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FACILITATING INTERPRETIVE RESILIENCE: THE JOSEPH STORY (GENESIS 37-50) AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the notion of the Bible as a site of struggle offers resources that may facilitate interpretive resilience for communities/sectors that have been marginalised by dominant biblical theologies. While the notion of the Bible as a site of struggle had its conceptualisation within historical-critical redaction criticism, literary-narrative and literary-rhetorical criticisms provide similar kinds of “critical” recognition of ideo-theological contestation within the biblical text, whether the final form or a socio-historically reconstructed redactional edition. This article uses the Joseph story in Genesis as a case study. Central to the understanding of interpretive resilience in this article is the recognition that marginalised sectors themselves build their interpretive resilience as they navigate and negotiate the (additional) kinds of resources biblical studies might offer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of HIV (and AIDS) have created significant space for working with local faith-based communities and organisations in the related areas of masculinity and sexuality (West 2016b). The preference for the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, based in the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, is

to do its community-based Contextual Bible Study work with organised communities (West 2016c). In its work on sexuality, the Ujamaa Centre has established a collaborative relationship with the Pietermaritzburg Gay & Lesbian Network.¹ Among the workshops we have done together was a series of workshops in 2013 that included church leaders from the KwaZulu-Natal province and members from the Gay & Lesbian Network. The workshop was constructed in two related phases, with the first phase providing a baseline measure of participants' experience and perceptions of homosexuality. During this workshop, one of the activities was a Contextual Bible Study on Genesis 18-19, which located the infamous Genesis 19 within its literary context, reading Genesis 18-19 as a single narrative (with various sub-plots) (West 2016b). The Contextual Bible Study concluded with participants committing themselves to forms of action upon which they had agreed in their small-group work in response to their engagement with the Contextual Bible Study, an integral component in the See-Judge-Act process of Contextual Bible Study.

This first-phase workshop was followed, some months later, with a second phase. The introductory activity of the second-phase workshop was a report by each participant on what "actions" they had undertaken in response to the Genesis 18-19 Contextual Bible Study. Each participant reported on what s/he had done. When the process of reporting was complete, there was an interruption, as the Gay & Lesbian Network's video operator asked if he could also present a report. As facilitators, we in the Ujamaa Centre were intrigued. The young (self-identified) gay man had not wanted to participate in the Contextual Bible Study during the first-phase workshop. We had offered him the opportunity, but he had declined, indicating that he was not that interested in "religion". His role was to record aspects of the workshop for the Gay & Lesbian Network. He was a persistent but self-effacing presence throughout the workshop. His request to offer an "action" report was, therefore, unexpected. But we readily welcomed him to share with the group.

He told us that he had paid careful attention to the Contextual Bible Study, filming the plenary sessions and some of the small-group sessions. He mentioned that his apprehensions about "religion", in general, and the Bible, in particular, had slowly begun to dissipate as he watched and listened. His experience with religion and the Bible, ever since he had been open about his sexuality, was one of stigmatisation and condemnation. But his observation of the Contextual Bible Study on Genesis 18-19 had given him pause to reconsider. He had found the Contextual Bible Study "empowering", as had other participants.

1 Pietermaritzburg Gay & Lesbian Network, <http://www.gaylesbian.org.za/>

During the first phase, a number of the gay, lesbian, and transgender Christian participants had shared how they had become alienated from their churches and the Bible. Immediately after the Contextual Bible Study, as small groups reported on their proposed “action plans”, participants had shared how, by re-reading this story through the Contextual Bible Study process, the Bible had been rehabilitated. One participant stated:

[I]t takes away the power of the text over us as homosexuals, for we are told that homosexuality is the reason for the destruction of the Sodom; we are told that we pose a threat to the church, that we will bring destruction on the church.

Another explained: “Many have left the church because of this text ... it has chased us out of the church”. Another participant shared that, in her context, “[e]veryone claims to know what this text is about! It will not go away, it must be re-read”. Other participants asked: “Why is it that we have not questioned the interpretation of this story?” And still others wondered: “Perhaps this re-reading enables us to go back to the church.”

Significantly, some of the participants appropriated the re-read biblical text as a resource with which to confront the church:

The church is like Sodom, just as the men of Sodom wanted to subject others to their power, so the church wants to subject us to its power. Re-reading this text reminds us to question each and every text; God himself will come down to judge the church, just as God himself came down to judge Sodom!

This theme was taken up by others, who asked: “Could not this text, as it is interpreted by Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jesus, be read as a story about receiving and welcoming homosexuals into our churches?”²

Amidst all this sharing in the first phase, our video operator had not uttered a word. Yet, we were to discover, during the second phase, that he had also been encouraged by these responses, as they confirmed his own re-appropriation of Genesis 19, the classic anti-homosexual proof text (Gagnon 2001:78; Lings 2013:241). He told us how he had returned home after the first-phase Contextual Bible Study and used the same Contextual Bible Study with his mother. His mother was a devoted Christian who loved him dearly, but who worried that God might condemn

2 I recorded these contributions with the permission of the group, taking notes on the PowerPoint version of the Contextual Bible Study publicly so that everyone could note what I was writing and could confirm that I had recorded their comments correctly. They wanted to be heard and they wanted their responses to the Contextual Bible Study to be shared with others.

him for being gay. Her acceptance of his sexuality was tempered by her theological apprehension. He thus chose to work through the Contextual Bible Study with her. The effect was profound, he told us, with tears in his eyes, for she understood Genesis 19 (within its literary context) in a new way, recognising that this text (and so God) did not condemn him. Our corporate, collaborative re-reading had offered an antidote to the toxic interpretations of this text that characterised its reception history in our faith communities.

The Ujamaa Centre's work with marginalised faith-based communities or sectors has offered a number of similar outcomes and impacts. In the long history of the Ujamaa Centre's work with a series of intersecting marginalisations, including race, class, gender, HIV, masculinity, sexuality, and disability, religion in general, Christianity in particular, and the Bible specifically have been understood to stigmatise and condemn. So much so that we have come to understand our work in the Ujamaa Centre as offering contending readings of a Bible that is a "site of struggle" (West 2017b). We have also, recently, begun to reflect on how our work might be considered as a resource for building interpretive resilience.

2. INTERPRETIVE RESILIENCE

Resilience has always been a defining attribute of poor and marginalised communities. In some sense, all liberation theologies have been and are rooted in the realities of resilience. Though not theorised as a distinctive feature of liberation theologies, the notion of "the epistemological privilege of the poor", a central tenet, and perhaps the distinctive feature (Frostin 1988),³ of liberation theologies, embodies knowledges forged by resilience in the face of domination (Scott 1990). However, it was our work with people living with HIV that foregrounded resilience as a distinctive feature. The related HIV community-based research of colleagues in memory work, healing, and resilience offered us a more deeply theorised conceptual apparatus (Denis 2005; Denis *et al.* 2011). My own work within the ambit of HIV and trauma theory has leaned heavily on these theoretical resources (West 2016a).

We came to recognise that our Contextual Bible Study processes contributed to, and built capacity in various forms of resilience. When we asked the organised HIV support groups with whom we worked to try and explain how they understood the contribution of Contextual Bible Study to "living positively" with HIV, the overwhelming response we received was

3 For a nuanced understanding of this "privilege" and the notion of that there is no "simple poor", see Míguez (2006).

that re-reading the Bible through Contextual Bible Study processes built theological capacity and, in so doing, made a significant contribution to the religious-spiritual dimension of psychosocial resilience.

On the journey towards healing for HIV-positive people in South Africa, theological resilience is a significant resource. Most of the public forms of the Christian tradition (as with the Islamic tradition and traditional African Religion) (West 2011a) are part of the problem, religiously re-traumatising HIV-positive people. Recognising and participating in the theological contestation of Job, for example (West 2016a), has provided a form of theological resilience, building the religious-spiritual capacities required to live positively in a religious landscape dominated by theologies of retribution.

Because the Ujamaa Centre works with a wide constituency, across intersecting sectors of the poor and marginalised, we can reflect across our work on the kinds of capacities that Contextual Bible Study builds. Among these is the capacity to recognise that our sociocultural, Christian, and biblical traditions are not monovocal; they are contested. The work of the Ujamaa Centre indicates that building the capacity of marginalised sectors to interpret the Bible from and for their own experience, recognising that there are contending biblical theological trajectories or voices, nurtures the religious-spiritual dimensions of psychosocial resilience for those struggling to live positively with trauma in a context such as South Africa, where the Bible is both an obstruction on the journey towards healing and a potential resource for restoration.

In this article, I reflect more fully on our emerging notion of “interpretive resilience”. But even as I do so, I heed the caution of colleagues who are concerned that the concept of “resilience” may be used “to obfuscate meaning” (Lynch 2017). The concern is that the use of “resilience” within development and humanitarian studies has shifted the focus from resilience as an already present asset or reality among marginalised individuals and communities to resilience as something that development and humanitarian practitioners dispense. Lynch (2017) asks:

Can resilience be taught, especially by internationals who are known for top-down imposition of aid? Can one be trained to be resilient? Perhaps. But, once again, the idea that outsiders must train people most affected by conflict, climate change, and other disasters is problematic.

Her own understanding of “resilience” offers a threefold “argument” about “resilience”:

[F]irst, that the term reflects, implicitly if not explicitly, a recognition of the fact that marginalized, poor, and conflict-ridden communities of people manage on their own, sometimes without, sometimes despite and sometimes with the interventions of others; second, that humanitarians would do well to position the issue of resilience as one they should learn from, rather than attempt to “teach” others about; and third, that the increased use of the term resilience by the humanitarian community may also represent, at least in part, a response to the failures rather than the successes of the humanitarian community: its own, those of governments, those of international organizations (Lynch 2017).

Lynch (2017) is concerned that

the general mindset of humanitarian groups, plus their need to demonstrate their value-added to donor communities, perpetuates paternalism precisely in the crucial domains where affected communities need to be the teachers and trainers.

Claims to “build resilience” must be treated with caution, particularly because of “the use of resilience as a tool for perpetuating hegemonic values and discourses” (Cretney 2014:631), and because, in particular, “it is not a pro-poor concept” (Béné *et al.* 2012:3).

Heedful of these cautions, my starting point is the interpretive resilience that already exists among “ordinary” readers and users of the Bible, particularly those from marginalised sectors. In this instance, I draw on “a more culturally and contextually relevant definition of resilience” derived from research across cultures and contexts, in which “resilience” is defined as follows:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar 2008:225).

Ungar’s research focuses on children, as does much of the HIV-related memory and healing work on which the Ujamaa Centre has drawn in our work with HIV and trauma. Ungar (2008:225) goes on to identify two key processes constitutive of “resilience”:

Resilience is therefore both a process of the child’s navigation towards, and the capacity of individuals to negotiate for, health

resources on their own terms. Both concepts of navigation and negotiation figure prominently in this definition, distinguishing it from more static understandings of resilience as a clearly defined set of outcomes or culturally independent processes.

“Here”, as Ungar (2008:225) elaborates

navigation refers both to a child’s capacity to seek help (personal agency), as well as the availability of the help sought.

With respect to “negotiation”,

[c]hildren and youth negotiate for health-sustaining resources to be provided in ways that they, and those in their culture, define as health-enhancing.

Ungar’s analysis is useful in my reflections on how to understand the outcomes and impacts of the Ujamaa Centre’s collaborative Contextual Bible Study processes. Our usual practice is to work with organised groups of poor and marginalised sectors, who invite the Ujamaa Centre to work with them on a particular contextual concern (not adequately addressed by other faith-based resources). In terms of interpretive resilience, we can understand this collaboration as driven by the agency of marginalised sectors as they *navigate* towards and *negotiate* for health-sustaining interpretive resources. The Ujamaa Centre offers such interpretive resources, an offering forged in nearly thirty years of collaboration with poor and marginalised sectors.

In the next section of this article, I will focus specifically on the biblical studies resources with which the Ujamaa Centre works.⁴ We have analysed Contextual Bible Studies as three overlapping concentric and collaborative processes (West 2017a:273-275). The outer circle is the See-Judge-Act cycle, a process that proceeds from social analysis to biblical analysis to social action, working with a particular local community sector. Within and overlapping with this cyclical process is a community-based process where we work from existing local sector knowledges to

4 I dedicate this article to a colleague and friend, Fanie Snyman, who has spoken truth to power across many decades, contributing to the formation of generations of resilient South African students of the Bible. I share his hope, namely that “By embarking on a process of truly bringing together African and Western Old Testament scholarship we can perhaps begin to create a South African tradition of scholarship for future generations of Old Testament scholars and at the same time contribute to Old Testament scholarship in general. Perhaps we may give a new meaning to the maxim *ex Africa semper aliquid novi* [out of Africa always something new]” (Snyman 2013:5).

potentially resonating biblical detail to (biblically) partially reconstituted local knowledges. The third inner circle/cycle is a process in which we move from thematic biblical appropriations to literary biblical resources to socio-historical biblical resources and then back to partially reconstituted thematic biblical appropriations. This inner cycle's attention to biblical detail is the specific resource that builds interpretive resilience for those navigating and negotiating African contexts for life-enabling resources, in which the Bible is a significant, if ambiguous, sacred site.

3. RESILIENT DETAIL

The late Gunther Wittenberg used to reflect on how “fundamentalist” and “liberal” Christians were in many ways similar. According to him, they argued about the historicity of the Bible, with the “fundamentalists” claiming that it was all historical, and the “liberals” arguing that hardly any or none of it was historical. But, for both, the terrain of contestation was historicity. I have extended his argument to include the debate between “evangelical” theologians and “liberation” theologians. Both have insisted that the Bible speaks with a singular voice, the voice of “personal salvation” and the voice of “systemic liberation”, respectively. What biblical scholars can contribute to the latter debate (and the former) is attention to the detail of the Bible.

Whether the focus is on socio-historical or literary detail, the verdict is the same: The Bible does not “speak” with one voice. Or, put positively, the Bible “speaks” with multiple, often contending, voices. Liberation theology and liberation hermeneutics, which we might have expected to celebrate a multi-vocal Bible, have been slow to recognise this contribution from biblical scholarship (Míguez 2006:126). Even Brueggemann's suggestive biblical-theological analysis, based on the socio-historical liberation-oriented work of Gottwald (1979), in which he identifies two contending ideo-theological trajectories across biblical history and sociology (Brueggemann 1992a, 1992b, 1993), has not been taken up widely (see West 2000).

As Míguez (2006:126) notes with respect to Latin American liberationist readings of the Bible, it was “specially the critique of feminist hermeneutics” that prompted the realisation that “the Bible was a more complex memory, with diverse trajectories in itself, with internal diversity and even contradictions”. Míguez (2006:126) goes on to recognise that biblical scholarship has consistently pointed to the redactional processes that have generated such a contending text:

The memories had been reshaped in different hands and generations; scribes that wrote the people's traditions were not innocent and

without their own vested interests, and the patriarchalism of the culture became inscribed in the text.

The realisation that the Bible is itself inherently contested, “a site of struggle”, was articulated by South African Black Theology at roughly the same time as feminist biblical scholars were interrogating the contested nature of biblical patriarchy from both a literary and a socio-historical perspective (Trible 1973; 1978; 1979; 1984; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1981; 1983; 1984). Given the Bible’s long complicity with colonialism and apartheid, the contested nature of the Bible with respect to “class” and economics led to South African Black Theology’s recognition of the Bible as a race/class-economic “site of struggle”. Mosala analysed and articulated the notion of the Bible as a “site of struggle” most clearly. Representing the second phase of South African Black Theology (West 2016d:326-348), Mosala (1989:185) states clearly that “the texts of the Bible are sites of struggle”. Though Mosala (1989:40) acknowledges that the final literary form of the biblical text bears witness to these struggles, his primary focus is the sites of struggle that produced and are evident within the various socio-historical redactional editions of the biblical text.

My own work has tended to emphasise a literary exegetical starting point for the discernment of struggle within biblical texts. Beside my own interest in the Bible as literature, my emphasis is determined by my work with the Ujamaa Centre. The work of the Ujamaa Centre privileges the local epistemologies and knowledges of each of the particular marginalised community sectors with which we work. Their organised agency is central to our collaborative work of re-reading the Bible as a potential resource for social transformation. Thus, my argument with Mosala, going back to the late 1980s (West 1995), is that, while I recognise the significance of socio-historical methods in enabling us to identify the ideological voices in the sources that have been taken up and redacted by other (often dominating) voices, literary methods also provide access to contending ideological voices.

Indeed, we tend to forget that biblical studies as a discipline has its origins in critical attempts to make sense of the different voices that are evident in a careful and close reading of the final text. The turn to historical-critical and then sociological methods was driven, then, by modern-Enlightenment fixations with history (Rogerson 1983; Lategan 1984; Rogerson 1992). Postmodern anxieties about being able to access “objective” history, particularly biblical history, have opened up methodological space for poststructuralist ideologically oriented literary methods to flourish (Olson 2010). There is thus an ideological adeptness

in the current array of literary methods for doing what Mosala imagined (in the mid-1980s) only socio-historical analysis could achieve.

Rather oddly, African biblical scholarship has been slow to take up literary methods, preferring the more familiar socio-historical methods. However, an enduring interest in how African orality (Dube 1996) and proverbial sayings (Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) 2013; Mtshiselwa 2015; Ramantswana 2016) might provide indigenous interpretive resources for reading biblical texts has kept the potential for literary methods visible (with respect to African resources), if not actualised (with respect to biblical texts). This dissonance – what is appropriate for African resources is not appropriate for biblical texts or what is appropriate for biblical texts is not appropriate for African resources – while odd, is not my primary point. Literary methods are more accessible to “ordinary” African readers and hearers, embodying as they do a rich heritage of literary-narrative “texts”. They have no difficulty in engaging with the literary detail of the text when offered resources that they can themselves navigate and negotiate. I argue that, in so doing, they develop their interpretive resilience.

My argument about the accessibility of literary resources does not mean that socio-historical resources are not significant resources for building capacity in interpretive resilience. They are, and this is Mosala's point. Mosala's argument is that the critical-historical and sociological work required to identify a redaction's contending ideological communities or sectors builds capacity in contemporary readers of the Bible to do something similar with their own contexts. I have argued (West 1995:131-173) that a similar analogy of method holds with respect to literary critical methods, but with the added advantage of being more reader-ly accessible to ordinary African Bible users. Indeed, I would go further and advocate that socio-historical resources should be offered, but only after local appropriations of literary resources, for literary resources can be navigated and negotiated with more resilient agency than socio-historical resources.

In the next section of this article, I will offer an example, from actual community-based work, of a facilitated collaborative re-reading process in which literary methods prepare the way for facilitated collaborative socio-historical work, immersing an already resilient Bible reader in an array of potentially resilience-building navigable and negotiable resources.

4. THE LITERARY DIMENSIONS OF THE JOSEPH STORY

The Ujamaa Centre has done extensive work on the Joseph story. We began by working with the woodcut by Azariah Mbatha, in which he represents part of the story of Joseph in nine “narrative” panels.⁵ At the time, we were exploring ways of working more overtly with literary-narrative resources, and Mbatha’s woodcut offered local African art as a potential resource, mimicking the left-to-right and top-to-bottom conventions of the translated biblical text in Southern African languages and English (West 1994). Mbatha’s woodcut is a remarkably “close reading” of the biblical narrative (West 2016d:410-420), and thus provided a useful entry into a close and careful literary-narrative reading of the biblical text itself.

Much of our community-based work in the KwaZulu-Natal region in the late 1980s focussed on the struggle against apartheid nationally, and the particular context of apartheid state-sponsored violence within the KwaZulu-Natal province. The anguish evident in each of Mbatha’s panels offered potential plot lines of connection between the realities of contemporary communities and the biblical narrative. There is no doubt that the woodcut offered ordinary readers resources with which to navigate and negotiate the literary-narrative detail of the biblical text. For example, Mbatha is attentive to the literary-narrative emphasis on clothing, taking care to represent how clothing is used to construct a narrative of deception in both Genesis 37:31-33 and Genesis 39:12-19. Working with the woodcut in one hand and the biblical text in the other, it took us eighteen months to work through the Joseph story, up to Genesis 47:12, which is where Mbatha concludes his woodcut interpretation.

This was also the time in which there were growing calls for the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. Thus, the potential resonances with Joseph’s time in prison and his emergence as a political leader in Egypt generated considerable discussion, with close attention to the biblical text beyond the narrative frame of Mbatha’s woodcut. The kind of leader Mandela might be once he was released from prison led local community-based readers to interrogate Joseph as a leader. There was considerable dismay when it was discovered that Joseph might be understood to have adopted oppressive economic policies in the narrative account in Genesis, as we read beyond Mbatha’s boundaries. Continuing with the narrative after the family is united in Egypt, reading on into the narrative of Joseph’s economic policies in Genesis 47:13-26, and remembering how

5 See the woodcut at <http://www.churchland.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Bible-Study-4.pdf>

Joseph acquired the grain (Gen. 41:47-49), it became apparent that the abundant grain that Joseph had “collected” (Gen. 41:48) was later “sold” (Gen. 41:56; 47:14). What was particularly appalling to Black South African readers in KwaZulu-Natal waiting for Nelson Mandela to inaugurate a just socio-economic epoch was the carefully narrated process whereby Joseph impoverished the people (Gen. 47:14-25), taking their money, their livestock, their land, and their bodies.

Reading backwards, itself a critical skill not usually associated with Bible reading, ordinary readers remembered not only how Joseph acquired the abundant grain, but also how he had been clothed with Egyptian clothing in Genesis 41:14 and then more specifically in Genesis 41:42. Had this been a narrative indication of (a change in) Joseph’s character? Ordinary readers went back-and-forth through the biblical text seeking literary-narrative detail concerning his character. Some remembered being worried by the references to Joseph’s “silver cup” as the cup “which he indeed uses for divination” (Genesis 44:5) and Joseph’s own admission to his brothers: “Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?” (Gen. 44:15). What, such readers wondered, did the receiver of Godly dreams and interpretations need with a cup of divination? The narrative beyond the woodcut, resonating as it did with their own socio-economic struggles and hopes, opened up the biblical text as a rich reservoir of literary-narrative detail. Ordinary readers navigated and negotiated this literary-narrative detail differently, as they wrestled with what appeared to be contending characterisations of Joseph within the narrative. It was clear that there was an increased capacity both to critically interrogate and critically appropriate the text. The ordinary readers with whom we read became more resilient Bible readers, interrogating received interpretations of the Joseph story.

Over a decade later, in 2003, the Ujamaa Centre had occasion to return to the Joseph story. Invited to work with a local non-governmental organisation, the Church Land Programme, and a local community-based organisation, the Rural Network, the Ujamaa Centre facilitated a process in which we jointly produced a series of Contextual Bible Studies on land issues. Our process was participatory and, for each Contextual Bible Study, we brain-stormed potential biblical texts. Among the biblical texts I suggested for the Contextual Bible Study on “Leadership and land” was the Joseph story, particularly Genesis 41:46-57 and Genesis 47:13-26, using Mbatha’s woodcut as a way of “summarising” the more familiar parts of the narrative.⁶ As reported by West & Thulani (2010), the effects of this

6 See the community-based Contextual Bible Study we produced at <http://www.churchland.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Bible-Study-4.pdf>

Contextual Bible Study have been significant. Wonderfully, and ironically, the biblical story of Joseph's economic "capture" of the land enabled the Bible to be used (resiliently) to take back the land from the missionary-colonial settlers who used the Bible to take the land from Africans!⁷

In our work on the Joseph story, the emphasis has been on plot, character, setting, and narrative point of view. By offering such literary-narrative resources, first through Mbatha's narrative woodcut and then by a series of Contextual Bible Study questions focussing on the literary dimensions of the text, already resilient readers have the opportunity to foster further potentially resilience-building capacities.

There are many more examples in the work of the Ujamaa Centre where literary-narrative resources are used. In some cases, as with the Joseph story, literary-narrative readings raise significant socio-historical questions, offering an opportunity to delve behind the biblical text to the socio-economic struggles that might have produced the text as we have it in its final form. The move behind the biblical text, as Mosala argued, enables the ideological agenda of the text's redactional history to become apparent, generating additional potentially resilience-building resources.

5. THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE JOSEPH STORY

In two recent South Africa-based studies, both Castillo (2014) and Ramantswana (2016) interpret Genesis 47:25,

So they said, 'You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's slaves' (NAS),

as ridicule or sarcasm. Significantly, although both are resolutely socio-historical in their methodological approaches, the literary-narrative analysis leads them to this recognition (from the realities of their lived experience of such "hidden" forms of resistance to domination by the poor and marginalised).

Castillo is overt about how narrative analysis leads him to delve into the socio-historical realities that might generate such a text. He draws on the full range of literary-narrative and literary-rhetorical method, including structure, plot, setting, characterisation, repetition, juxtaposition, irony, and narrative point of view. Of particular importance is the rhetoric of irony.

7 For a detailed biblical hermeneutical exposition of the anecdote about missionaries using the Bible to take African land, see West (2016d:326-348).

Castillo uses a number of scholarly sources for his own understanding of irony, but he acknowledges that underlying many of these is the work of Sharp. Her understanding of the relationship between irony and the praxis of the reader is worth quoting, in this instance, as it is apposite to both Castillo's and Ramantswana's analysis.

The rhetoric of irony effects a change in the praxis of the reader prior to any affirmation of the ironic sense that the reader might eventually choose to bestow ... Textual irony moves fluidly between the aggressive or coercive and the evocative or playful, signifying through the reader's apprehension of charged semantic transactions among three elements: what is stated, what is tacitly affirmed by means of rejection of the stated, and what is made visible by means of the interaction between what is stated and what is unsaid. Irony operates in a rhetorically dramatized communal space negotiated continually by the author, the (real or implied) competent reader, and the implied incompetent reader. Irony invites the reader's complicity in the rejection of the surface meaning of the matter being communicated and invites participation in the creation of a new meaning and simultaneously relies on and moves beyond that which has been stated. And whether ominously or teasingly, irony threatens the interpretive disenfranchisement of any unperspicacious reader who fails properly to decipher the text's invitation (Sharp 2009:23-24).

As competent readers – with

eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today [so as] to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities in the very absences of those struggles in the text (Mosala 1986:196)

– the praxis of both Castillo and Ramantswana is activated in Genesis 47:25 by the ironic hiphil “you have saved our lives” and the ironic cohortative which has the people pleading to become “slaves”. For Castillo (2014:78), the literary-narrative-rhetorical textual evidence clearly points to socio-economic resistance:

Genesis 47.13-26 could be understood as a narrative that rejects and criticises the unjust socio-economic system of the Israelite monarchy and ridicules its ideological and theological constructions presented as salvific but proven to be destructive. The story would seek to unveil the real impact of the socio-economic measures of the monarchy and de-legitimize its salvific discourse, together with empowering the population by showing it the weakness of the system and therefore provoking them to reject it and construct

a different reality in accordance to the faith in the ancient God of the Israelites.

Ramatswana (2016:194) also recognises the literary irony of Genesis 47:25, arguing that

[t]he Egyptians' sarcastic denouncement of Joseph should be viewed as a critical stance against oppression, [precisely because] 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 apologia 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 emphasis of Castillo's socio-historical work is to recover a redaction of the Joseph story which is marked by the presence of Genesis 47:13-26, a redaction probably contending with the post-monarchic city-temple state and its tributary mode of production (Boer 2007; West 2011b), whether in its Solomonic, following Storniollo (1996:189), or post-Solomonic, following Coote (1991:92), manifestations (Castillo 2014:96-97). He recognises, following the work of Brett (2000), that the version we have in the final form may even date to the post-exilic period, as "a critique of Ezra's rule as representative of the Persian administration in Judah, especially in issues related to land and property" (Castillo 2014:97, referring to Brett 2000:118-119).

There would, I think, be some agreement, in this instance, with the redactional conclusions of Ramatswana (2016:196-197), who finds resonances with Nehemiah 9:36-38 and the "post-exilic situation under the Persian regime". However, in a more recent article, Ramatswana (2017:80) focuses on an earlier redactional edition, arguing that

the Joseph story's function is to legitimize the power relationship between the sons of Jacob. The Joseph story has political overtones in that it serves to justify the supremacy of Joseph over the other tribes of Israel.

Following Carr (1996:272), who views the Joseph story as “a subtle argument for the North’s destiny to rule both the Northern and Southern Israelite groups”, Ramantswana (2017:81) adds that

the Joseph story should also be viewed as a literary device to delegitimize the royalty of the tribe of Levi [for] [w]ithin the Joseph story, the eleven brothers become slaves of Joseph, while the Egyptians become slaves of Pharaoh.

Ramantswana does not comment on Genesis 47:22, where the (Egyptian?) priests are exempt from slavery to Pharaoh:

Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh gave them. Therefore, they did not sell their land (NAS).

This priestly exemption is reiterated in Genesis 47:26b: “Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt valid to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh’s” (NAS). Might this be a post-exilic priestly attempt to legitimate the “recovery” (Ramantswana) or “co-optation” (Brett) of land?

6. BUILDING INTERPRETIVE RESILIENCE

Whatever their redactional conclusions, these socially engaged scholars share a commitment to offer resources to those for whom the Bible is a significant and/or sacred text. As noted earlier, both draw on literary analysis in their own exegetical work as a resource to reconstruct a particular socio-historical redactional edition. Significantly, both also use literary resources as a way of (or on the way to) offering their communities socio-historical resources.

Castillo (2014:251-253) concludes his Masters research with a Contextual Bible Study, following the model of the Ujamaa Centre, in which literary analysis (by means of narratively oriented questions) opens up a reader-centred space, in which to offer socio-historical information and questions for discussion. Similarly, but turning to a local African proverb, in much the same way as the Ujamaa Centre used Mbatha’s woodcut, Ramantswana uses a Tshivenda proverb as a local African resource for redaction-critical analysis. He mentions that the proverb he selects 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 (Ramantswana 2016:191).

What the Ujamaa Centre offers is a carefully formulated and sustained set of community-based pedagogical processes for working with both literary and socio-historical resources, “offering” them in ways that are facilitated rather than instructed. The Contextual Bible Study processes of the Ujamaa Centre are thus crucial, if we are to recognise that “building” resilience is under the control of those with whom we work, as they navigate and negotiate the biblical studies resources offered.

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