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# DECOLONISING BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN THE (SOUTH) AFRICAN CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

The recognition of social location as a heuristic device in biblical hermeneutics does not necessarily equate to the production of radical and alternative knowledge. From our own social location (Africa), biblical hermeneutics has to deal with the dynamics of coloniality. Africa, especially South Africa as a social location, is still burdened by coloniality. The orientation of African biblical hermeneutics has to be decolonial if it is to overcome the persistence of coloniality by privileging African knowledge systems and African thinkers. It also has to unmask the structures of coloniality that continue to destabilise the African imagination. The emergence of African biblical hermeneutics does not imply that the colonial systems have been overcome – coloniality is able to survive and thrive even under the tag “African”.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the toppling of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, Libya has become what others describe as a “migration corridor” (Bredeloup & Pliez 2011). According to Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal* (2015), in 2014, the European Union (EU) reported a record of 280,000 illegal border crossings, of which over 170,000 came mainly from Libya via the Mediterranean Sea. In April 2015, a boat carrying hundreds of migrants from the coast of Libya capsized in the Mediterranean Sea, resulting in the death of approximately 850 people. The media reports on this disaster sugar-coat the problem by referring to it as a “migrant boat disaster”. Mainly Black Africans were in that boat; for those in Africa, the boat disaster is an African disaster. Africans

flock from different parts of Africa to Libya in a desperate attempt to escape from the African continent into Europe. This incident serves to highlight the plight of – to borrow terms from Fanon (1968) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) – “the wretched of the Earth”, whose postcolonial context is still marked by “damnation”: poverty, civil wars, death, and inferiority, among other things. This damnation is a product of colonisation and racialisation.

The longing to cross over from Africa to Europe reflects the long-term colonial damage of the African social-political-epistemological structure and the continuing damage caused by the structures of coloniality. While the colonial slave trade of Africans, among others, was officially abolished at the end of the nineteenth century, structures of coloniality enabled the reproduction of the same system of domination and oppression in the current so-called postcolonial situation, in which Africans continue to hold the short end of the stick. Pope Francis has called upon Europeans to act “swiftly and decisively”, in order to address the current humanitarian crisis that centres on the Mediterranean Sea. One wonders why the Pope, who originates from the subaltern region, would not call upon fellow subalterns to find a solution for the crises and challenges that subalterns are facing. Furthermore, one wonders how Europe, which contributed over 65 million migrants to other continents during the colonial era, exploited Africa and other continents and islands in the service of its imperial regimes and, in turn, gave rise to the current migration challenge through the disparities created by the colonial machine, would provide a reasonable solution (cf. Emmer & Lucassen 2012). The decolonial turn triggered the migration of some Europeans back to Europe as they sought to escape from those they had exploited for centuries.

The slave-migrant conundrum may seem irrelevant to the topic at hand, namely biblical interpretation in the (South) African context, but the two are related. The current migration of Africans to Europe reflects a search for an alternative to the current situation in which Africans, “the wretched of the Earth”, find themselves, but in this search for an alternative, there is a looming danger of reproducing the colonial system, which through its racial hierarchisation pushed the Africans into the lower rank of human existence (Maldonado-Torres 2007:240–270). This article argues that social location as heuristic device does not necessarily equate to production of alternative knowledge. Biblical hermeneutics in the (South) African context, if it is to be an alternative for Africans to cherish, has to produce an alternative trajectory for reading the biblical text to the benefit of African communities, while unmasking the structures of coloniality that continue to destabilise the African imagination.

The first section of this article addresses the issue of social location as a heuristic device, indicating the need for decolonisation, as social location is not an innocent concept. The second section discusses the issue of epistemology, highlighting the need for the decolonisation of the African mind across the racial line. The third section sets out some possible trajectories for African biblical hermeneutics that can help us overcome the Euro-Western hegemony in our (South) African context. Finally, a biblical text is read in light of African knowledge systems.

## 2. SOCIAL LOCATION AS A HEURISTIC DEVICE

Social location is now recognised as an important hermeneutical device in the reading of biblical texts. The two volumes of *Reading from this place*, edited by Segovia and Tolbert (1995), serve to highlight a paradigm shift in biblical hermeneutics by underlining the importance of social location in one's reading of the biblical text. The emphasis on social location as a hermeneutical device is also intertwined with the turn in literary criticism toward the reader in what is referred to as reader-response criticism, which is associated with postmodernity, poststructuralism and/or deconstruction within the Western canon. The problem with these Western epistemological projects is that they "are caught within the Western canon, reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2007:212).

The use of social location as a hermeneutical device has resulted in studies that originate from subaltern regions branded as contextual approaches (e.g., African biblical interpretation, Asian biblical interpretation, cross-cultural biblical interpretation, Hispanic American biblical interpretation, Mujerista biblical interpretation, etc.), ideological approaches (e.g., cultural studies, ideological criticism, liberation theologies, postcolonial biblical interpretation), and gender-based approaches (e.g., gay/lesbian interpretation, feminist interpretation; Hayes 2004). The term "contextual" has also become fashionable for scholars in the subaltern regions. In the South African context, the late Wittenberg (1996) and West (1992; 1993) have championed the contextual hermeneutic.

Social location as a hermeneutical device in our African context cannot be divorced from the dynamics of colonialism (the imperial relationship of domination and exploitation between "European-Western-White" and the Other, "African-Native-Black") and coloniality (a continuity of the colonial form of domination, exploitation, and racialisation by the dominant racial

groups in the postcolonial era).<sup>1</sup> The South African context as a social location, given the history of colonialism and apartheid, requires us to scrutinise the body-politics of knowledge, on the one hand, and the epistemological location of the African reader, on the other.

### 3. SOCIAL LOCATION AND THE BODY-POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

The recognition of the real, flesh-and-blood reader who generates the meaning of texts signals an important shift in hermeneutics. Western critique does not question who this reader is, but from a decolonial perspective, questioning who this reader is remains a necessary task. In the (South) African context, the issue of the reader in biblical studies and in academia, in general, has to do with the “body-politics of knowledge”.<sup>2</sup> As Mignolo (2009:174) argues:

Body-politics is the darker side and the missing half of bio-politics: body-politics describes decolonial technologies enacted by bodies who realized that they were considered less human at the moment they realized that the very act of describing them as less human was a radical un-human consideration. Thus, the lack of humanity is placed in imperial actors, institutions and knowledges that had the arrogance of deciding that certain people they did not like were less human. Body-politics is a fundamental component of decolonial thinking, decolonial doing and the decolonial option.

Body-politics has to do with the issue of race and racial ordering of the world. Quijano (2000a:215-232; 2000b:534-535) claims that the idea of race as a means of social classification did not exist prior to the rise of European colonisation. The social classification of people according to race meant the establishment and legitimisation of relations of superiority-inferiority between the conqueror and the conquered.

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- 1 Grosfoguel (2007:220) defines coloniality or the colonial situation as “the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administration”.
  - 2 Mignolo (2013:338; 2007:484) describes “body-politics of knowledge” as follows: “The body-politics of knowledge includes the re-inscription, per Fanon for example, of the history inscribed in the [B]lack body in a cosmology dominated by the [W]hite body beneath the theo- and ego-politics of knowledge.”

In the South African context, the issue of “race” can be neither evaded nor avoided, as it has to do with the question of who is producing knowledge. This, in turn, has to do with social location within the racial classification system. Colonial-apartheid racialisation remains a reality. As Vice (2010:326) notes, White privilege is not an invisible norm, but it is something that continually stares one in the eyes:

In South Africa, the working and effects of privilege are starkly apparent; one cannot in good faith pretend they do not exist.

In racialised discourse, the concept “whiteness” or “White” refers to “a social location of structural privilege in the right kind of racialized society” (Taylor 2004:229). It is a social location of power in line with the structure of domination, which sets those who are racialised as Whites in the position of power, while those who are not Whites are marginalised. It is a social location of structural advantage embedded in the design and organisation of society to advance White interests (Fleras 2014:88). Whiteness, as Flagg (2005:2) argues,

generates a distinct cultural narrative, controls the racial distribution of opportunities and resources, and frames the way in which that distribution is interpreted;

it defines “the social construction of racial identity” – who is and who is not White – and sets the boundaries for the non-White racial groups. During the colonial-apartheid era, the boundaries of social location along the lines of race and ethnicity were clearly set – they were not an invisible norm operating in the background. As Steyn (2005:122) notes, the

particular historical and political configuration in South Africa has meant that [W]hites have never experienced their whiteness and the advantage it afforded them as invisible.

The White social location of privilege is, however, not a thing of the past; it remains a current reality. White social location of privilege is also a global phenomenon. Quijano (2000a:217) notes:

Alongside the expansion of colonial domination by a single ‘race’ ('Whites' – this term was an invention of British colonial America – or ‘Europeans’ from the eighteenth century on) of the rest of the population over th[e] last 400 years, the same criteria were applied to impose new social classification of the world population on a global scale.

Colonial expansion and domination made it possible for White privilege to be operative on a global scale. Race and the racial hierarchy that privileges Europeans or Whites became the most visible expression of colonial power. Although colonialism proper – the establishment of direct colonial administration in the colonised territories – has come to an end, the colonial racial hierarchies and racial classifications have survived colonialism. Therefore, Sullivan (2006:1-2) rightly argues that Whites continue to enjoy habits of racial privilege, given the persistence of the White-privileged world that currently exists.

Body-politics remains a visible reality in the field of biblical studies (cf. Masenya 2004; 2005; Masenya & Ramantswana 2012). In their review of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa, Masenya and Ramantswana (2012:630) observed that the contribution of Black African scholars in the production of knowledge published in *Old Testament Essays* has been very low. This, as Masenya and Ramantswana reasoned, also reflected the low membership of Black African scholars in the Old Testament Society of Southern African (OTSSA). In 1994, at the dawn of democracy, the membership of the OTSSA was less than 2% Black African scholars, and by 2010, the ratio was 200:36 White to Black. Furthermore, if one peruses biblical studies journals such as *Old Testament Essays* or *Neotestamentica* – journals of biblical societies, the OTSSA and the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, respectively – it is apparent that the contribution of Black African scholars is low, volume after volume. This speaks to the issue of whose knowledge is being produced and disseminated in this field. The continuing disparity in the field of biblical studies implies the continuity of structures of coloniality within the South African context.

The demise of the colonial-apartheid regime in South Africa did not result in a radical shift in the production of knowledge. The continuance of the status quo basically implies the continuity of White dominance in the production of knowledge in the field of biblical studies. It is wishful thinking to assume that Whites will, out of their own good, voluntarily give up their privileged position. The demise of colonialism and apartheid was not voluntary; it was because of internal and external pressure that the apartheid regime entered into negotiations for a new constitutional order in South Africa. Just as the Land Reform Programme, which encouraged White landowners to voluntarily sell their land, has produced little result, we cannot expect much to change on a voluntary basis, even in the field of biblical studies. The Black Other is still underrepresented in the field of biblical studies. Biblical studies in South Africa, as a social location, is still predominantly producing “White” knowledge.

From a decolonial perspective, the concept of social location is not simply concerned with place, be it Africa or South Africa. Reading from this place, without engaging the social location of the reader in the racialised world in which we live, does not necessarily address the problem. This is especially so in South Africa, where certain aspects of whiteness continually stare us in the face. Snyman (2007) suggests the construction of a hermeneutical framework that goes beyond racialisation by doing away with the binaries of White/Black, Western/African, and European/non-European. Such a framework, however, does not have to blind us from seeing the continuance of the operation of whiteness, both visibly and invisibly, in our South African context and globally. Race-, colour-, and gender-blind hermeneutics that neglect the life-denying realities facing the Black, African, non-European, and female only serves to entrench White privilege. I concur with Snyman (2010:806-808), who insists that reading must be ethical: one is responsible to take seriously the implications of one's reading (Schüssler 1988). Snyman (2015:284) argues:

The decolonial turn pushes the envelope with regard to the ethics of interpretation much further by enquiring into the power relationships constructed by socio-political realities. It forces the question of race and the role of Western epistemologies in the construction and maintenance in a politics of exclusion.

The decolonial option is concerned with “the social location of blackness as marker of the bottom of society” (Basch *et al.* 1994:40). The bottom, in this sense, is not merely racial location, but also spatial location. It is Africa as a dark continent (Jarosz 1992). It is a social location of people who in the logics of coloniality

went from the sixteenth-century characterization of ‘people without writing’ to the eighteenth and nineteenth century characterization of ‘people without history’, to the twentieth century characterization of ‘people without development’ and more recently, to the early twenty-first century characterization of ‘people without democracy’ (Grosfoguel 2007:214).

In addition, Mosby (2012:8) argues that “blackness” has to go “beyond the borders of one’s place or location within a nation state”; in so doing, it becomes “an act of resistance and a response to centuries of inequality, discrimination, racial oppression”. The decolonial option calls for hermeneutics from below by placing the agenda of the damned at the centre not as a means of attaining White privilege, but as a means of realising the fullness of humanity by undoing the structures of oppression and domination, thereby dethroning whiteness.

## 4. EPISTEMIC LOCATION

Colonisation proper was realised by the violent conquest of the Black, of the people of colour. In the process, it produced not only racial hierarchy (superior and inferior people), but also the hierarchisation of social location/geographical location (Europe and America as superior and Africa as inferior) and the hierarchisation of knowledge production (superior and inferior knowledge).

The recognition of Africa as a social location in which we read the Bible necessarily has to take into consideration the colonisation of the African mind, which not only is a reality of the past, but also remains a current reality in the twenty-first century. It is necessary, therefore, for African biblical scholars to critically reflect on the knowledge they are producing, given the past and the continuing colonisation of the African mind. In our current postcolonial and post-apartheid (South) Africa, colonisation of the mind cuts across the racial line.

### 4.1 Epistemological location of White Africans

White (South) Africans are socially located in Africa, but the troubling question remains: Does the social location of Whites in (South) Africa automatically imply that they are thinking from a subaltern position? From a biblical hermeneutic perspective, are White (South) Africans producing what may be regarded as African knowledge?

During the colonial-apartheid era, to a large extent, White African biblical scholars duplicated the Euro-Western hermeneutical practices in the African context. Deist (1992) argues that White South Africans reflected an inferiority complex with regard to knowledge production, due to the tendency of White biblical scholars to measure their scholarship with that of Europe and America. Deist's putative inferiority complex is understandable and not surprising. The success of colonialism relied, to a large extent, on its foot soldiers, who were supposed to practise Euro-Western forms of knowledge in the colonised location, and, in turn, deposit those knowledge systems into the minds of the colonised subjects, by force if "necessary".

While Whites located in the subaltern regions may have fallen victim to the colonial system, it is this same system that made them assume an epistemic position of privilege over the colonised subjects. In order to maintain the knowledge system they brought with them, they continually had to update it by running on the heels of their European and American racially and epistemologically privileged White compatriots. The colonial system that privileged them in the subaltern location had to maintain

its power over them by keeping the position of privilege geopolitically; therefore, the need for decolonising the subaltern White mind.

While some Whites may object to being accused of being instruments of the colonial system, the fact of the matter remains that the success of the colonial system lies in that it has also thrown them into the geopolitics of knowledge, which privileges knowledge produced from the hegemonic side – the Euro-Western geographical locations. The White (South) African cry that they did not choose to be born White and, therefore, should not be blamed for the sins of the forefathers and foremothers is welcomed; however, they have to come to terms with the colonial matrix of power, which privileges them from the underside of the power matrix, while not privileging them from the hegemonic side. White (South) Africa should realise that the colonial system of White privilege does not mind using some of its own only to turn against its own in order to maintain global power structures.

In my view, White (South) Africans are faced with two options. The one option is to continue to maintain White privilege in the subaltern position for as long as possible. As noted earlier, in the South African context, White talk serves to maintain the White privilege conferred on the Whites during the colonial and apartheid era. By engaging in White talk, subaltern Whites tend to cling to their position of privilege in the postcolonial and post-apartheid period and to perpetuate the structures of coloniality from within the subaltern location. The other option is for subaltern Whites to accept that the colonial system has thrown them onto the underside of the colonial matrix of power and to understand that their liberation has to become intertwined with that of the Blacks. This position would require White (South) Africans to give up their continuing attempts to maintain their privileged position and to let their struggle become one with the Black struggle. For as long as the White (South) Africans do not embrace the Black struggle and let it envelop them, they remain linked to the colonial system of power, which will continue to work through them to maintain dominance.

Furthermore, considering the geopolitics of knowledge, as Mignolo (2005:121) points out, the invisible side of coloniality is in its privileging of knowledge produced in the six imperial languages, namely Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, and German. In a similar vein, Grosfoguel (2013:73) points out that the *Westernised university* is based on the production of knowledge by a few men from five countries in what is essentially Europe, namely Italy, France, England, Germany, and the USA. Grosfoguel (2013:73) further argues:

The pretension is that the knowledge produced by men of these five countries has the magical effect of universal capacity, that is, their theories are supposed to be sufficient to explain the social/historical realities of the rest of the world.

The continual reliance of subaltern Whites on Euro-Western biblical scholarship only serves to perpetuate the structures of coloniality. Subaltern Whites have to start working from below, from the bottom of society, not to maintain privilege in the subaltern position, but rather they must work to reverse the injustice inflicted through colonialism and join in the “Black” or subaltern struggle for a just global system in which plural voices from the subaltern regions contribute as equals.

## 4.2 Epistemological location of Black Africans

To be Black and to be socially located in Africa does not imply that one is thinking from the subaltern epistemic location. During the era of colonial domination, the colonisation of the African mind was not achieved through a voluntary process; rather, it was achieved through violence, as Africans had to go through the hellish experience of having their cultures and knowledge systems ploughed under and having to adopt what Dascal (2009) refers to as “the colonizer’s epistemic principle of ‘invidious comparison’”, the epistemological distinction made by the colonisers between the ‘primitive’ mind of the colonised, and the ‘superior’ or ‘civilised’ mind of the coloniser.

The colonisation of the African mind turned the Black epistemically White by making Blacks turn against their own institutions and knowledge systems, thereby regarding them as primitive. As Quijano (2007:169) notes, this was done in multiple ways. First, the colonialists systematically suppressed African modes of knowledge and of production of knowledge and meaning, their beliefs and cultures. Secondly, the colonialists imposed their own forms of knowledge and knowledge production on the African mind. Thirdly, the colonialists co-opted some of the colonised into the colonial system, by teaching the colonised in “a partial and selective way, in order to co-opt some of the dominated into their own power institutions” (Quijano 2007:169). Fourthly, Africans were seduced to follow the Euro-Western forms of knowledge and culture.

The colonial system relied on turning those who are socially located in the subaltern side to think epistemically the same as those who are socially located in the hegemonic side. As Grosfoguel (2007:213; 2011) argues:

Precisely, the success of the modern/colonial world-system consists in making subjects that are located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions.

Attaining Western forms of knowledge and culture implied success and a better life. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that many Africans would currently aspire to cross the Mediterranean to the shores of Europe. The colonial damage done to the African mind has, to some extent, become permanent and irreversible.

The collapse of colonial administrations in subaltern locations did not bring about the end of the colonial systems. Maldonado-Torres (2007:243) notes:

Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.

The colonisation of the mind is not something of the past, something we can just undo and move on; it remains a current reality with which we live and have to wrestle. The idea of a postcolonial world deceives us epistemically into thinking that we are free of the colonial structures. We are not yet free; we continue to live within the global structures of coloniality. Colonial systems continue to shape our traditions, religious inclinations, languages, politics, fashion, ideology, education, and so on. The colonial values, norms, and ideologies continue to invisibly shape us in our subaltern locations and, to a certain extent, they have become part of us – identity and being. The fact that I refer to myself as a South African speaks to the continuity of coloniality shaping my identity and my being in the world.

In the South African context, we have been engaged in the decolonial process of renaming towns, cities, buildings, streets, and so on, giving them African names and names of the heroes and heroines of the struggle. This rebranding of products, as important as it may be, does not necessarily change the content: the cities, town, streets, and buildings remain the same, with improvements and deterioration here and there; yet the content remains colonial. In the field of biblical hermeneutics, African biblical scholars run the risk of recycling Euro-Western ideas under their own new brand names. The branding can change to African without the content changing significantly. The content will not change if African biblical scholars do not take radical steps to rethink biblical hermeneutics from the underside of modernity or the underside of the colonial matrix of power.

From our subaltern location, both Black and White are guilty of perpetuating the structures of coloniality. Finding an alternative may seem hopeless, and hopeless it may be. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014:187) notes:

The modern world system is proving to be resistant to decolonisation. Whenever it is confronted by anti-systemic forces, the world system responds in two ways. It either disciplines the anti-systemic forces violently or it accommodates them to its shifting global orders. The shifting global orders are resistant to deimperialisation.

However, we run the risk of not living up to our true selves if we simply continue to adapt and adopt without epistemically imagining alternatives outside of the Euro-Western canon of thought. This is not impossible, even given the dictates of Westernised knowledge systems that try to make it impossible to think outside of them and to go beyond them.

## 5. PRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE FROM AN AFRICAN SOCIAL LOCATION

Given the history of colonisation and the continuity of the structures of coloniality in Africa as a social location, African biblical scholars should have a two-fold commitment: they need to be committed to understanding the workings of the current global system in order to avoid perpetuating the structures of coloniality in, and from our social location, and they need to be committed to producing alternative knowledge on the basis of our own African knowledge systems and experiences. Escobar (2007:186) rightly notes that

it is impossible to think about transcending or overcoming modernity without approaching it from the perspective of the colonial difference.

The twofold commitment requires a dual process of epistemic delinking and epistemic relinking.

### 5.1 Epistemic delinking

Those who are on the underside of modernity need to engage in a process of Mignolo's "delinking from the web of imperial/modern knowledge and from the colonial matrix of power", in order to regard the Euro-Western systems as insufficient, that is, not applicable to everyone everywhere (Mignolo 2007; 2009). This implies the rejection of the tendency to claim "universality" for Western categories, which the rest have to mimic in their social locations. Thus, delinking is an epistemic shift from the imposed colonial mindset and the continuing dependence on Euro-Western categories.

## 5.2 Epistemic relinking

The Tshivenda proverb, *I shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?* ("Running away from your own path, where are you headed?"), should remind Africans that all is not lost in their African cultures, heritage, and knowledge systems (Masenya & Ramantswana 2015). We should not be deceived into thinking that there is nothing to go back to and that the thinking traditions of our ancestors are irrelevant and outmoded for the current reality. We cannot continue to trample over our own heritage in the hope of setting ourselves as one equal among others. We can think like Africans in Africa generally.

The idea of a "relinking" is not some obsession with time-travel to the long-gone, outmoded, precolonial past; rather, it is an epistemological reorientation in the present that refuses to abandon the rich heritage of the African ancestors and draws knowledge from the experiences of suffering from colonialism and coloniality. Wiredu (1992), a Ghanaian philosopher, put it: "Conceptually speaking, then, the maxim of the moment should be: 'African, know thyself.'"

Epistemic location as a heuristic device requires a relink with our African ancestors through rethinking, remembering, and preserving the rich heritage left for us. Epistemic delinking from Europe without relinking with our own indigenous knowledge system is to remain trapped within the structures of coloniality. Prominent within the framework of biblical wisdom is the view of the new creation as not solely the coming of the new altogether; the eschatological new creation is also the regaining of paradise lost. The new creation comes as the revival and a radical improvement of the old.

Before concluding, I would like to provide an example of how a relinking with our African knowledge system can be applied in the reading of biblical texts, by reading Genesis 47 informed by knowledge systems derived from our African ancestors.

## 6. READING GENESIS 47 IN LIGHT OF AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: *DZA MUSANDA DZI KUMBA THOLE*

To relink with African knowledge systems is to be willing to appropriate afresh the heritage our ancestors left us and let it inform our understanding of reality and of biblical texts, a heritage of faith. The Tshivenda proverb highlights, *U ŋala tshau ndi u laṭa*: to abandon what is yours is a loss. When we relink with our African knowledge systems, we make a deliberate

move to anchor the Bible in indigenous discourse. Therefore, I will read Genesis 47, using the Tshivenda proverb that is basically a critique of those in positions of power: *Dza musanda dzi kumba thole* (literally, “The chief’s livestock draws a heifer,” i.e., attracts a poor family’s heifer to mingle with, and thus become legally part of the herd); that is, those in power tend to thrive at the expense of the poor. This proverb reflects a critical stance towards those in power, especially when they deprive the poor of their basic necessities. To read Genesis 47 through our proverb of interrogation is to enter into a dialogic process of questioning, challenging, and understanding of the biblical text. Considering the critical stance of the proverb towards those in power, to read through the proverb is to choose to read the text with the interest of the poor, suffering, and exploited in mind. The proverb of our interrogation also highlights the value that the African people attached to the cattle or their livestock. Ownership of a heifer implied better prospects for the future and improvement in one’s social status. For ordinary people, a heifer, that is, a young female cow that had the potential to produce other cattle, was a valuable asset with which they were not willing to part. To lose a heifer simply because it mingled with the chief’s livestock was to be disempowered economically, and this hurt ordinary people the most.

Moreover, in traditional African cultures, cattle were not simply mere assets; they were also a form of currency (Bohannan 1967; Schneider 1964; Steele 1981). Steele (1981) notes that, among the Shona and Ndebele, cattle functioned as currency, as stores of value, as standards of value, and as media of exchange. *The Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission of 1903-1905* made the following observation regarding the natives and their cattle:

The desire to possess cattle has been in the past a strong incentive to Natives to earn money. Natives have often been heard to say that cattle were their bank and the means of securing their money in a visible and reproductive manner (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:212).

Comaroff and Comaroff (1997:211) note that Africans epitomise colonial economic forces at work with the relations of cattle to cash:

Not only could cash eat cattle, but the replacement of the latter was impossible without the former. The association of beasts with banks became commonplace, making animals synonymous with financial assets at their most secure.

The importance of cattle is also evidenced in marriage transactions. A Bapedi saying, *Ngwana wa Malome nnyale di boele sakeng*, basically

means that marriage was encouraged among close relatives so that the cattle would be retained in the family (Matshidze 2013:200). Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:58-59) note that, among the Tswana people, when money became an acceptable form of bride price, it was regarded as “cattle without legs” (*dikgomo tse di hlokang maoto*). In the different cultures in South Africa, it is common practice, in the *lobola* negotiations, to count the bride’s price in cows, but with payment in cash. The “cattle without legs” thus refers to the payment in cash in terms of the market value of real cattle.

In 1909, Rev. Williams also captured the importance of cattle to the native African people:

[T]he Native is very slow to part with his cattle ... until he has exhausted every other method of supporting life. Too often he will see himself, wife and family growing thin, whilst his cattle are increasing and getting fat, but to buy food with any portion of them is like draining his life's blood. On the other hand, if he wants a wagon, rifle, ammunition, horse or plough, he will not think twice about buying them even in a time of hunger. These are things which he can handle, see and regard as “property”. Food must come from his gardens and if harvest fails, well he must either work, or if he has grown boys send them to the mines ... His cattle are like Government Stock which no holder will sell for the purpose of living on the Capital unless he is forced to do so (as quoted from Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997:212).

In this instance, a Tswana saying comes to mind: *Motlhoka kgomo ke mong kang a sule*, literally “The one who has no cattle is as good as dead.” This Tswana saying also reflects the value Africans placed on their cattle and their attachment to them, their own right to live.

Returning to Genesis 47, the unwillingness of the Egyptians to give up their livestock comes as no surprise to the African mind. Genesis 47, when read along the grain, presents Joseph as a wise figure whose economic plan saved multiple nations during the lean years – the tough economic times. The Joseph story is often regarded as having unique features that set it apart from other patriarchal stories it follows (von Rad 1966:292; Westermann 1986:27). Stone (2012:62-73), reflecting on some of the unique features of the Joseph story, notes from a narratival perspective that this story is a proper culmination of the Genesis narrative. In Stone’s view, Joseph surpasses the key figures who preceded him – Adam and Noah, Abraham, Jacob – who all have “mini-rerun of the fall” in their stories. Stone (2012:67) argues that “Joseph is like Adam and the others in fall stories in Genesis, yet he overcomes their folly”. Pace Stone, I will argue on the basis of the proverb of our interrogation that Joseph follows

the lead of his patriarchs and that his economic plan was executed in folly – the extortion of the livestock of the poor Egyptians to the benefit of the elites was an act of throwing the Egyptian poor into the bottomless pit of poverty.

In Genesis 47, Joseph is portrayed administering and executing the plan to deal with the tough economic times – a plan which earned him a place among the Egyptian elites. Under Joseph's administration, the chief beneficiaries were the elites, while the remainder of the Egyptians were reduced to poverty. Through Joseph's plan the Egyptian masses were left holding the short end of the stick. They had to sweat in order to provide security and comfort for the imperial regime during the lean years. They now had to buy the food and grain, which the Egyptian masses had worked hard to stockpile. As Horsley (2009) notes, in the ancient Near East, the imperial regimes demanded the peasants who farmed the land, the "black headed ones" (the ordinary people), not only to produce for themselves, but also to produce enough in order to support the regime. In addition, the rulers expropriated taxes, tithes, and tributes from the ordinary people in order to support the regime. Unfortunately, during tough economic times, when the ordinary people could not produce enough and did not have enough, they were pressured by the taxes, tithes, and tributes to borrow from the wealthy and powerful, thereby setting them in a position of losing their ancestral lands and becoming debt-slaves (Horsley 2009:7-8).

The Egyptian masses tried as long as they could to hold on to their valuable possessions. In the Hebrew Bible, eight terms are used for "cow": מַקְנָה (cattle), שׂוֹר (ox), בָּקָר (herd, ox, cattle), בָּהֶמֶת (animal/beast/cattle), פָּר (young bull), אַלְפָה (cattle), אֲבִיר (bull), בָּעֵיר (cattle). The word מַקְנָה occurs four times in Genesis 47:17 and the word בָּקָר appears once:

וְיִבְאُו אֶת־מַקְנֵיהֶם אֶל־יְסוּף וַיִּתְּן לָהֶם יוֹסֵף לְחֵם בְּסֻדִים וּבְמַקְנָה הַצְּאן  
וּבְמַקְנָה הַבָּקָר וּבְחֶמְרִים וּבְגַנְזִים בְּלִקְשָׁם בְּכָל־מַקְנָהָם בְּשָׁנָה הַהּוּא

So they brought their cattle to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the asses: and he supplied them with food in exchange for all their cattle that year (Gen. 47:17 RSV).

מַקְנָה is used twice as a general term to refer to the domesticated animals listed: horses, sheep, cattle, and donkeys, and twice in conjunction with nouns referring to specific entities – מַקְנָה הַצְּאן ("livestock of sheep") and מַקְנָה הַבָּקָר ("livestock of cattle"). The use of the term מַקְנָה emphasises that cattle were regarded as representing domesticated animals as a whole. In addition, the recurrence of the term מַקְנָה indicates the value the people

attached to their “cattle” or “livestock”; therefore, the Egyptians were not voluntarily parting with their cattle. The unwillingness of the Egyptian masses to surrender their cattle highlights the value they attached to their cattle or livestock. This is also a reminder of the value the African people attached to their livestock as evidence by the proverb of our interrogation. Cattle attached the people to their land, and, therefore, when Joseph extorted the Egyptian masses of their cattle, it is not surprising that the Egyptians were willing to lose their land and their own bodies. Thus, it can be said that the Egyptian masses, having lost their cattle, felt as good as dead. The Egyptians’ prospect of coming out of this abyss was a hopeless one, as they had no heifers to provide them with any hope for the future.

In Genesis 47:25, the text seems to be artfully attempting to redeem the image of Joseph, in that it presents the Egyptian poor as thankful towards Joseph: “You have saved our lives. May we find favour in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh” (NIV). Some authors (Wenham 1994:449, 452; Sarna 1989:323; Ross 1988:687; Bush 1979:295; Morris 1976:591) have viewed the gratitude on the lips of the Egyptian masses positively as an honest expression of gratitude by trying to explain Joseph’s behaviour; others (Bush 1979:294; Morris 1976:583) go to the extent of blaming the Egyptians for their enslavement. Others view verse 25 as a literary device – an apologetics aimed at redeeming the character of Joseph (see Hurowitz 1994:360; Dick 2004:3-19). However, in my view, two contrasting ideas stand side by side in this instance: the Egyptians are saved (or given life), on the one hand, but they are turned into slaves, on the other. If Genesis 47:25 is read positively as an expression of positive sentiments by the Egyptians, then it would indeed function as an apologetics defending Joseph’s image. However, I would say that the statement in Genesis 47:25 is more effectively viewed as sarcasm. How could Egyptians be thankful for being rendered slaves in their own land through a foreigner in the Egyptian royal court? This while the Hebrews, the family members of the foreign elite, retained their livestock, were given the best part of the land, and were now also in charge of Pharaoh’s livestock (Gen. 47:3-5). The statement in Genesis 47:25 is not one of appreciation; rather, the Egyptians were ridiculing Joseph for rendering them slaves. If Genesis 47:25 is viewed as sarcasm, it may just as well be rendered: *Thank you for nothing.*

The Egyptians’ sarcastic denouncement of Joseph should be viewed as a critical stance against oppression. The foolishness of leaders does not have to be sugar-coated in an attempt to redeem their already tainted image. The poor peasants, who had worked hard to build their own stockpile and reserves for the imperial regime, became victims of the same

regime, as they fell deeper into debt year after year until they were forced to surrender their cattle, their labour, and their land. The one who, in the past, was a victim of greed is now portrayed as the one displaying an excessive form of greed: avarice. Joseph had caused a disaster of massive proportion through his systematic extortion, which left the Egyptians worse off. Wildavsky (1994:37-48; 1993:144) argues that Joseph's harsh treatment of the Egyptians was a violation of the moral law "in the name of survival". Fung (2000:31-39) highlights that one would expect Joseph to have been hesitant with the enslavement of the Egyptians; however, Joseph was ready to enslave others without "showing any sign of discomfort". Fung (2000:39) further states: "The enslaved becomes the enslaver. He who was sold is happy to buy others." As Fung (2000:39) notes, Joseph's enslavement is an undoing of "what he has achieved in the long confrontation with his brothers in chs. 42-44". Therefore, this sets Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptian as a fallacy and foolishness.

In the South African context, the Nkandla saga presents itself as a paragon of political greed that comes in the form of corruption or *kleptocracy*,

where political leaders, usually autocrats unrestrained by checks and balances, openly use government institutions to enrich themselves in any way possible (Manzetti & Wilson 2007:952).

The public protector, Thuli Madonsela, in her report "Secure in comfort" (2014), found that the president had unduly benefited from the security upgrades done on his homestead and that he should, therefore, pay back some of the monies used in the upgrades. The Nkandla saga points to the greed and corruption that cuts across a much wider set of transactions affecting a large number of beneficiaries directly, with the head of state, Jacob Zuma, as the chief beneficiary. Just as the Pharaoh is presented in the Joseph story as distanced from the systematic extortion of his people, yet being the primary beneficiary, it is no wonder that, in the Nkandla saga, state organs attempted to distance and render the president an innocent beneficiary. The South African citizens were finally vindicated on 31 March 2016, when the South African Constitutional Court ruled that President Jacob Zuma had failed to uphold the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa when he disregarded the order of the public protector to repay some of the government funds used towards the upgrades of his homestead and was, therefore, ordered to repay the funds.

The pinnacle of the Nkandla saga is the injustice inflicted upon the four neighbouring households of Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead. They were forced to give up their ancestral lands in order to create security in comfort

for President Zuma and his family. The consultants who recommended their relocation stated:

*A total of 4 households were found to be too close to the principal's homestead when considering safety distances and necessary stand-off distances for potential threats. It was therefore necessary to relocate 4 households* (quoted from Madonsela 2014:225-226; italics as in the Madonsela report).

The public protector's report indicates that the families were "initially reluctant" to move, but were pressured to move with the promise of receiving new housing elsewhere. The relocation of the families neighbouring the president's homestead is no different from what the colonialists did when they dispossessed the indigenous people of their land to make way for their own settlements and farms. Whether the neighbouring families were moved to better locations and better houses is immaterial: the fact remains that they were dispossessed of their land. It may be that, like the Egyptians who were pressured by the regime to give up all their money, cattle, lands and bodies, the neighbours, whose land was appropriated, had to sarcastically appease the state organs by expressing gratitude for their relocation. In fact, the proper response to the injustice inflicted on the four neighbours of President Zuma is *Thank you for nothing*. I dare to even say that it is the tax monies of the massacred miners at Marikana, who lived in appalling conditions in the mine villages, earning low salaries, with no security and comfort, from which the president unduly benefited.

Greed in the form of corruption leads to misallocation of resources as funds are directed into areas in which the political elites will make private gains. The World Bank (2010:3) noted:

The more these elites are able to privatize state resources, the more they can distribute favours and create a base of consensus for their privileged position.

In the South African context, the damage caused by corruption can be reversed if the political leadership is committed to breaking the vicious cycle of tolerance of misconduct and enforcing anti-corruption measures.

During the post-exilic period, when the Jews found themselves in a similar predicament to the one faced by the Egyptians, they denounced the situation.

But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings

you have placed over us. *They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.* In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it (Neh. 9:36–38 NIV).

The post-exilic situation under the Persian regime was good inasmuch as the people had the freedom to be in the land; however, they still felt completely enslaved. This brings another proverb to mind, *Li naka jitshi hoha jinwe didinngwe lone li tshi hohwa ji ri mavhala anga* (literally, “A leopard tends to have satisfaction when it attacks the other, but when it is attacked, it cries out, ‘My colours’”), meaning that people tend to enjoy being able to ill-treat others, but when they are ill-treated, they cry foul. The proverb of our interrogation, *Dza musanda dzikumba thole*, calls for the denunciation of oppressive tendencies among those in power, irrespective of who that power might be: the Pharaoh over his own Egyptian people, the Pharaoh over the Hebrews, the Persians over the Jews. Therefore, whether the oppressor is one of your own or another, oppressive tendencies should be denounced. Justice shows no favour.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the idea of social location as a heuristic device is not without problems. Being socially located in Africa does not necessarily imply that one is epistemically producing knowledge from the subaltern side of the colonial matrix of power. In the (South) African context, the issue of who is producing knowledge – that is, the body-politics of knowledge – needs to be interrogated, as does the epistemic location from which such knowledge is produced, particularly given the history of colonialism and apartheid, and the continuing structures of coloniality. However, the structures of coloniality should be challenged through the production of alternative knowledge. For the historically colonised in our context, the call is to relink with our African ancestors and the rich heritage left for us, and to allow the knowledge gained to inform our reading of biblical texts.

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