

# The African and Western Hermeneutics Debate: Mimesis, The Book of Esther, and Textuality

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay enquires into the problem of mimesis when dealing with the biblical text: imitating the text as well as imitating the tools with which the text is read. Using the Book of Esther as illustration material, it looks into mimesis within the story of Esther itself as well as mimetic actions based on the story. The focus then shifts to a particular Western and African feminist/womanist discourse on mimesis and the biblical text masking particularities. The discussion proceeds to highlight one particularity that needs to be discussed, namely the issue of textuality, a theme with rich potential in the Book of Esther. The author ponders the following question: If the notions of text and writing are so deeply embedded in Western thinking, is it not time to start thinking in terms of different rationalities when African hermeneutics is contrasted with Western hermeneutics? The last section of the essay looks into this possibility but only in a preliminary way in an effort to move the debate between African hermeneutics and Western hermeneutics a bit further.*

## A INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay refers to the concept of *mimesis*, a term central to aesthetics, especially literary texts and the fine arts. Derived from the Greek *mimēsis*, from *mimeisthai*, it refers to the "imitative representation of the real world in art and literature" and a "deliberate imitation of the behaviour of one group of people by another as a factor in social change."<sup>1</sup> In this essay, mimesis alludes to mimesis within the text of Esther where the victim ends up imitating the perpetrator in various ways. It also alludes to the possibility of a similar mimesis within the current debate between African and Western hermeneutics regarding the issue of textuality.

Erich Auerbach published his classic study on realism, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* in 1946.<sup>2</sup> He pro-

<sup>1</sup> OED, n.p. [cited 24 April 2012]. Online: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mimesis>. See also Michelle Puetz, "Mimesis," n.p. [cited 24 April 2012]. Online: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/mimesis.htm> and Adriaan M. de Lange, "Mimesis," in *Literére Terme en Teorieë* (ed. T. T. Cloete; Pretoria: HAUM-Literêr, 1992), 308-310.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1946).

vides an image of Western culture in which he, a Jewish refugee in Istanbul at the time of text production, is at home. Amidst the dislocations and horrors of the Second World War, Auerbach's world is a "pan-European space," the entire sphere of European literary production that is rather characterised by discontinuity and plurality.<sup>3</sup> The title of the book, *Mimesis*, refers to the link between reality and the text, that is, the problem of representing reality by way of words. Auerbach draws certain conclusions regarding the author's human condition and experience on the basis of certain observations he makes apropos stylistic features of the text.<sup>4</sup> These conclusions he then links to the culture in which the text was produced. In other words, Auerbach "sees the reality of worlds revealed by texts as worlds constructed by those texts."<sup>5</sup> In the words of Barry Maine,

Whether he is writing about ancient or modern texts, Auerbach never wavers from his conviction that all conceptions of human nature are born and understood in the context of history. For him, all human experience at all times, and all the literature that represents it, exists in a state of becoming.<sup>6</sup>

The representation of reality in texts is contextual, "because it designates ways of organizing experience, which writers and readers, historically situated, find compelling for a variety of reasons."<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the well-known first chapter ("Die Narbe des Odysseus")<sup>8</sup> there are significant aspects absent in the Homeric poem that can be found in the OT text of Genesis 22, creating a contrast between "Wirklichkeit" and truth, earthly historicity and transcendence. A failure to transmit transcendence in Homer's poem is met with disappointment:

<sup>3</sup> Carl Landauer, "'Mimesis' and Eric Auerbach's Self-Mythologizing," *GSR* 11/1 (1988): 89. He says (88): "Auerbach identifies himself as a pan-European, a participant in a European culture which he defines both geographically and chronologically. He is reconstructing a European world in which he is at home."

<sup>4</sup> See René Wellek, "Auerbach's Special Realism," *KR* 16 (1954): 300: "But Mr. Auerbach never rests content with an analysis of style but moves from that to reflections on the attitude of a writer toward reality and his technique of reproducing it, and these topics, in turn, lead to reflections about periods and cultures, social conditions and assumptions."

<sup>5</sup> Barry Maine, "Erich Auerbach's 'Mimesis' and Nelson Goodman's 'Ways of Worldmaking': A Nominalist Revision," *PT* 20/1 (1991): 46-47: "This is what *Mimesis* shows us. There are worlds in the making in these texts." Maine provides a nominalist interpretation of Auerbach *contra* the classic criticism provided by René Wellek.

<sup>6</sup> Maine, "Erich Auerbach's 'Mimesis,'" 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Maine, "Erich Auerbach's 'Mimesis,'" 47.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Die Narbe des Odysseus," in *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1946), 5-27.

Der homerische Realismus ist zwar nicht mit dem klassisch-antiken überhaupt gleichzusetzen; denn die Stilrennung, welche sich erst später ausbildete, gestatte im Rahmen des Erhabenen keine so Mußevoll ausformende Beschreibung alltäglicher Vorgänge; in der Tragödie zumal war kein Raum dafür; ferner traf die griechische Bildung sehr bald auf die Phänomene des geschichtlichen Werdens und der Vielschichtigkeit menslicher Problematik ...<sup>9</sup>

He shows a clear preference for the Judeao-Christian tradition over the classical tradition. Homer deals with saga and the OT deals with history, Homer's text functions on the level of human action, but the OT "ragt [...], insofern es sich mit dem menschlichen Geschehen beschäftigt, durch alle drei Bezirke: Sage, Geschichtsbericht und deutende Geschichtstheologie"<sup>10</sup> and "ein anderer Begriff vom hohen Stil und vom Erhabenen gewinnen lässt als aus Homer."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the biblical text has a superior position to classical works which were central to the German concept of *Kultur* and aesthetic integrity.<sup>12</sup>

But here is the irony: the idea that form the centre of the book—the two poles of Platonic aesthetics, the idea and mimesis, the ideational—can be traced to those German origins he is physically running away from (my emphasis – G.F.S.):

[H]is work scans the history of western literature in a very German search for a union of *Idea* and *Mimesis*. And his tools for that effort were provided by the same Platonic aesthetics which had been worked through so thoroughly by two centuries of Germans. From a long line of German aestheticians, Auerbach inherited the methods – and the values – of his own scholarship. Essentially, *Mimesis* uses a Germanized classicism to attack a classical Germany.<sup>13</sup>

A similar pattern and more or less at the same time as Auerbach's *Mimesis*, can be detected in a *Purimspil*,<sup>14</sup> *Homens Mapole*, The Downfall of Haman, by Haim Sloves. It was a play produced in 1940 and staged on a continuous basis from 1945-1949 in Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Romania and South Africa,<sup>15</sup> similarly posing the question about the relationship between Jewish culture and Western secularised

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<sup>9</sup> Auerbach, "Odysseus," 26.

<sup>10</sup> Auerbach, "Odysseus," 24.

<sup>11</sup> Auerbach, "Odysseus," 25.

<sup>12</sup> Landauer, "'Mimesis' and Eric Auerbach," 92.

<sup>13</sup> Landauer, "'Mimesis' and Eric Auerbach," 93.

<sup>14</sup> Yiddish for the comic dramatisation of the story of Esther, describing what happened on Purim and why it has become an important Jewish holiday.

<sup>15</sup> See Annette Aronowicz, "The Downfall of Haman: Postwar Yiddish Theater between Secular and Sacred," *Association for Jewish Studies* 32/2 (2008): 369-388.

Footnote 1. The discussion on the play is based on Aronowicz's article.

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culture.<sup>16</sup> It simulates a problem that even now surfaces within the debate between African and Western hermeneutics, namely the enforcing presence of (Western) particularity as universalising tendencies.<sup>17</sup> The Europe to which Jews turned was mythic and never really a geographical unit or political power. It was an idea, a particular kind of universalism that functioned as a way of organising life and thought.

Can one do without mimesis? Michael Taussig refers to the mimetic faculty and portrays it as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power."<sup>18</sup>

Theoretically then, the mimetic faculty will enable one to be African and Reformed or Roman Catholic.<sup>19</sup> But what then about African hermeneutics' claim to be different from Western hermeneutics and its drive to establish itself as a separate study field within Biblical Studies in general? Does one deal here with political grand standing and a power show off in the light of a continuous

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<sup>16</sup> The Modicut Puppet Theatre in New York in the early twenties of the previous century expressed a similar secularising process in their rendition of the Purim play. In the play *Akhashvereyresh* the story receives a few twists. The king's drunkenness is emphasised, the two eunuchs planning to kill him speaks a Germanised form of Yiddish and Mordecai becomes Motl, a diminutive form of Mordkhe. See Edward Portnoy, "Modicut Puppet Theatre: Modernism, Satire, and Yiddish Culture," *DR* 43/3 (1999): 115-134.

<sup>17</sup> In this play the authority of the rabbis and their system of observing the commandments are undermined, compelling a secularising move that implies a turn towards Europe. Secularization then means "the modern Western notions of the state, the individual, reason, the body, and so on, as the final word of history" that is imposed on the rest of the world and without which imperialism is impossible. (Aronowicz, "The Downfall of Haman," 370; 375) and 378: "Yet within the turn to Europe, the Yiddishists clung fiercely to the preservation of Jewish peoplehood. Their Europe was not the Europe of individuals liberated from the chains of local identities, finally entering the universal. It was the space that made collective Jewish life possible, without prior oppression. The whole project of Yiddish modernity was linked to perpetuating a people, in the face of what was perceived as imminent decline and decay. ... The challenge was to live in this collective and to enter into the larger world at the same time."

<sup>18</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xiii.

<sup>19</sup> I use the terms "African" and "Reformed"/"Roman Catholic" in a contrastive sense. "Reformed" or "Roman Catholic" here imply Western hermeneutics.

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colonisation process that requires decolonisation?<sup>20</sup> Or should one assume the presence of alternative rationalities?

This essay enquires into the problem of mimesis when dealing with the biblical text: imitating the text as well as imitating the tools with which the text is read. Using the Book of Esther as illustration material, it looks into mimesis within the story of Esther itself as well as mimetic actions based on the story. The focus then shifts to a particular Western and African feminist/womanist discourse on mimesis and the biblical text masking particularities. The discussion will then proceed to highlight one particularity that needs to be discussed, namely the issue of textuality, a theme with rich potential in the Book of Esther. If the notions of text and writing are so deeply embedded in Western thinking, is it not time to start thinking in terms of different rationalities when African hermeneutics is contrasted with Western hermeneutics? The last section of the essay will look into this possibility but only in a preliminary way in an effort to move the debate between African hermeneutics and Western hermeneutics a bit further.

## B MIMESIS AND THE BOOK OF ESTHER

### 1 Mimesis as narrative strategy

In the Book of Esther, it is very clear that the Jews towards the end of the story became like their oppressors. In order to survive the Jewish people had to do what Haman intended to befall on them. In fact, when one compares Haman's decree (Esther 3:12-4:2) with that of Mordecai (Esth 8), they are to a large extent quite similar.<sup>21</sup> The Jews ended up imitating the Persians.

#### Haman's decree – Esther 3:12-4:2

#### Mordecai's decree – Esther 8

**Esther 3:12** – The royal scribes are summoned at a particular date to write of Haman, albeit with a different date.

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<sup>20</sup> See Gerrie Snyman, "'Looking into Black Eyes and Feel the Embarrassment': A Selected and Selective Reading of The Africana Bible," *OTE* 24/2 (2011): 464-491. In the current essay I hope to construct a more positive outcome for the debate than was foreseen in this article.

<sup>21</sup> The comparison presented here is based upon Moshe David Simon, "'Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man...': Irony and Theology in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 31/4 (1997): 19-21, where he compares the two decrees issued by Haman and Mordecai. There is a large degree of correspondence in that similar words are used, but because of the origins of the decrees, Haman versus Mordecai, the decree in the latter appears to be not silly or evil, but just. A similar comparison is given by Catherine Vialle, *Une Analyse Comparée d'Esther TM et LXX. Regard sur Deux Récits d'une Même Histoire* (Leuven, Peeters, 2010), 77 and Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 300-306.

down what Haman commanded with the king's governors of the provinces as well as with the princes in the form of a letter to be sent to each and every people in their own respective language.

**Esther 3:12-13** – The letters were written in the king's name and sealed with his signet ring, sent by the hands of the couriers. The contents of the letters refer to "slaughter, slay and destroy" all Jews on a single day with their property as spoil.

**Esther 3:14** – a copy of the edict is issued in each province as law, in order that the Persian people can be prepared.

**Esther 3:15** – The couriers were sent urgently and they arrived in Susa. The king and Haman sat down to celebrate but the city of Susa was in turmoil.

**Esther 4:1** – When Mordecai found out what was going to happen, he mourned and put on sackcloth, walking in the middle of the city crying.

**Esther 4:2** – In every province there was grief amongst the Jews, who started to fast, weep, lament and wearing sackcloth and ashes on their heads

Those summoned are the same, but the Jews are added as well as the geographical indication of the kingdom. These letters were written in each group's own script too.

**Esther 8:10-12** – The action is quite similar here as with Haman, but the contents differ: "to slaughter, slay and destroy" the forces of every people and province afflict them, women and children, with their property as spoil, all on a single day. Here it is the Jews who can take the spoil.

**Esther 8:13** – the same, but now it is the Jews who are prepared "to take vengeance" on their enemies.

**Esther 8:14-15** – The couriers went out with a greater sense of urgency and haste. When the decree was received in Susa, Mordecai went out and the city rejoiced.

**Esther 8:15-16** – Mordecai went out of the king's presence in royal robes.

**Esther 8:17** – The word of the decree spread similarly as with Haman's decree, only with the difference that there is now joy amongst the Jews who are now feasting and celebrating the day as a holiday.

With Mordecai at the helm and Esther truly established as queen, the king now becomes a real Persian king. His laws have now become just and they are carried out. Mordecai shares in the king's splendour, wearing violet and white clothes and a golden turban and a cloak of linen and purple, all the colours and material one finds back at the beginning of the book during Ahasuerus's large scale celebrations. Moreover, Mordecai and Esther seemed to have enabled the king to act like an emperor – he places a tax on the lands and the islands of his kingdom. He no longer gives things away such as half the

kingdom (if only metaphorically!) when Esther became queen.<sup>22</sup> In the end things turn "normal" in the kingdom with the protagonists doing what people in power are supposed to do.

Ironically that is exactly what Haman did, but being the antagonist and perpetrator, his actions do not possess a moral mimetic drawing card. Mimesis of Haman only occurs in descriptions of the antagonists of those readers who imitate Esther and Mordecai as protagonists.

## 2 Mimesis of the narrative within marginalised contexts

To many readers, the book of Esther is a book of exile and empowerment that shapes the discourse of marginalised people, such as Jews, women, African Americans and slaves, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people.<sup>23</sup> The figure of Esther served as an inspiration to those women who all worked within the system, but who sought some kind of power to decide over and for themselves. They all assumed the identity of the biblical heroine, and related their people to the position of dependence from which they needed to be saved. And, in some cases, almost subversively, "is the unstated though enthymematic equation between the white man and Haman, which functions rhetorically and unmistakably as a threat."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Simon, "'Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man...,'" 21: "With Mordecai in control, kings behave like kings, laws are just and effective, wealth is truly glorious and, most importantly, everything runs according to divine plan."

<sup>23</sup> Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Reader," *PhilRh* 33/3 (2000): 194. Zaeske's own reading of Esther is aimed at breaking the hold that masculinity seems to have on rhetorical theory that excluded women, subordinated classes and the subalterns since the days of Plato to Aristotle, Cicero to Quintilian, Campbell to Burke (195). See also Sarajoni Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation," *OTE* 15/1 (2002): 113-30. She argues that the text of Esther can be read as an empowering and liberating text for women in suffering contexts in South Africa since the majority of South African women view the Bible as a crutch on which to lean in difficult times. Texts like Esther can impact women living under the triple oppression of race, class and gender in a very direct and pervasive manner.

<sup>24</sup> Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther," 215. Cf. Teresa C. Zackodnik, "'I Don't Know How You will Feel when I Get Through': Racial Difference, Woman's Rights, and Sojourner Truth," *FemStud* 30/1 (2004): 49-73. Sojourner Truth symbolises for many white feminists that which they will admire yet disavow. She served as a proxy through whom white women could voice their political desires without risking their social position (58). White women's utilisation of slave women's plight for their own liberation is problematical in that the black or slave woman as a proxy becomes whitened or portrayed in such a way that her material conditions disappear. Racial difference is then not incorporated. The black body of the slave woman provides the white feminist with an oppression that is violently real, yet manageably at a distance re-

For example, in 1853, Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and a former slave addressed the Fourth National Woman's Rights Convention in New York City. Zaeske considers her performance in front of a hostile audience as a mimesis of Esther in asserting her inferiority in order to gain power, although seeing herself superior to the hissing and protestations of the mob audience.<sup>25</sup> In alluding to the story of Esther, the audience was supposed to fill in a number of comparisons between the story of Esther and the socio-political context of the time, especially to draw an implicit parallel between two oppressed groups, the Jews in Susan and African-Americans in the confederation. Sojourner Truth turns Esther into the foremother of woman's rights.

But her imitation of the story in a hostile context went much further than the female protagonists. She includes her hostile audience (male listeners that heckled her) and linked them to the antagonists in the story, the foolish Persian king and his Prime Minister, Haman:<sup>26</sup>

Men who hiss at women because they ask for their rights exhibit such deep contempt for the rights of women that, by operating within the narrative framework of the Esther tale, Truth logically could compare them to the evil Haman. Women were asking for much less than half the kingdom, she stated, "they ask for their rights; and can they ask for anything less?" (568). Adopting a prophetic voice, Truth warned: "The king ordered Haman to be hung on the gallows which he prepared to hang others; but I do not want any man to be killed, but I am sorry to see them so short-minded" (568). The threat, though indirect, was serious: just as God punished Haman for his evil actions against the Jews, so, too, would he punish men who treat their mothers (Truth's synecdoche for women as a group) with malice.

By saying that she would not want any man killed, Truth reminded men and whites that, to avenge Haman, the king, persuaded by a woman with God on her side, empowered the Jews to massacre their enemies.<sup>27</sup>

The force of mimetic action is clear: men (and whites) will be punished for their inequities just as Haman and the Persians were punished for their actions against the Jews. Of particular interest is her associating of Haman with

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garding her materiality (61). In this way white women are not confronted by their own victimisation and their role in racial oppression.

<sup>25</sup> Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther," 210.

<sup>26</sup> Her petition to the king is regarded as analogous to women asking for their rights. Zackodnik, "'I Don't Know How You will Feel,'" 63. Zackodnik shows how Truth's speech has been rendered differently by the New York Daily Times and *History of Woman Suffrage* with regard to her use of the Book of Esther.

<sup>27</sup> Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther," 211.

whiteness.<sup>28</sup> It is especially what happens to him that is of concern to Sojourner Truth – him being hanged on the gallows. In one version of her speech at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City in 1853, she associatively identifies with Esther as oppressed who wanted to lay her complaint before the king. The king grants her wish and hanged Haman on the gallows. But Truth said this was not what she wanted, namely to kill others. She only wants women's rights, but then she cannot contain herself in saying with regard to the hanging of Haman, she is sorry to see them so short-minded.<sup>29</sup>

Her focus here is on Haman and not on Esther, thereby underscoring the violence Haman exacted on the Jews, with whom she identifies and whom she regarded as having experiences akin to her own. Her invocation of Haman is rooted in what can be called the Black Jeremiad,<sup>30</sup> especially its warning to white people of the future judgment for the sin of slavery. It is as if Sojourner Truth warns "whites of the dispossession and violent death that they may meet, as did Haman, for enslaving and attempting to dehumanise African Americans."<sup>31</sup>

Her reference to Haman is ambiguous and double-edged, the latter a definite feature of the Black Jeremiad:

The Black Jeremiad offers another telling example of how a non-dominant group's acceptance of the cultural values and norms of a more dominant group is a double-edged phenomenon. Recently scholars have shown how internalization of the ideology of domes-

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<sup>28</sup> In a course titled "From Text to Sermon: Reading, Writing religious texts" – CGM303U – at Unisa students of the late eighties and early nineties identified with Esther and Haman along racial lines. Haman was constantly seen as the evil other of apartheid, whiteness in its various cultural and political forms and blacks associated themselves without second thoughts with Esther. See Gerrie F. Snyman, "'Ihlahle Eli-nothututhu?' The Lay Reader and/or the Critical Reader: Some Remarks on Africani-sation," *R&T* 6/2 (1999): 140-167.

<sup>29</sup> In another version of her speech it was as if the king hanged Haman and his sons on his own accord. Truth again affirmed she does not want to see people killed, but women ought to rise as high as the hanged Haman. See Zackodnik, "'I Don't Know How You will Feel,'" 63-64. Zackodnik thinks here reference to Haman's rise is ambiguous, as it refers to not only him being hanged on a gallows 50 cubits high, but also to his meteoric rise within the kingdom as Prime Minister.

<sup>30</sup> David Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. du Bois, 1841-1919," *AmerQ* 38/3 (1986): 481-492. The Jeremiad arose from Puritan failure to fulfil its task of self-perfection and world redemption (482). The Black Jeremiad developed from the American Jeremiad and became a powerful rhetorical tradition denouncing every form of racial injustice. As reform measures set in, the parameters shifted to include new social issues on the margins of society (490).

<sup>31</sup> Zackodnik, "'I Don't Know How You will Feel,'" 64.

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ticity by most nineteenth-century American women and of slave-holders' paternalistic ideology by black slaves simultaneously represented acceptance of important limits on these groups' militant resistance and efforts for autonomy and the ideological shield behind which women and slaves steadily expanded their rights and freedom into increased areas of existence.<sup>32</sup>

The Black Jeremiad stands under the influence of hegemonic ideology. It serves nevertheless as an illustration of how subordinate groups change and reshape what they have come to learn from the dominant class, turning them into weapons that can serve their own purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Sojourner Truth's implied comparison between white men and Haman and black women and Esther is built upon the possibility to imitate. It is not real action, but intended, or simulated. The ability to imitate constitutes simultaneously the possibility to Other.<sup>34</sup> It is for this reason that Brenner does not see morality in the Book of Esther. To her, readers side with Esther and Mordecai simply because they are superior. The book is to her a guide to life and survival. It is an answer to the question what it takes to survive and succeed as a Jew in the Diaspora. Nonetheless, the answer she finds is disconcerting: One mutates into the former adversary.<sup>35</sup>

Given the violence in the book, it is then no wonder that Purim had through the ages a dark side to it in its imitation of what befell Haman. In the fifth century C.E. one action during Purim festivities was the hanging on large gallows effigies of Haman. These hangings of effigies came to be perceived by Christians as a mockery of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, especially when the structures from which the effigies hung, were cross-like. Their reaction necessitated the Theodosian law of 408, instructing governors to bar Jews from setting fire to Haman in memory of his past punishment.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, there is further evidence that in certain communities, Purim festivities enabled people

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<sup>32</sup> Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad," 491.

<sup>33</sup> Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad," 491.

<sup>34</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Athalya Brenner, "Looking at Esther through the Looking Glass," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pres, 1995), 71-80.

<sup>36</sup> Elliott Horowitz, "The Rite to be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence," *PT* 15/1 (1994): 25, 28. To many Jewish historians of the past the linking of the burning of the Haman effigy with Christ is regarded as slander. However, currently the burning of the effigy is regarded as part of past Purim celebrations and reflects the carnivalesque nature of the festivities. And that the burning did in fact allow for the venting of hostilities is also recognised.

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to commit ritualised aggression against others.<sup>37</sup> Thus, to imitate may not always be desirable.

Randall Bailey provides a further example in his reference to something that is not always taken into consideration.<sup>38</sup> Haman is thought to be the enemy, even from much earlier times, since he is depicted as related to Agag (1 Sam 15). But Agag and his kin were killed by the ancient Israelites. Thus, Esther / Mordecai and Haman stood under the cloud of genocide from the very start: "Saul's genocidal activities are acceptable, while Haman's are to be frowned upon."<sup>39</sup> I am reminded here of Bailey's remark about the privileging of the Jews in Esther:

Thus, the privileging of one ethnic group over others is embedded in the ideology of the text. This ideology seems to be embraced by commentators of the text, in the same ways in which Eurocentric translators of the Hebrew Bible have privileged Israelite /Judean / Jewish actions toward "the Other."<sup>40</sup>

It is a similar privileging and embedded ideology in the text that prevented Mosala to act mimetically on the Book of Esther, although his reading of the Book of Esther had largely shaped the contextual framework of liberation in the 1980's.<sup>41</sup> In the face of what he calls an oppressive European civilizing attitude he looked into the implications of the text of Esther for African women's struggle for liberation in South Africa. In what he describes as the revolt of the reader he rebels against the authority of the text imposed on him not only by apartheid theology but also the liberal theological tradition:

Most studies of the book of Esther are preoccupied with questions of the religiosity, canonical status, historicity and purpose. The problem with these studies is not that they address themselves to these questions but that they rely heavily on the text itself not only for information but also for the theoretical frameworks with which the text must be interpreted. Thus most works simply retell the

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<sup>37</sup> Horowitz, "The Rite to be Reckless," 38.

<sup>38</sup> Randall C. Bailey, "'That's why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *To the Ends of the Earth? Minority Biblical Criticism in Motion – They were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (eds. R. C. Bailey, T.-s. B. Liew, and F. F. Segovia; SBLSS 57; Atlanta: SBL, 2009): 230.

<sup>39</sup> Bailey, "'That's why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!'" 231.

<sup>40</sup> Bailey, "'That's why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!'" 232.

<sup>41</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," *JBTinSA* 2/2 (November 1988): 3-9.

story, assess the obvious religiosity of the text and confirm the book's own confession of its purpose.<sup>42</sup>

In reading the text Mosala refers to the feudal or tributary system implied by the text of Esther that reflects two kinds of oppressions: One unsaid, namely what is happening to the surplus of production and the other said, namely patriarchy.<sup>43</sup> In the struggle for survival, the central message of the text, Esther's gender-power is first alienated but then integrated into the patriarchal-feudal system. Mosala objects, however, to the text's utilisation of a female character for patriarchal ends, as well as the sacrifice of gender-struggles for the sake of national survival and the suppression of class issues in the story.<sup>44</sup> Of particular note is Mosala's emphasis on the role of the text's textuality in the theoretical framework of patriarchy. He insinuates a relationship between patriarchy and defining textuality in a particular way.

The story of Esther displays a particular kind of mimesis in terms of the victim doing what the perpetrator does. But because the context differs considerably, their actions receive a positive range. Erich Auerbach puts himself against the German culture he is fleeing from in Nazi Germany, but he cannot escape the utilisation of the master's tools. He ends up imitating the studies of old German masters. Similarly, Yiddish culture, in an effort to forge a new identity, remains European and partakes in its universal claims. Sojourner Truth emulates Esther in her reception of the story in front of a hostile audience, and draws her impersonation to its logical consequences in suggesting an imitation of Haman amongst the white male audience. In the early Middle Ages Purim festivities entailed in some localities a ritualised aggression towards effigies of Haman. Mosala's refusal to participate in imitative play implies a refusal to employ the master's tools and becomes implied in an act of complicity.

## C WESTERN / EUROPEAN DISCOURSE AS "MASTER'S TOOLS"

All these aspects put on the table the problem within European discourse, namely that the discourse that challenges European epistemologies depends on those very epistemologies to enable criticism.<sup>45</sup> The problem then becomes what Vander Stichele and Penner defines as the "universalization of particularity" which is illustrated in the current debate on African and Western hermeneutics as well as feminism when "basic structures of 'certainty' mask particu-

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<sup>42</sup> Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther," 5.

<sup>43</sup> Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther," 7.

<sup>44</sup> Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther," 8.

<sup>45</sup> Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" In *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (eds. C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner; GPBS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 12.

lar and acute forms of power relationships that postulate white, European, Christian (predominantly Protestant) upper class males ...."<sup>46</sup>

What happened with feminist discourse is instructive here. They provided a voice of critical inquiry in vitally examining patriarchal texts and the history of scholarship that replicated the patriarchal legacy.<sup>47</sup> But in the end that was not enough. Feminism cannot inhabit the father's house. It began as a Western movement for equality, but as long as it fails to recognise geographical, linguistic and historical difference it remained to be viewed as a tool in the West's colonisation of the mind.<sup>48</sup> Frances Klopper describes it as follows:

In the secularised Western societies of Europe and much of North America, feminist critics read the bible from a non-religious background. Womanist scholars [African—G.F.S.] are on the whole still committed bible readers. It follows that the bible does not affect women's lives in these contexts to the extent that it does in South Africa with its predominantly Christian (87%) population. [...] Although sexism exists both within Western and African cultures, Western feminist biblical scholars are not confronted with the same social and economic burdens as their African counterparts within their own communities.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 9. They use Ernst Troeltsch as their example. The latter saw universalism and individualism as the pinnacle of human achievement manifested in Christianity and the religion of ancient Israel. He believed in the superiority of Christianity which he identified as a European religion over against the religions of the Orient, the white race and the educated classes.

<sup>47</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 15: "In other words, from the beginning, feminist scholars were not abandoning the historical-critical enterprise; they were reconfiguring its goals of recovery based on their alternative experiences as women. In this way, then, feminist scholarship provided a voice of critical inquiry—offering in particular a hermeneutics of suspicion in terms of examining not only the patriarchal texts of the past (and their consequent exclusion of women), but also the history of scholarship that replicated both the structures and results of that patriarchal legacy. Feminist critics are thus explicit about their own social location—and the way in which that location affects their historical reconstruction—in a way that earlier male-stream scholars could not possibly be. Awareness of the resultant subjectivities and their impact on the production and performance of discourses thus represents an indispensable element that feminist and other liberationist scholars have brought to the conversation."

<sup>48</sup> Jorunn Økland, "Why can't the Heavenly Miss Jerusalem just Shut up?" in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner; GPBS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 312.

<sup>49</sup> Frances Klopper, "Quo Vadis, Feminist Scholarship? Reflections from the Threshold between African and European Biblical Exegesis," in *African and European*

Feminist discourse paved the way for the scholarly enterprise to put its own subjectivity on the table. It started as a protest against androcentrism within Western culture and the claimed universality of the masculine perspective.<sup>50</sup> In their critique of masculinity and androcentrism, feminism constructed its own subjectivity which has been rendered questionable within feminism itself due to racial issues. The latter were introduced into the debate when non-Western women argued along similar lines that feminism universalised the women's liberation agenda as white and Western.<sup>51</sup> In this way historical-criticism became viewed as a Eurocentric tool in service of Western imperial tendencies.<sup>52</sup> Masenya regards this methodology as strange within an African context and when compared to a *bosadi* reading of the biblical text, a vast gap is registered.<sup>53</sup> She calls historical-criticism "[t]raditions of a foreign master" and argues with other black female scholars for the right to interpret sacred texts for themselves. They should not have to answer to privileged women who are ignorant about colonialism, race and class.<sup>54</sup> In terms of whiteness and feminism, "the subtle and hidden/masked universalization of their own value system and discursive structure" is overlooked.<sup>55</sup> In terms of race, the terms "woman" and "women" simply signified white experience: "By failing to insert the word 'white' before 'woman' and 'women,' some feminists imperialistically take over the identity of those rendered invisible."<sup>56</sup>

In this way, while feminist biblical scholarship provided numerous challenges to the dominant paradigm and discourse, it also manifested a degree of *continuity* as well. On an ideological level, for instance, the emphasis on the freedom of the subject and the idea that all subjects are equal readily connect with the modernist enterprise underlying traditional historical criticism. The liberationist impulse in feminist critical work affirms that same commitment and, although the universal subject of "western white middle-class Christian male" is challenged (and in some cases obliterated), it tends to be replaced or opposed by another universal subject, as the category

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*Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (ed. H. de Wit & G. West; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 185.

<sup>50</sup> Kune Biezeveld, "The Role of 'the Other' in the Reading of the Bible: Towards a New Roadmap for Bible Reading in the Western World," in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (ed. H. de Wit & G. West; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 129.

<sup>51</sup> Biezeveld, "The Role of 'the Other,'" 130.

<sup>52</sup> Klopper, "Quo Vadis, Feminist Scholarship?" 187.

<sup>53</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Their Hermeneutics was Strange! Ours is a Necessity! Rereading Vashti as African-South African Women," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (eds. C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner; GPBS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 184.

<sup>54</sup> Klopper, "Quo Vadis, Feminist Scholarship?" 188.

<sup>55</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 17.

<sup>56</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 17.

"women," initially used to counter dominant male discourse, often displayed the same universalist and essentialist overtones. A feminism of difference in such instances turned out to be a feminism of uniformity.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, the aim of using the master's tools is to ironically undermine the "master" by using the methodology for purposes different from those intended by the master. There is a continuity as well as a discontinuity: it is not a question of deleting the master's tools, but "a decentering of methodology, its re-examination and reapplication."<sup>58</sup>

The existence of an African hermeneutics group at the Society of Biblical Literature testifies to a similar problem and redirects the focus to the particularity of African thought structures which differ from western ones. African hermeneutics claims for itself a similar subjectivity, yet different from Western hermeneutics. The question remains whether it, like feminist discourse, displays the same overtones it tries to lay bare. Or, is there a need to provide a different language and thought structures than those given in the discourse that is being criticised? Can it do otherwise?

Whereas feminist criticism demonstrated within an androcentric paradigm that difference with respect to masculinity need to be factored in, African hermeneutics lay claim to a similar kind of difference on the basis of racialising elements and with postcolonial or decolonial criticism, questioning "the universalist pretensions of Western hegemonic discourses"<sup>59</sup> and challenging nontemporality and universalisation of the Western framework on the basis of the fragmented nature of human experience and culture: "One rather finds discrete communities (past and present) and different experiences, which can only be brought into conversation with great difficulty, and then always at the risk of being subjected to one colonizing project/power or another."<sup>60</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner refer to an inherent ambiguity of contesting dominating discourses yet practicing a degree of complicity. Within this ambiguity,

one can also engage the dominant discourses and communities, reconfiguring and reconstituting traditional tools, methods, and aims in alternative directions and contexts. In the latter case, voices within and without of the guild find each other, and those at the center and the margins can establish (some) common cause. Herein also lies the possibility and prospect for the creation of shifting

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<sup>57</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 16.

<sup>58</sup> Athalya Brenner, "Epilogue: Babes and Bathwater on the Road," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner; GPBS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 335.

<sup>59</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 18.

<sup>60</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 23.

identities and the development of subversive discourses amidst the employment of alternative ones.<sup>61</sup>

But such an engagement is not easy. For example, what happens in a context of an oral/aural nature where people do not read texts but listen as someone reads it for them, and then interpret the text simply on the basis of what is heard, memory and personal experience, as is often the case in a context of illiteracy? Does the Western position not presume a textualist approach, whereas in the African hermeneutical position textuality is not necessarily an assumption?

## **D TEXTUALITY AND THE BOOK OF ESTHER**

### **1 A textualist mode of thinking**

In the traditional definition of exegesis and application, the general assumption is that of textuality. The centrality of the Bible as *text* was cemented very early in the history of exegesis and became a significant descriptor for those churches originating within that period. The text also became a *sine qua non* during the Reformation. The Belgian Confession has at least six articles related to the Bible as text and the Westminster Confession links inerrancy to its textualist mode of thinking.

Within the Dutch Reformed tradition, Hans de Wit, for example, distinguishes between exegesis and contextuality where text plays an important role:<sup>62</sup>

As a systematic and analytical dialogue with the *text*, diachronically and synchronically, focussing on its grammar and syntax, the meanings it may had in its original context(s), its references to its historical background(s), its history of growth, its more literary aspects, its history of reception,—in short: the exploration of whatever elements of meaning and language *texts* are made up of. *Exegesis requires skills that are different from those needed in the process of actualisation.*<sup>63</sup>

By appropriation or application De Wit means

replacing the original reference of the *text* with a new one and inserting the old biblical text into the *new* context of one's life, mak-

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<sup>61</sup> Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?" 28.

<sup>62</sup> Hans de Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality: Happy Marriage, Divorce or Living (Apart) Together?" in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (ed. H. de Wit and G. West; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3-30.

<sup>63</sup> De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality," 4.

ing it part of one's life, with the resulting effect of the hermeneutical circulation between the two.<sup>64</sup>

He refers to what he calls the "epistemological pitfall" where the success of the appropriation of a biblical text becomes a standard for the quality of the exegesis. To him (my emphasis – GFS), "[t]he competence of exegesis applies to the text that was handed down to us. It intends to *produce knowledge with respect to this text*. This competence, however, does not naturally extend to the current socio-political reality."<sup>65</sup>

In her response to De Wit's propositions, Nzimande observes an ethnocentric bias.<sup>66</sup> Her problem is that Western biblical scholars assume what she calls "epistemological dominance."<sup>67</sup> De Wit's emphasis on the text and exegesis as an analysis of the linguistic components that becomes an indispensable modus operandi is a case in point. To her, and she is rather candid, reading the biblical text in a context of poverty does not require an analytical approach or a rationality in the Western sense of the word.<sup>68</sup> In the end, she accuses him of academic territorialism and Western ethnocentrism, if not arrogance.<sup>69</sup>

It is clear from De Wit's emphasis on textuality that his kind of thinking sits within a modernist paradigm based on the start of the art of book printing. The book printing brought the Bible as text into ordinary readers' hands and in Europe it set off a movement towards literacy where text and literacy are closely associated. In the 20th century various departments of the science of the theory of literature came into being, in whose midst the notion of "intertextuality" originated and which pondered whether one can assume that any text presupposes or alludes to other texts. Moreover, texts are regarded as palimpsests, referring to the practice of scraping an old text clean and use the surface

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<sup>64</sup> De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality," 5.

<sup>65</sup> De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality," 23, footnote 30.

<sup>66</sup> Makhosazana K. Nzimande, "Being 'Apart' and 'Together' at the same time?" in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: in Quest of a Shared Meaning* (ed. H. de Wit and G. West; Brill: Leiden, 2008), 33.

<sup>67</sup> Nzimande, "Being 'Apart' and 'Together,'" 34.

<sup>68</sup> Nzimande, "Being 'Apart' and 'Together,'" 34.

<sup>69</sup> Nzimande's accusation of ethnocentrism and arrogance made me look for evidence within European discourses. While on a sabbatical at KU Leuven, I encountered the following paragraph in a popular denominational magazine, *Damiaan Vandaag* (12/4 [2012]) about a nun, Mother Marianne, whom the Pope would have canonised on 21 October 2012: "Moeder Marianne is een excellent voorbeeld van de europeanisering van de wereld met het beste van wat gewoon katholieke mensen toen tot stand kon brengen." Here is a direct reference in popular belief of the role of missionaries in the previous centuries: to turn the missionary objects into Europeans. See Rogier van Rossum, "Missie, Migratie en Globalisering," *Damiaan Vandaag* 12/4 (2012): no pages.

for another text. Palimpsest has become a metaphor for intertextuality. In the last instance, everything turned out to be texts, even "oral" texts.

## 2 Textuality and Esther

When one studies the making of the Hebrew Bible or OT, the mimetic relationship between the Bible as text and the notion of textuality becomes problematical. Karel van der Toorn argues that the notion of the Bible as a collection of books is misleading.<sup>70</sup> He argues that to refer to the Bible as book or books come from the second century B.C.E.. It is a rabbinical concept and a Hellenistic invention. To regard the Bible as books is, however, distorted historical reality as much of it predates the Hellenistic era. One dare not think of the Bible as a book in terms of a physical object that can be bought in a bookstore although this is the reality. There are two aspects that need to be borne in mind: writing was laborious and the materials used in the process determined what could be done or achieved. Writing texts was expensive and time consuming, confining the making of texts to the upper echelons of society. Says Van der Toorn:

To speak about the books of the Bible is misleading on more than one account. Historically, the Hebrew Bible is a collection of scrolls, and scrolls cannot be simply equated with books. The difference between the two is not merely a matter of form; it affects the mode of writing, editorial strategies, and the way in which readers use the text.<sup>71</sup>

Writing existed to support oral performance. Texts were produced for audiences. They act as deposit boxes for oral performances, and the scroll was the repository of a completed text whose composition preceded its fixation in writing.

What is one then to make of Timothy Beal and Mieke Bal's utilisation of the concept of writing in their understanding of the book of Esther? It is as if in their understanding writing does not mimic the ancient process of writing and textualisation. Writing, and textuality in a postmodern sense, become a heuristic key to unlock the book of Esther.

Beal makes a lot of writing in his understanding of the book.<sup>72</sup> He regards Vashti and Mordeci as being *written out* by royal law:

Vashti is *written out* of both law and the story, and this writing-out is used by the subjects of the law to *write back in* what they consider

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<sup>70</sup> Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (BLS; London: Routledge, 1997).

to be proper sexual identity for women in relation to "their lords" (even though it may have never existed before this).<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, Vashti is written into the story in her being a threat to male dominionship.

The textuality of Beal's approach is reinforced by his reference to the Book of Esther as a palimpsest, a story written then erased and then a new story written all over again over the old erased one. Vashti is erased, and the story of Esther is written over the Vashti story. But traces of Vashti remain behind:<sup>74</sup>

Esther is conscripted with Vashti's breakout in mind. With her, the king and his advisors are creating their own palimpsest, looping back to the beginning of chapter 1 to write a new "love story" over the old one that had starred Vashti as supporting actress. ... But the old story cannot be erased entirely; it will remain legible between the lines and between the words of the new story, resisting oblivion.

To understand Beal's focus on writing, one needs to comprehend textuality and the poststructuralist mode of thinking. Textuality is central to poststructuralist thought: texts do not have meaning, nor can one determine the meaning of a text in a final or determinative way. It rejects structuralism's idea that structure in a text has intrinsic meaning. With deconstruction as component of poststructuralism, Derrida entered the scene to problematise the Western mode of thinking by preferring writing to speaking:

Deconstruction is text-centered. Yet for deconstruction, there is no center to the text. *Text* is not limited to written language. The self is a text; experience is a text; any instance of signification is a text, and as [Roland] Barthes said, "everything signifies" .... Text is the product of signifying difference. Text and its related terms (such as *writing* and *reading*) are, for deconstruction, complex, fluid, and powerful metaphors. Whatever a text is, it is not a stable, self-identical, enduring object but a place of intersection in a network of signification. *Intertextuality* —a term introduced by Julia Kristeva— suggests that each text is situated for each reader in an ever-changing web composed of innumerable texts. There is no extratextual reality to which texts refer or which gives texts their meaning; meaning or reference are possible only in relation to this network, as functions of intertextuality.<sup>75</sup>

With Beal writing becomes a heuristic key to understand the intrigue of the story. It never functions as a mimicking of the historical writing process.

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<sup>73</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 15, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 130.

The idea of a palimpsest is more symbolic than reality, an instrument with which to understand the repetitiveness in the book itself. But because of its function as a heuristic key, its definition and understanding resides within Western culture. Moreover, its postmodern interpretation underscores its Western context.

Mieke Bal regards the book of Esther as a reflexion on writing:

As it happens, in Esther the social functions of writing are exemplified by its narrative and semiotic functions. The act of writing is plotted in such a way as to undermine the standard social functions of writing, as conceptualized in the orality-literature debate, thereby inviting reflection on the politics of writing and reading.<sup>76</sup>

She links writing to throwing the lots, making laws, banquets and letters in the book of Esther. They all comprise of inversions or perversions of their standard functions. The entire plot in the Book of Esther is interwoven with textuality. The first decree allowing for the extermination of the Jews is erased by Mordecai's counter decree allowing the extermination of the king's enemies. They are asymmetrical. For example, Haman throwing the lot means that the lot had to be read, becoming a random text *obeyed* by Haman, yet the text that he wrote in response, became *disobeyed*. Bal, playing with the words reader-response, sees the response to Haman's decree as a reflection on reading: "The letter/counter-letter confrontation constitutes a reader-response theory, proposing that reading is neither fixed nor independent of the text."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, obedience to Haman's text as well as ignoring it would have entailed killing.

The function of writing undermines the certainty of writing, argues Bal.<sup>78</sup> Writing is thought to preserve memory, making explicit what was thought and said at a particular moment. The first decree, that deposes Vashti and aims at ensuring male domination, is deconstructed in the rest of the narrative with Esther manipulating the king. The second decree, by Haman, appears equally futile. Bal says writing produces danger and not defeat. Delay or deferral that is inherent to writing, undermines the fixation or sense of permanency it strives for.<sup>79</sup> Mordecai is not rewarded for discovering the plot to kill the king. Only when the king's memory fails him, and he reads about Mordecai, the king is able to reward him. Says Bal: "The written text, which was impotent before

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<sup>76</sup> Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing," in *Ruth and Esther* (ed. A. Brenner; A Feminist Companion to the Bible [Second Series] 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 227.

<sup>77</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 226.

<sup>78</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 228.

<sup>79</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 228.

the king read it, acquires in the reading the power to force the king to act: justice must be done / served by writing."<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, to Bal the Book of Esther is a mirror of the contemporary critic:

If engaged, like her, in exposing the abuse of power, the danger of writing, and the instability of subjectivity, the critic will escape neither responsibility for her activity nor the encapsulation of that activity in historically diverse, subjectless writing.

Thus, writing criticism in accordance with Esther entails not obscuring either its predecessors or its opponents, not denying either its complicity or agency. The book of Esther demonstrates that writing is not necessarily either a deadly weapon or an innocent toy; closer to the time bomb than to anything else, however, it can be countered by virtue of its delayed effect. Hence, when involved in the act of reading—the deferred completion of writing—critics should be aware of both their (overt or covert) allegiances (reading is an act in which subjectivity is dispersed) and their own inevitable contributions to this act (it is an act).<sup>81</sup>

In my mind, Beal and Bal's utilisation of writing in order to understand the Book of Esther, is driven by a Western notion of writing and textuality within literary aesthetics. They show that Esther, in the end, uses her master's tools by writing texts. But both provide a western (contextual) interpretation of the writing aspects in the book. It is as if their interpretation of writing is excessive in that it becomes an all consuming *topos* in their reading, as if they draw the consequences of the notion of writing and textuality to its extreme into a postmodern frame of mind.

Textuality becomes a precondition for understanding within a Western framework. If this is true, should one then assume a particular rationality that underscores textuality? What happens when such a textuality is not embedded in other frameworks? Does one then need to account for different rationalities?

### 3      Different Rationalities?

De Wit hopes that reading the Bible will enable a meeting of rationalities—readers from different worlds bringing with them completely different rationalities.<sup>82</sup> He presupposes an ideal situation where the discussion is not dominated

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<sup>80</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 230.

<sup>81</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 237.

<sup>82</sup> De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality," 27.

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by Western rationality but where each rationality will become vulnerable to each other.<sup>83</sup> But that seems impossible if one reads Nzimande's reaction.

The question of mimicking the colonial master, or using the master's tools—the question of complicity—came up in my reading of *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*.<sup>84</sup> What figures very strongly in this book is a generalising view on Western or European hermeneutics over against a very particularising setting of the own African or African-Diasporic context with which the OT is interpreted. What was clearly mapped was what the different African and Diasporic contexts were:

By beginning with, or referencing, images or tropes from Black life, authors have allowed the realities of day-to-day existence on the African continent and throughout the African Diaspora to have a prominent place in the process by which meaning is derived from the First Testament and other ancient texts deemed authoritative by African readers today.<sup>85</sup>

It is not any lived experience, but one in which the reader has become a racialised other through various means and subsequently disempowered, culturally, socially, economically, educationally, religiously and politically.

The antagonist in this set up is Western or European hermeneutics. In the book the context of the antagonist is not so pronounced as that of the protagonist's African or Diasporic context. Masenya elucidates the problem: "An attempt to foreground one's African context within Eurocentric epistemologies (which continue to shape the South African higher education curriculum) is still viewed with suspicion."<sup>86</sup> She adds (with reference to an earlier statement):

One becomes an insider as one is being trained as a student, an insider to the theologies which are foreign to oneself, an insider as one trains African students in Western-oriented studies of the Bible, an insider as one does research. If the research conducted is not played according to the rules inside the game, it will not earn this "insider/outsider" accreditation to the Western academic status quo,

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<sup>83</sup> De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality," 27.

<sup>84</sup> Hugh R. Page, ed. *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). See Snyman, "'Looking into Black Byes and Feel the Embarrassment,'" 464-491.

<sup>85</sup> Page, *The Africana Bible*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Madipoane Masenya, "Exiled in my own Home," in "African and African Diasporan Hermeneutics: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Journey, Exile, and Life through my/our Place," written by Randall C. Bailey, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (ed. H. R. Page; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 22.

which itself remains basically an outsider to the African status quo.<sup>87</sup>

Brian Epstein illuminates the problem by referring to a Zande diviner and an American medical doctor.<sup>88</sup> He asks whether the diviner reason differently from the medical doctor and whether the diviner has alternative standards of rationality from the scientist.<sup>89</sup> He does not want to focus on reason to answer these two questions.<sup>90</sup> He looks at rationality, because there is

a growing recognition that contextual factors play a crucial role in determining whether a belief or an action is rational. ... This leads to a point often glossed over in the rationality literature: that *cultural* factors must also figure into determining the rationality of an action or belief.<sup>91</sup>

He further argues that the rationality of an action, for example, must be evaluated against the background of what the actor had in mind and the rationality of a belief need to be assessed against the background of the knowledge possessed in the believer's community.<sup>92</sup> He questions the notion of an ideal rationality, or of what he calls a caricature of scientific rationality, "a sort of formal, logical ideal for forming beliefs or choosing actions."<sup>93</sup> Instead he pursues what he calls a pragmatic moderate pluralism for defending alternative standards.<sup>94</sup> He argues that even monism of the most orthodox kind need to relativise the rationality of an action to at least some contextual factors, despite the view that there can only be one demanding set of rules or conditions that an action or belief must satisfy to be rational: "Accommodating some context

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<sup>87</sup> Masenya, "Exiled in my own Home," 21.

<sup>88</sup> Brian Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist: Revisiting the Question of Alternative Standards of Rationality," *JAAR* 78/4 (2010): 1048-1086. Cited 30 March 2012. Online: DOI: 10.1093/jaarel/lfq091.

<sup>89</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1051. It is important to grasp the distinction Epstein draws between reasoning and rationality. **Reason:** "To reason is to draw inferences, to move from a set of beliefs or claims to another set of beliefs or claims." **Rationality:** "Rationality is a broader notion, indicating a kind of rightness or faultlessness in forming a belief or choosing an action." Reasoning is thus only one way of forming rational beliefs. Rationality functions in the formation of a belief based on perception or hearsay. Reason is a means whereby thinking comes from one idea to a related idea, for example the relationship between cause and effect. Reason and rationality focus on different aspects."

<sup>90</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1058.

<sup>91</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1059.

<sup>92</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1061.

<sup>93</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1059.

<sup>94</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1059.

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dependence is required for *any* view of rationality to be tenable."<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, Epstein also argues the following:

For a version of pluralism to be tenable, we have to abstract, at least to some extent, over contextual differences. That is, we have to allow ourselves to take "rational" to denote the same relation across some different individuals and some different contexts. If not, we can never be in a position to contrast their standards of reasoning at all.<sup>96</sup>

He says further that there may be differences between what is rational for a blacksmith and for a silversmith, for a veterinarian and for a tax attorney. But one may abstract over these differences "because it may only be radical cultural differences that are appropriate to the theoretical purposes."<sup>97</sup>

The question of different rationalities obviously need much more explanation than what has been presented here, but on the basis of Masenya's uneasiness *vis-à-vis* Western epistemologies and Epstein's argument regarding the Western medical doctor and the Zande diviner, it is possible that the debate between Western and African hermeneutics needs to account for that aspect in the debate. There seems to be a *prima facie* case for different rationalities in the debate on hermeneutics.

## **E CONCLUSION**

If African hermeneutics claims for itself a rationality different from that with which Western Hermeneutics operates, can one assume that the notion of textuality testifies to such a different rationality and in fact constitutes a marker *par excellence* for Western hermeneutics? In other words, the reader's focus on writing in the book of Esther happens because of the focus on texts within the Western / European sphere of literature studies and theories of literature. To be more specific, the very idea of a theory of literature is as European or Western as can be. If this is true, any reading of the biblical text, simply for the fact that it is a text, employs the master's tools. And it would be very Western of me to claim it, as it universalises the reading of the biblical text.

Let me return to the question implicit in this essay: Can African Hermeneutics mimic or imitate Western Hermeneutics? The answer to the question is obviously yes. The more pressing question is whether such mimicry is necessary and / or desirable.

If one accepts a differentiation between rationalities, and defines African rationalities differently from Western rationalities, then the epistemological

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<sup>95</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1071.

<sup>96</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1075.

<sup>97</sup> Epstein, "The Diviner and the Scientist," 1076.

desire to mimic theoretically falls away. In other words, mimesis becomes superfluous. But then one needs to reckon with the impossibility of understanding the Other, plunging oneself into a mode of cultural relativism.

The book of Esther is in itself an example of mimicking, portraying the outcome of the Jews' struggle for survival in the Diaspora as one in which the Jews visited on the Persians that what Haman intended to visit upon them. Cheryl Anderson warns that one needs to consider one's own historical memories and own circumstances in order to determine whether mimicry of the privileged chosen group in biblical narratives is necessary: "[I]f they ignore the marginalization in the text, they will ignore the marginalization in their own lives."<sup>98</sup>

Regarding mimicry of Western hermeneutics, the point is whether complicity will be recognised and dealt with. Or perhaps defined in another way: does the recognition of Western hermeneutical elements imply that within a different (African) context these elements should have no bearing?

The issue of textuality serves as an example. The Bible as text plays an important role within the Church, especially those traditions with their origins in the Reformation. Those traditions were exported to Africa and still play an important role in terms of Bible translations. What should African hermeneutics then do about textuality? Is it a very Western notion when one follows its deployment in Western hermeneutics? Will a focus on orality serve as a way in which African hermeneutics can decenter textuality? Or is textuality already part and parcel of African hermeneutics? If so, what are the differences between African and Western hermeneutics or how does the two then correspond? Is the problem then the western notion of textuality that has become definitive for textuality in any other culture? Or is the problem more political and less epistemological?

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<sup>98</sup> Cheryl Anderson, "Ruth and Esther as Models for the Formation of God's People: Engaging Liberationist Critiques" (paper presented at the Twelfth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford, 12-21 August 2007), 26.

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