Tutu of his unproblematic assimilation of Jesus as the Messiah in terms of Isa 61:1-7.
interpretation—is extracted is difficult enough, given the commitment to the dominant exegetical findings within the academies. At that critical time when Mosala’s book was published in 1989, it may have been even more difficult to defend the extensive scale, slow progress, and, quite possibly, fragmentary results of an archaeological project that both may have delayed the progress of the struggle, and also may have involved jettisoning some of the contributions to the corpus of the existing liberation traditio itself.

But, whilst quite possibly only in a marginal sense, ignoring the detour through various archaeological sites may have contributed to the current situation in South Africa of too many of the promises, which were made in 1994, unfulfilled, and too many hopes frustrated, and, more importantly, too many people unemployed and without adequate health care or housing, whilst German-purchased corvettes sail about in False Bay. However, as noted above, it is not simply the biblical and theological sorority and fraternity that may require a penetrating inquiry into their supportive participation in certifying the 1994 transition, together with a sober analysis of the present outcome, but also the other disciplines in the Arts and Humanities.

It is often claimed that the current image of our country—owing, indeed, to “vested interests”—all too readily invokes the portrait of joyful black and white men, women, and children celebrating together, whilst waving the national flag, singing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, and proclaiming the ‘rainbow miracle.’ But the reality—that material focus, which is part of the postcolonial project—suggests a less jubilant and sanguine image. What, indeed, has happened to the claim that the liberty of the oppressed in our country would result in the fulfilment of their basic human needs of food and shelter, health and education?

It has been forcibly contended that a socialist future for South Africa, which was advocated by the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party, the United Democratic Front, and the Congress of South African Trades
Union as late as 1990, was abandoned, *inter alia*, for “the criteria valued by the Pax Americana ... [of] ... liberal democracy and individual rights ... neo-liberal economics and curtail[ed] state interventionism ... [and] ... the free flow of capital and goods” (Louw 2004, 194-95). This conversion to the Washington Consensus was orchestrated by the careful wooing of the ANC in particular, by influential business groups, both those local and those from abroad, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, western diplomats, and the National Party at a series of workshops and conferences assembled in domestic and foreign locations (de Klerk 1998, 189; 227-28; 344; Louw 2004, 174; Van der Westhuizen 2007, 244-46). The resultant transition from a model of growing the economy through redistribution, the ANC’s initial position, to that of the National Party’s Western persuaded Normative Economic Model, which was released in March 1993, and which, effectively, became the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) plan of the ANC in 1996, ensured the survival of racial capitalism, albeit in a “blurred” form (Louw 2004, 174; 195).

This reversal by the ANC meant that “economic growth was placed before social and developmental needs” (Van der Westhuizen 2007, 244), and even if South Africa *de jure* is “a formal constitutional democracy,” *de facto* it “is not a functioning liberal democracy. Instead, it is a one-party dominant democracy, characterized by corporatism and elite pacting” (Louw 2004, 195). Reflecting on the beneficiaries and the marginalized of the 1994 agreement, Louw (2004, 174) paints a troubling scene:

... the settlement’s winners were South Africa’s black middle class and (Anglo) big business, while the losers have been South Africa’s black underclass, now (perhaps permanently) trapped in poverty ...

And South Africa’s white citizens, who were the former recipients of economic and, indeed, political, benefits, “were given the privilege to transfer almost all their property (wealth)—also the
undeserved part—into a new economic system that operated strongly pro rich” (Terreblanche 2007). Is Terreblanche’s (2007) hope that “the old white elite and the new black elite realize the situation is highly immoral and not sustainable” futile?

Perhaps, most painfully, the liberation hermeneutic of the mainstream Christian denominations was found wanting in precisely the way in which Mosala (1989) proposed, when the issue of national reconciliation in South Africa confronted the deeds of history. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 permitted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established by the Act, to circumvent due legal process, by granting amnesty to those who “fully disclosed” their political actions regardless of their severity (Clark and Worger 2004, 118). The churches appeared all too willing to participate in the affairs of the TRC without questioning whether it is justice which effects reconciliation, or whether it is truth; and without observing the more widely accepted notion that “the truth of accountability is determined through law” (Van Zyl Slabbert 2003, 321). Thus, a ‘united’ and ‘reconciled’ nation is premised upon a corpus of stories, the product of memory and forgetfulness, which, one conjectures, brought little comfort and, one knows, brought paltry compensation particularly to the victims, and to the surviving families of the victims, of state violence, who were the most in need (Daye 2004, 144); whilst the perpetrators transferred their undeserved wealth from one regime to another, or, more harshly, for Mamdani, the “TRC allowed the great majority of those privileged under apartheid to get away scot-free” (Van Zyl Slabbert 2003, 323). Confession and forgiveness, as the sacramental wing of the church has taught, includes penance, and one proposes that the narratives of victims and perpetrators ought not to exclude the possibility of legal prosecution as the enactment of that penance.

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2 Giliomee (2003, 650) notes that “There were no historians, political analysts or any other social scientists on the commission, which was made up predominantly of clergymen, human rights lawyers and activists from non-governmental organizations.”
Amongst others, it has taken Jacques Derrida (2000, 104)—indeed, a post-structuralist and a foreigner—to observe that

This conflation of confessional story-telling with truth, and truth with reconciliation, is a feature of a solicitation, both as a perennial tremor of a weak fault-line at the heart of specific and wider questions about, and issues of, justice for South Africans; and also a solicitation as a seduction by foreign, if ‘global,’ economic policies, which have contributed to the enrichment and the continuing affluence of the few in South Africa. The latter seductive ordering and re-ordering of the economy, enforced by external as well as internal pressure groups and lobbyists, obstructs restorative justice and redistributive economics, whilst the former vestigial reverberations continue to pose questions to the democratic settlement in South Africa (Derrida 1972, 161).

If the suggestion that postcolonial research in the area of biblical studies, with its implications for theological reflection and the possibility of contributing to the ethical character of South Africa, and which may have wider implications, is not without validity, how, then, does it make that contribution? This, in acute form, is the question that must be considered, because whilst such an endeavour will overlap with, or, perhaps, more accurately, perform an ancillary role to, a more open liberatory hermeneutics, that is, one characterized by perennial resistance to dominant interpretations, and one that is flexible, corrigible, and dialogic, it may—it is a modest claim—ensure that the materiality of the

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3 Translation: “One often confuses, sometimes in a calculated way, forgiveness with similar themes: excuse, regret, amnesty, prescription, etc., so many senses, of which certain come under the law, a penal law, to which forgiveness must remain, in principle, heterogeneous and irreducible.”
biblical studies inquiry is neither simply a remote Middle Eastern one nor merely a present-day South African context, but one bridged by the recent colonial archive, and one that remains palpable in the lives of the majority of (South) Africans.

Needless to say, for the postcolonial exegete, the NT remains the primary and authoritative text. Again, needless to say, this text is a selective, narrative corpus of theological, not historical purposes, and its writers and contributors are informed, and, indeed, constrained by their own worldviews. On the one hand, the text, as a cultural artefact, is generated by a restricted vision, one that is constructed from the answers to fundamental existential questions and shaped by mythological content; a perspective or angle of view that is expressed symbolically in accounts and stories through language, art, music, and ritual actions, as well as in the economic, political, and scientific practices of a bounded societal milieu, and it always remains subject to the dynamic of corrective and detour, to a greater or lesser degree, as this vision, this worldview, forms, reforms, and re-forms itself (see Wright 1992, 123 and passim; also, Chidester 1988a; 1988b; 1989; 2000). On the other hand, the individual and collective interpretive practices of readers are no less restricted by their worldviews, their perspectival grids, through which they view their environs, and through which they view scripture.

But, within the postcolonial context, the dialogue between the two worldviews arguably has been dictated by the vested interests of the dominant interpreters and collectivities, which, in an extreme form, merely reverberates with their own images and sounds (Thiselton 1992, 531). And, for the postcolonial critic, those self-portraits and echoes have resided in the diaspora for far too long, and have been disseminated, through conscious and unconscious collusive acts, via the tomes of biblical commentary produced in Heidelberg and Edinburgh, by the diaspora within.

Thus, the suggestion that postcolonial biblical criticism tables is that the interpretive act ought not to circumvent the materiality of colonial conquest. This involves a subsequent re-drafting of the
colonized through returning to the ruptures in the linearity of the muthos of colonization wherever such an archaeological quest may lead—to the academy, the seminary, the church, the press, the school, and the home—in order for the influence of the occluded to contribute to, alter, resist, even revolt against—become the stasis (as faction) against the stasis (as the extant position)—influential readings, which, it must be stated forthrightly, perhaps more particularly in South Africa, inform and construct the character of the postcolonial society.

4. A postcolonial contribution to Hermeneutics @home

The story, variously called the “Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” in Mark 12:1-12 is, one suggests, difficult for the postcolonial exegete to read in (South and southern) Africa without the intrusion of questions about, and notions and historical knowledge of, inter alia, the meaning of land, the conquest of land, forced evictions from land, and post-independent, or, in South Africa, post-apartheid, claims for land. But the passage seems to offer little that is liberating, and appears to enforce patterns of ownership, exploitation—it even includes violent action—and results in a reading that appears oppressive, de-humanizing, and seems to maintain the extant relations of production.

The diasporic foreign tomes provide only detached and exalted interpretations of paltry consolation. Hooker’s (1991, 274) assertion that “Mark has understood the purpose of the parable to be an attack on the religious leaders ... [who] ... have consistently refused to hear God’s word and do so still in their refusal to listen to Jesus” relies upon an allegorical reading, which Taylor (1966, 472) also admits, but with the qualification that “the narrative is not pure allegory.” Cranfield (1963, 366-67), momentarily

4 So called by Wright (1992), but also known, inter alia, as the “Parable of the Vineyard” (Gould 1896), “The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen” (Nineham 1963; Taylor 1966), “A Parable About Rejection” (Hooker 1991). These occidental labels draw attention to themselves.
perceiving an alternative reading, cites Jeremias’s ‘option for the poor’ in the “others” to whom the vineyard will be given, but then he notes that “it is very doubtful whether this explanation, attractive though it undoubtedly is, can be maintained” (Cranfield 1963, 367).

However, if “[s]tories about landlords and tenants, and potential disputes between them, would have had a highly familiar ring,” because the context of first-century Judaism demonstrates both foreign and local non-resident hierarchies owning vast acreages, whilst peasant farmers and labourers “struggled ... to avoid being crushed between the two millstones of local exploitation and foreign overlordship” (Wright 1992, 169), a fortiori its ‘ring’ is ‘familiar’ in our present African contexts. And, even if this parable “is absolutely understandable as spoken to peasants who know all about absentee landlords and what they themselves have thought, wished, and maybe even planned” (Crossan 1991, 352), quite how it is ‘gospel’ for the present workers to be murdered so that other workers may be enslaved under the same oppressive conditions with the same penalties for resistance may require some campfire reflection.

Current research into the land question in southern Africa by scholars of religion has focused upon its sacrality, especially with reference to the ancestors, burial grounds, and the hierophantic quality of the natural environment. Rakotsoane’s (2005) inquiry into the opposition to resettlement by the communities affected by the Lesotho Highlands Water project, in spite of a comprehensive compensation package, emphasizes that both commercial and developmental projects funded and undertaken by foreign companies and organizations must include an educational component about worldview perspectives other than their own. But, sensitivity to local mores often eludes the domestic governing power itself. Stites’s (2000) case study of the right of access to the tombs of the deceased by two families—one in Maxongo’s Hoek in the Eastern Cape; the other, in the Middleburg district of Mpumalanga—highlights the numinous quality of place, and also
demonstrates that burial sites provide evidence of domicile in cases of land claims.

Unfortunately, however, the prevailing view about land both in South Africa and more widely in the region, and one that even seems to inform the official policies, comprises an opposition between two systems: communal tenure versus individual tenure. This generates a set of conundrums about which system ought to prevail; or, if both are to be recognized, in which regions of the country each may be applicable; and, furthermore, how the law is to accommodate them. However, recent investigations demonstrate that the pre-colonial material archive reveals a more nuanced situation. Whilst the allocation of land—residential and common—lay within the province of a chief and his councillors, individual families held the right of residence and of produce from their own portion, and also the right of succession. But these entitlements were embedded within an expanding network of reciprocal duties and benefits within an area under the jurisdiction of a regional ruler and his advisors (Cousins 2008, 129). The intertwining of corporate and individual rights and obligations ensured that individual interests and consequent actions impacted upon the general welfare of a community, and, likewise, that the decisions and actions of the rulers were dependent upon communal support. Thus, a politics of accommodation existed with respect to land allotment and availability, produce, areas of grazing, immigration and external dangers, and the consultative process acted as a check on the power of the overlords, even to the extent of threatening the assumption of hereditary succession to high office.

Colonial intervention caused this situation to change, and “the image of chieftainship which was seized on by white officials and legislators was based on notions of chiefly despotism stemming from a crude understanding of the Shakan system ... The deeper-seated and underlying forms of chiefly accountability and responsiveness ... were by and large ignored” (Delius 2008, 218).
The incorporation of chiefs and headmen within administrative structures, although in different ways in Natal, the Cape and the Transkei, and the intensification of legislation following the formation of Union in 1910, has established a false dichotomy between the individual and the communal right to land in South Africa. One of the reasons that the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 is subject to legal challenge is that

The Act gives the top-down version of chiefly power the backing of the formal legal system, with potentially far-reaching consequences not only symbolically but also materially in relation to the validity of unilateral decisions by land administration committees concerning land sales and mining deals (Claassens 2008, 290).

It rests upon colonial and apartheid notions of the concept of land being attributed to indigenous people, and ignores the pre-colonial archive, a material reality that survives in residual form in many rural communities. The Communal Land Rights Act and its attendant laws “ignore and thereby undermine indigenous, layered, decision-making forums and levels of authority” (Claassens 2008, 377).

The parable of the vineyard and its tenants, as it appears in Mark 12:1-12, presents serious difficulties for hearers and readers, whether first-century or twenty-first century indentured labourers, peasant workers, and rural land dwellers in Palestine or the Transkei. When approaching the biblical text, Dube (2000, 85) notes that “[a]s a person of southern African origin, and of Africa at large, I immediately put my story-maps of pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence encounters on the table.” This extends Young’s (2001) remit, and makes it incumbent upon the postcolonial exegete to convey the pre-colonial situation, in addition to the colonial interventions and the postcolonial inheritance, with reference to land, its ownership and use. Armed with the results of careful archaeological (in the Foucauldian sense, see Foucault 1969) inquiries, the “Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” which, in the postcolonial context, appears to present a
colonial transgressor killing off his workers, may be read through the pre-colonial material reality via colonialism to the postcolonial context. In this sense, for the postcolonial reader, the presence of absent landowners and tenant farmers already represents a breakdown of the pre-colonial reciprocal relationship between chiefs and subjects, and portrays expatriate overlords exploiting workers and demanding produce. Thus the postcolonial inquiry does, and must do, more than simply foreground the contrast between colonial and postcolonial situations. Owing to its return to the pre-colonial evidence, it also asks questions about the biblical text, its composition, embellishments, and elisions, about the possible social position of the author and/or his community, and, more importantly, about the story behind the story, or the competing strands of the parable, the kinds of subversive questions which Mosala (1989) argued were necessary if liberation is to be found in the biblical message. And in Logion 65 of the Gospel of Thomas, possibly a source of the Gospel of Mark (Davies and Johnson 1997, 260-261), and in Parable 55 (Herm. Sim. V.5.2) of the Shepherd of Hermas, perhaps dated to 150 CE (Osiek 1983, 12), perhaps even as early as 110 CE (Ehrman 2003, 169), agonistic traditions jostle for alternative readings of the story in canonical Mark 12:1-12.

Whilst one cannot pre-empt the response of readers to this passage, one posits the following conjectures. First, like the original hearers, the current (South) African hearers would find the situation familiar. Second, rights to particular portions of land and their produce are not alien to the indigenous communities of Africa. Third, the relationships between landlords and workers are embedded in negotiated and agreed upon traditional frameworks, or are formalized by some kind of consensual oral contract in an indaba arena. Fourth, the reaction of the workers to the demands of the landlord in the parable may display, inter alia, the ‘wickedness’ of those working the soil, or it may suggest that there is no common agreement about work and produce. Fifth, the death
of the son and heir, ultimately, will alter the situation for the landlord utterly, since the land will no longer remain the property of his family, which demonstrates that the individual and his family no longer contribute to the well-being of the community, and the community itself needs to be reconstituted. Sixth, the land is being given to “others,” but those “others” are also workers of the soil, and thus the situation will be perpetuated until the death of the present landlord. Seventh, there is a little irony in the proof-text (Ps 118:22-3), which extends beyond the difficulties that Hooker (1991, 276-77) enumerates. The action of “building” is common only to the landowner (Mark 12:1) and those who have rejected the foundation (Mark 12:10). And it was the landowner who built a “wall” (Mark 12:1). He erected a boundary that may not have been agreed upon by common consent, and now the vineyard and its produce will pass from his hands. Likewise, those who have rejected the pre-colonial archive of land use in (South) Africa have erected boundaries—promulgated new legal acts—which, to a certain degree, are arbitrary and have been imposed, which depend upon spurious colonial acts of administrative control, which have benefited and corrupted the few, which have drawn upon notions of land from the diaspora, and which have led, and, quite probably, will lead, to acts of violent resistance. Finally, readers, having been made aware of editorial and compositional techniques and aware of the employment by those in power of selected strands of the pre-colonial and colonial historical narratives, could also be empowered to challenge redaction practices that may collude with the dominant parties, both in the first century and in the twenty-first century.

This method of locating the postcolonial reader of the bible within the pre-colonial, colonial, and now postcolonial environment does not draw direct parallels between the textual and the current situations. But it may engender the possibility of revisiting the material concerns of justice both within the text and in the contemporary situation with the altered visions of worldview perspectives that, even though they may occur in adversative
forms, challenge both the dominant traditions within the biblical account, as well as those who hold power and attempt to control the present milieu. This may entail resistance, and give rise to a response that may be costly, but it may be less distant from the more pervasive and informing lessons of the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, who is soon to be crucified; and, not without significance, the passage itself, with all its tragedy, may be ‘good news’ simply in the sense that it offers the possibility of establishing human relationships—as landlords and workers, as members of communities, as producers of goods—on a new basis.

5. Conclusion

In fine, reading this story within a (South) African setting would generate, in all probability, a contextual image of the contested nature of land. Perhaps behind, perhaps contemporary, but certainly surrounding Mark 12:1-12 is a contested field of interpretations, which have been excluded from the Canon, and questions about where the story is to end, and, more significantly, whose story it is, remain. Likewise, and more firmly, behind the current legislation on land in South Africa are alternative traditions, which have been occluded from the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004, and, it appears, this has occurred owing to the intervention by apartheid sanctioned, supported, and, perhaps even, formed traditions (Cousins 2008, 23-26). The pre-colonial archive has been subsumed and reinvented by colonial practices and, without postcolonial investigations that return to the pre-colonial site and follow trajectories through to the postcolonial legislative action, the law will, albeit attenuated, perpetuate colonial traditions and oppressive and corrupt systems of patriarchy. The competing stories encircling the story in the Gospel of Mark and the embedded customs now made peripheral to the law in South Africa are the marginal others without which the dominant trajectory can be defined, and they need to be ‘re-
voiced,’ suggests the postcolonial critic, in the cause of a liberating gospel.

These endeavours to uncover traditions behind the tradition (the singular always concealing its ancestors) and the encircling adversative customs and mores that were defeated in the battle for hegemony, whether of the biblical or pre-colonial archives, creates a ‘writerly’ text, rather than simply a ‘readerly’ text, and concurs with Mouton’s (2001, 122) proposal

... that the authority of Scripture be refocused and restructured within the dynamic site of continuous interaction between the Spirit of God, contemporary faith communities, and the biblical texts. Such an approach would embrace the many dimensions of the full hermeneutic circle, and not marginalize the current worldviews of readers. But, in addition, those ‘other dimensions’ must not refuse permission to prize open the Canon both of Sacred Scripture—that ‘refocusing’ and ‘restructuring’ of “the authority of Scripture”—and also of the ‘sacred scripture’ which is authorized by our politicians, our prelates, our scholars. And within biblical scholarship, it would do so in the cause of

[m]aking connections with the biblical theological trajectory that embraces pain—that articulates the theology of the poor and marginalized within the biblical traditions —[and that] will enable them [the readers] to articulate and own their working theologies (West 2000, 78).

That articulation, that act of poësis, of ‘making,’ is embedded in a material archive that requires excavation and attention, and that may contribute to address current attempts to untie and resolve complex issues, such as land redistribution, in a more authentic and just manner.

Postcolonial archaeologists may neither disagree with West (2008, 161) that “what is needed is the social theory and political praxis of progressive Marxism and the resources of prophetic Christianity”, nor with his kindly expressed hesitation that he is “not sure postcolonialism offers this”. Unfortunately, the campaigns for hegemonic interpretations within the academy attempt, more often than not, to reject precisely this kind of
reticence and marginal liminality that would permit postcolonial theorists and fieldworkers to contribute to, but not to invalidate, other modes of reading the bible, in an endeavour to augment, as an ancillary adjunct, the incarnational possibilities of our dreams and visions of justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Bibliography


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