


Reading from this place? A personal reckoning with whiteness and Bible scholarship



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This article offers a critical autoethnographic engagement with the enduring influence of whiteness in biblical scholarship. The author, a white South African New Testament scholar, reflects on how his theological formation and social location (which is marked by institutional privilege and Eurocentric frameworks), shaped his early interpretive practices and hindered more just, contextual readings of Scripture. Drawing on Welile Mazamisa's challenge to 'read from this place', the article traces a personal and theological journey from detachment to engagement, from reader to hearer, from teacher to learner. Framed by decolonial hermeneutics and contextual theology, the author explores how encounters in the church, academy and society at large disrupted inherited paradigms and called forth new modes of interpretation rooted in solidarity and accountability. Some primary (South) African perspectives are engaged to illuminate the epistemic and ethical imperatives of reading from below. The article demonstrates how critical reflexivity and intercultural reading practices can help dismantle the hermeneutical injustices perpetuated by whiteness and recover liberative meanings obscured by dominant theological traditions.

Contribution: This article contributes to ongoing conversations about decolonising biblical scholarship by providing a personal, methodologically rigorous case study. It models how critical autoethnography can serve as a theological practice of unlearning and reimagining, offering a path for scholars situated in privilege to read the Bible differently. By centring Southern African voices and interpretive traditions, the article advances the work of contextual, justice-oriented hermeneutics within and beyond the South African academy.

Keywords: Welile Mazamisa; whiteness in theology; African biblical hermeneutics; decolonial biblical interpretation; liberation theology; critical autoethnography; contextual Bible reading.

Introduction

In a 1991 article, the South African theologian Welile Mazamisa asked a crucial question, what does it mean to read the Bible 'from this place'? His challenge was directed at the theological academy that had long ignored the hermeneutical voices and practices of black South Africans, preferring instead the assumed neutrality of Western interpretive paradigms (Mazamisa 1991:67–72). Mazamisa's work unsettled the normative assumptions of whiteness in biblical scholarship by insisting that orality, locality and the socio-political realities of the reader are not peripheral but central to how the Bible is read and interpreted in (Southern) African contexts. In many ways, that question, 'how and from where we read', has continued to guide me. This article is a personal reckoning with the epistemological and structural consequences of reading the Bible as a white, male, South African scholar formed in, and benefitting from, historically privileged theological institutions.

Significant work has been done to decolonise the discipline of biblical studies in South Africa (Claassens, Van der Walt & Olojede 2019; Forster 2023; Hombana 2024; Mosala 1989:198; Mtshiselwa 2011; Nadar 2009; Pillay 2019; Punt 2006; Van der Walt 2014; West & Dube 2001). Yet, the complicity of whiteness in shaping both biblical interpretation and theological formation remains under-interrogated, particularly by white scholars. The dominant exegetical approaches I inherited during my formation towards the end of the political apartheid era were shaped by historical criticism, Eurocentric rationality and individualistic theological reasoning. These methods, while not inherently invalid, were presented as universal and value-neutral, effectively masking their cultural and ideological origins (Forster 2023:241–243; West 2016:7–10). What they excluded, often implicitly, were the lived experiences, communal interpretive practices and liberationist theological insights of black South Africans and other marginalised communities.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Honouring Prof Welile Mazamisa: The Reader, the Text, and Two Horizons', under the expert guidance of guest editors Dr Mphumezi Hombana, Mr Otto Makalima, Prof. Dion Forster and Dr Mzukisi Faleni.

This article represents an attempt at critical autoethnography. I reflect on my own positionality, tracing a journey from theological formation steeped in whiteness and privilege, towards a more reflexive, contextual and participatory mode of biblical interpretation. I consider how unlearning colonial, racialised and patriarchal assumptions became essential for re-engaging the Bible from a place of justice, solidarity and theological accountability. In particular, I engage with Mazamisa's notion of 'reading from this place' as both a hermeneutical and ethical imperative (Mazamisa 1991:67).

Methodological framing: Critical autoethnography and decolonial hermeneutics

This article is positioned at the intersection of critical autoethnography and decolonial biblical hermeneutics. Together, these frameworks enable a methodological approach that is both reflexive and transformative. They are tools through which I interrogate the socio-theological formation that shaped my reading of the Bible and examine the implications of my social location, particularly whiteness and its associated institutional privileges, in biblical scholarship.

On critical autoethnography

Critical autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses personal narrative as a means of exploring broader cultural, political and epistemological concerns. Unlike conventional autobiography or memoir, it does not simply recount personal experience but critically examines that experience as both data and analysis, subject and object. In this article, I place my own theological formation and exegetical practices under scrutiny, not as an end in themselves, but as a lens through which to consider how hegemonic norms such as whiteness are reproduced and potentially disrupted in theological education and biblical interpretation (Jones 2005:765–768).

My role, then, is not that of a detached observer but a self-implicated participant. Following Eriksen, I understand critical autoethnography as 'a reflexivity of reflexivity', in which the researcher's social location is not only acknowledged but interrogated (Eriksen 2022:102). This involves critically re-reading the interpretive assumptions I absorbed as a white, male biblical scholar educated at South African universities in the final years of apartheid, and later in the United States, Britain, and Europe, considering how the universalising assumptions of truth and value persist in my reading, teaching and theological engagement today.

Specific strategies of reflexivity guide this inquiry. These include reflective journaling on my pedagogical experiences, especially when teaching texts like Matthew 18 or Luke 4 in racially and economically diverse settings. I have also revisited moments of discomfort and reorientation in my academic development, such as my early exposure to the work of Itumeleng Mosala and Welile Mazamisa, and then gone on to evaluate how I responded to the epistemic

dissonance they introduced (Vellem 2017:8). Furthermore, I examine past interpretive choices, including the texts I chose to emphasise or avoid, the frameworks I used to explain them and the ways in which I positioned my students and readers in relation to the biblical text. These exercises in critical self-analysis aim to surface not only blind spots, but also the deeper structures of theological formation that rendered those blind spots invisible.

On decolonial hermeneutics

Running parallel to this autoethnographic reflection is the application of decolonial hermeneutics. This approach contends that biblical interpretation, far from being a neutral scholarly pursuit, has historically been entangled with colonial, patriarchal and racialised systems of power (Jennings 2020). As such, decolonial hermeneutics seeks to de-centre the dominance of Euro-American interpretive frameworks and foreground the voices and experiences of marginalised communities in the academy (Dube 2001:11–14; Snyman 2008:93–118; West 2016:5–9). It must be noticed that the framing of this initiative does not fit neatly into the ongoing debates on Liberation theology and Liberation hermeneutics and decolonisation and decolonial methodologies. It is not within the scope or purpose of this article to seek to resolve that complex and important debate.

Along with Mazamisa, as a Methodist, Itumeleng Mosala (1989) was a key early figure in articulating this critique within South African biblical scholarship. His Marxist-informed work exposed how even progressive theological readings can obscure the material interests of oppressed communities if they fail to account for class, race and cultural identity. He insisted that biblical texts must be interpreted in light of the socio-economic and political contexts not only of the ancient world, but of the readers themselves. For Mosala, black South African experience was not a supplement to interpretation, it was the very ground from which interpretation should begin (Mosala 1989:11–13).

Musa Dube (2000), reflecting from a postcolonial feminist perspective, further expanded the horizon of decolonial hermeneutics. Her readings demonstrate how the Bible has been implicated in both the justification and internalisation of empire and patriarchy, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Dube challenges interpreters to question what the text does in a given context, especially whose voices it silences or enables. She advocates a 'decolonising' reading strategy that amplifies the stories of women, the colonised and the poor in both the text and its contemporary receptions (Dube 2000:16–19).

Drawing on these scholars, I approach decolonial hermeneutics not as an abstract theory but as a concrete set of interpretive commitments. These include questioning the myth of objectivity, critically assessing whose interests are served by certain readings and holding space for interpretive practices grounded in African worldviews, oral traditions and communal discernment.

Decolonial, political and contextual theologies

Finally, this methodological framing is aligned with broader currents in decolonial and contextual theologies. From the mid-1980s onward, Southern African theologians, including those within the Methodist tradition to which I belong, have insisted that theological reflection must begin 'from below'. It emerges from the lived experience of oppressed and excluded communities (Bompani 2010; Brown 2020; Mosala 1989; Westhuizen 2020). Liberation theology, both in its Latin American and African iterations, underpins this hermeneutical commitment. It affirms that theology is not merely descriptive but prophetic, tasked with confronting injustice and reimagining the world through the lens of divine solidarity with the marginalised (Boesak 2015; De Gruchy 2016; Mofokeng 2018).

Political theology, likewise, reminds us that interpretation is never neutral. It is always situated, always implicated. To read the Bible in a postcolonial South Africa without acknowledging this is, in effect, to side with the status quo (Maluleke 1996:19). Therefore, the personal story I tell in this article is not an individual confession but a microcosm of the broader struggle for a more just, contextually engaged and decolonised biblical scholarship.

Reading from this place? Whiteness and the problem of location in biblical studies

For much of its modern history, Western biblical scholarship has presented itself as objective, universal and culture-free. Rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and shaped by European intellectual traditions, it purported to offer a 'view from nowhere' (Amini 2010:31), an interpretive stance that claimed neutrality while implicitly centring whiteness, maleness and Eurocentric worldviews (De Wit & West 2008:24–28). In theological education, particularly during the colonial and apartheid eras, this form of scholarship functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism, where historical-critical methods were elevated as the only legitimate way to interpret the Bible and other modes of reading were often dismissed as uncritical, devotional or ideological.

Whiteness as an unmarked location

My own theological formation took place in such a context. As a student at a historically white South African university in the 1990s, the curriculum I encountered was overwhelmingly shaped by European scholars such as Bultmann, Kümmel, Gunkel and their intellectual descendants. What was absent, or at best marginal, were the voices of African interpreters, women or those reading the Bible from places of socio-economic struggle. Yet, this Eurocentric tradition was never presented as one context among many. It was presented as the tradition, the norm, the gold standard of scholarly rigour. Whiteness, in this sense, functioned not as a marked and interrogated identity, but as a silent benchmark, its cultural particularities

masked by the rhetoric of universality (Maluleke 1996:19; Nadar 2006:339).

In hindsight, I see how this 'unmarked' whiteness shaped what was deemed a valid reading of Scripture (Jennings 2020:1–3). Interpretations emerging from black South African communities, which focused on land, justice and liberation, were often characterised as 'ideological' or 'agenda-driven', while European interpretations, no less ideological, were treated as apolitical or purely theological. Takatso Mofokeng argued powerfully that colonial and apartheid-trained theologians constructed a theology of oppression under the guise of orthodoxy (Mofokeng 1988:34–36). White readers were trained to ignore their own positionality while simultaneously invalidating the theological voices of black Christians as naïve, emotional or unsophisticated.

This racialised power dynamic in interpretation is what Gerald West (2016:13–16) calls 'hermeneutical injustice'. It is a condition in which certain communities, in this case, poor and black (South) African readers are structurally excluded from being seen as legitimate interpreters of the Bible. The irony is that these were the very communities who, during the darkest days of apartheid, read Scripture most prophetically. The 1985 Kairos Document, drafted by black theologians and lay leaders, exemplifies such grassroots theological insight (Kairos Theologians 1985). Its reading of Romans 13, not as an injunction to obey the state, but as a text calling for principled resistance to injustice, forced the white church to confront its complicity with state theology (Kairos Theologians 1985).

In my own experience, I recall participating a Bible study on the book of Exodus with a group of members of a township congregation as part of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's, 'Journey to the New Land' programme (Forster 2008:418). While I focused on the historical and theological structures of the narrative, others immediately located themselves in the text. Pharaoh was the apartheid regime, Egypt was the state and God was not a distant lawgiver, but the liberator walking with us. I was startled by how foreign these readings were to me, not because they were theologically suspect, but because they had never occurred to me. That moment revealed my racialised hermeneutical blind spots. I had been trained to avoid the political implications of the text in favour of its textual-critical features. I had read as a white scholar, from a supposedly universal place, and in doing so, I had failed to see what was most vital in the text for my interlocutors.

The importance of 'place' in hermeneutics

Welile Mazamisa's (1991:67–72) article 'Reading from this place' was among the first South African theological works that I encountered that made the epistemological significance of place explicit for me. For Mazamisa, 'place' was not simply geographical. It encompassed one's social, political, cultural and linguistic reality, they constitute the embodied context from which one encounters the Bible. In particular, Mazamisa

insisted that African Christians interpret Scripture within a framework shaped by orality, storytelling, communal meaning-making and the existential pressures of poverty, racism and marginalisation (Mazamisa 1991:68–69). These interpretive locations must not be relegated to the background but brought to the centre of biblical interpretation.

In this regard, Mazamisa developed the concept of *dialectica reconciliae*. Hombana describes it as a dialogical method that seeks to hold together the world of the text and the world of the reader in a dynamic tension (Hombana 2024:3–5). Mazamisa's work sought to bridge the divide between 'academic' exegesis and African popular hermeneutics, showing that understanding the Bible requires both contextual awareness and exegetical rigour. This approach also destabilises the false dichotomy between 'scholarly' and 'community-based' readings. It suggests that all interpretation is contextual. Other scholars have reinforced this view. De Wit and West (2008:31) demonstrate that Western biblical exegesis, far from being acontextual, is a product of specific socio-political histories. For example, they are shaped by Enlightenment ideals, the Reformation, and, in many cases, imperial ambition. Charlene van der Walt goes further, arguing that failing to name the location of Western theology is itself a form of ideological violence (Van der Walt 2010:4). For these scholars, acknowledging one's place is not a weakness but a prerequisite for honest and ethical interpretation (Van der Walt 2015:57–58).

Social location, then, is hermeneutically significant. Whether one reads from the margins of society or from its centres of power, that reading is shaped by what one sees, hears, hopes and fears. Recognising this allows interpreters to become more self-aware and opens space for collaborative dialogue with others who read differently. For white scholars like myself, this requires moving from a posture of detachment to one of engagement, to read not as one who 'knows', but as one who is learning to see.

Whiteness and hermeneutical injustice

Whiteness, as a socio-political location, not only shapes how texts are read but also whose interpretations are granted legitimacy. In the academy, whiteness has often functioned as an organising principle in shaping curricula, setting the boundaries of scholarly credibility and defining the 'canon' of acceptable sources (Forster 2023:247; Van Wyngaard 2019:260–261). During apartheid and well into the democratic era, white scholars continued to dominate editorial boards, examination panels and faculty appointments. Black and female scholars were often expected to prove their rigour by aligning with Western methodologies before their work could be accepted as legitimate biblical scholarship. Such exclusionary dynamics are what West identifies as hermeneutical injustice. They are a form of epistemic violence in which marginalised communities are systematically denied authority as interpreters. Such injustice is not only structural but also theological (West 2016:12–16). When the perspectives of black South Africans are excluded or

tokenised, the church's engagement with Scripture becomes impoverished and the gospel's liberative edge is blunted.

My own complicity in this system became apparent as I began to reflect more seriously on my formation. I realised that I had been trained to treat theological and textual knowledge as more authoritative than lived experience. This was particularly evident when I began doctoral research in New Testament studies and had to 'defend' the choice for Contextual Biblical Interpretation as an academically credible approach. I argued that it was precisely in the struggle for justice, in communities suffering under the weight of economic inequality and historical trauma, that the Bible came alive with deepest resonance. 'Ordinary' readers asked questions of Scripture that my training had taught me not to ask, questions about land, power, gender and belonging.

Towards decolonising the scholar's location

To read from 'this place', from the particularity of my own whiteness, is first to name it. This act of naming is crucial. It involves acknowledging that my interpretive posture is not neutral, but shaped by power, privilege and history. It also requires a process of 'unthinking' to interrogate, and at times relinquish, the assumptions inherited from Euro-American theological paradigms (Forster 2023:253; Van Wyngaard 2019:254; Vellem 2017:2). Walter Mignolo refers to this as 'epistemic delinking', a disengagement from colonial logics of knowledge production (Mignolo 2011:274). Similarly, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o identifies the need to 'decolonise the mind', in order to recover indigenous epistemologies and re-centre subjugated knowledge (Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o 1992:16).

In practical terms, I began to adjust how I read, teach and study Scripture. I turned to African language versions of the Bible, listening for resonances lost in English translations. I began to include proverbs, idioms and storytelling practices in my interpretive work, honouring the oral traditions that shape many African communities. I consulted sermons and reflections by local pastors, lay preachers and women in informal settlements trusting their insights to challenge and expand my own. I also returned to the works of Mosala and Mazamisa, not as ideological artefacts of a former era, but as living resources for reshaping theological imagination. Mosala reminds us that the Bible must be read from the perspective of those who struggle for life (Mosala 1989:20–23). This is not a metaphorical position, but a material one. Thus, I began to foreground the experience of the 'minoritised', the economically marginalised, the racially excluded, the sexually oppressed, as interpretive keys. Thus began my conversion from whiteness.

From reader to hearer, from teacher to learner: A theological and hermeneutical journey

My early years as a biblical scholar were marked by a strong sense of certainty. Fresh from theological studies and newly

ordained, I approached the Bible as one trained to teach, convinced that my task was to explain the meaning of the text to others, particularly those with less formal education. My training in historical-critical methods, source languages and 'formal' theology had taught me to value rigour, structure and doctrinal clarity. What I did not yet realise was that I also embodied a posture of interpretive authority shaped by my social location as a white, male, middle-class academic in the democratic South Africa. Now I see how easily this posture reinforced a paternalistic stance. I was the one who 'read' and 'taught', while others were there to receive. For example, as a young academic I remember teaching the parable of the Good Samaritan in a seminary-based Bible study, presenting it as a moral allegory of kindness to strangers. Only later did I realise that many of my black colleagues and students were reading the parable as a powerful critique of systemic exclusion, ethnic violence and religious hypocrisy in the context of South Africa. Their insights, rooted in lived experience, revealed layers of meaning I had overlooked. These moments gradually unsettled the confident posture of the teacher I had assumed myself to be.

Listening to marginalised voices

The real transformation began when I stopped speaking long enough to truly listen. One formative experience was attending a Contextual Bible Study at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology. The study, facilitated by a liberation theology collective, gathered women, youth and church leaders around the story of Jesus healing the bleeding woman (Mk 5:25–34). Here, I was not leading the discussion. I was there to listen, to learn. What unfolded was deeply humbling. Women spoke of medical neglect, economic exclusion and the resilience of faith under conditions of systemic violence. They read the woman's touch not only as a spiritual act, but as a political one. She was crossing boundaries to claim dignity. Their readings were not simplistic or sentimental, they were theologically profound and ethically urgent. In that space, I became a hearer.

Sarojini Nadar has written persuasively about this kind of interpretive transformation, cautioning against both the dominance and disappearance of the scholar (Nadar 2006:340). The task is not to abdicate responsibility but to engage in dialogue that centres the lived realities and interpretive agency of the marginalised. Nadar's insight shaped my approach to teaching and learning. I began intentionally listening to how students read texts, particularly those from different racial, gendered, or socio-economic contexts. Their readings often surprised me and always taught me. Here, I was a co-learner, no longer an educated, but ignorant, teacher.

A pedagogical shift to a co-learner model

Gradually, my pedagogical method shifted (Forster 2024). Inspired by Paulo Freire's concept of the teacher-student and student-teacher, I embraced a dialogical model in which both parties learn and teach (Freire 2014). No longer was the

classroom a space for dispensing knowledge. Rather, it became a site of shared discovery. I began experimenting with Contextual Bible Study (CBS), a method developed by Gerald West, Sithembiso Zwane, Charlene van der Walt and colleagues, at the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In this approach, groups read Scripture collaboratively and reflectively, drawing on their own social locations (West 2014:1–10). We began such sessions with a question, not a lecture: 'What stands out to you in this text?' or 'What does this remind you of in your own life?' This shift was not always easy. I struggled with the temptation to correct interpretations that deviated from the 'received' understanding. See for example, Charlene van der Walt's (2014:48–51) excellent work on 2 Samuel 13 with a group of women, from rural and urban congregations, where the conversation turned quickly to gender-based violence, silence and the complicity of religious leaders. We also facilitated Contextual Biblical Studies (CBS) sessions on this passage in the Beyers Naudé Centre for Theology. In our sessions, several women used local proverbs to interpret Tamar's plight, drawing out layers of theological lament and resistance. This approach to Bible reading helped me to understand such spaces as 'dynamic meeting places'. These were not just forums for shared insight; they were sacred spaces where new theologies could be born, interpretations forged in the crucible of everyday life. As I grew more comfortable in this co-learner model, I also became more attuned to when, and how, to offer my academic tools as a resource rather than a weapon.

Theological re-formation

These hermeneutical changes were accompanied by a deeper theological re-formation. My understanding of revelation expanded. No longer did I view the Bible as the sole deposit of divine truth, but as one site (a primary, but not only site), along with others where God's voice might be discerned, particularly in the witness of the poor, the wounded and the excluded. African theologians have long affirmed that 'theology remains a story that is told, a song that is sung and a prayer that is uttered in response to experience and expectation' (Oduyoye 2001:22). I began to see that the church is not a passive audience for my expertise, but an interpretive community in which I am also a student. Mosala's (1989:17) warning that apartheid theology was often crafted by well-meaning but detached experts served as a lasting caution. Academic theology, no matter how erudite, must be tested against the lives of those who live under the shadow of empire. I now treat the context as a text in itself (reading the word and reading the world), something to be read with as much seriousness and care, perhaps even reverence, as the biblical text.

Evidence of change

I acknowledge that I reached this level of understanding long after others have walked this path before me. Gerald West, himself a white South African scholar, transformed his role in the academy by working alongside grassroots communities

through the Ujamaa Centre, as have colleagues such as Charlene van der Walt, Juliana Claassens and Jeremy Punt. West's shift from academic expert to participatory facilitator modelled a solidarity-based hermeneutic that continues to influence my work (Forster 2023:258–260; West 2016:18–20). Likewise, Nadar's insistence on ethical reflexivity and dialogical accountability has shown me that humility is a scholarly virtue, not a weakness. In practice, I now build in habits of accountability: I debrief interpretive engagements with peers from different contexts, solicit feedback from students on my teaching posture and cherish co-authorship with colleagues wherever possible. These practices are not mere inclusivity gestures; they are part of an ongoing effort to remain teachable.

On recovery and discovery: Learning to read the Bible differently

Having undertaken a necessary deconstruction of dominant modes of biblical interpretation shaped by Western epistemologies and whiteness, I turn now to the constructive aspect of this journey; learning to read the Bible differently. This is both a recovery of suppressed voices and interpretive traditions, and a discovery of new practices and communities of interpretation that centre context, embodiment and solidarity.

One of the most significant developments in my interpretive practice has been the deliberate recovery of voices marginalised in my early formation. In rediscovering the work of African biblical scholars such as Welile Mazamisa and Itumeleng Mosala, I began to understand that texts themselves may bear class interests and internal contradictions that must be interrogated through the lens of material contexts. Mosala's insistence that Scripture cannot be read outside of its social, economic and political frameworks fundamentally shifted how I approached the Bible. For instance, I no longer viewed the Bible as a collection of abstract theological proclamations, but rather as a collection of embedded artefacts, reflecting early imperial politics and community struggles (Mosala 1989:19–22).

Alongside Mosala, Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist hermeneutic helped to expose the colonial and patriarchal ideologies embedded in both texts and their traditional interpretations. Dube's analysis of texts like Matthew 15:21–28, where the Canaanite woman challenges Jesus, showed me how voices of resistance in the text mirror the resistance of colonised and marginalised women in our contemporary context (Dube 2000:54–58). Dube's method of 'reading with' rather than 'reading for' became a key hermeneutical posture, inviting the community's insights to surface the layers of colonial injury and agency in biblical narratives. This process also involved engagement with African indigenous and oral traditions. Working in township congregations, I observed how biblical stories are told through song, proverb and communal performance. These oral methods not only deepen interpretive richness but also reconnect Scripture to lived experience. For instance, pairing Proverbs 31 with a local Xhosa idiom about women's wisdom

offered profound insights into the embodiment of dignity, faithfulness and resistance in contexts of precarity.

One of the most transformative 'discoveries' has been the potential of intercultural Bible reading. Inspired by Charlene van der Walt, Sithembiso Zwane, Gerrie Smit and Gerald West's work on intercultural hermeneutics, and also in the work of Peter-Ben Smit and Hans de Wit, I have participated in Bible reading groups across diverse geographies, bringing together scholars and practitioners from Indonesia, Africa and Latin America. Van der Walt (2016:1–12) argues that communal spaces that intentionally include marginal voices can become sites of deep theological encounter, where the silenced may speak and be heard. In one such reading of John 4, Indonesian participants saw the woman at the well as a figure for interreligious engagement in Muslim–Christian dialogue, while African women readers emphasised gendered marginalisation and dignity. The convergence of these interpretations was not conflictual but additive, resulting in a polyphonic understanding that resonated across contexts. Julie Claassens (2023) has shown, through her trauma-informed reading of Jonah, that imperial power leaves lingering wounds that require symbolic processing. She speaks of facing 'the coloniser that remains', a phrase that captures how unresolved historical traumas shape present theological discourse (Claassens 2023:38). Her insights affirmed for me that biblical interpretation is not merely exegetical but pastoral and ethical, it helps communities work through the collective trauma of colonisation, dispossession and erasure.

In recent years, I have also become more at ease with interpretive multiplicity. Where I once sought a singular exegetical conclusion, I now accept the legitimacy of divergent contextual readings. Reading Matthew 18 in a mixed racial group, for example, I was struck by how one member interpreted Jesus' teaching on the political conditions for forgiveness and someone else noticed something different (Forster 2019:178–197). Both readings offered depth and pastoral relevance. This echoes van der Walt's (2016:10–12) call for hermeneutical spaces that welcome ambiguity, dissent and vulnerability as generative theological resources.

My evolving hermeneutics have led to tangible shifts in my teaching and ministry. In sermons, I now intentionally foreground women's voices in Scripture, drawing on the insights of African feminist theologians such as Musa Dube, Funlola Olojede and Julie Claassens. Global partnerships have further enriched this trajectory. In collaborative projects with colleagues from the Americas and Asia, I have come to appreciate the theological gifts and contextual insights of others beyond the Global North. For example, my current work with Mexican, Palestinian and Indonesian theologians on interfaith hermeneutics draws parallels between their contextual negotiations of identity and South Africa's struggle for socio-political restitution. Together, we are developing Bible theological resources that draw from Asian, African and Latin American wisdom, an attempt to model truly global, decolonial biblical interpretation. Reading the Bible differently

has become an important faith discipline for me. It is an exercise in humility, in openness and in community. It is a process that continues to reveal not only the Bible's depth but also my own blind spots and the richness of others' perspectives.

Conclusion

Engaging with Prof. Welile Mazamisa's challenge to *read from this place* has transformed both my scholarly approach and my theological imagination. Where I once took my social location for granted as a white, male, South African, academically trained, I now understand it to be an active and necessary site of reflection and accountability. As this article has traced, critical autoethnography became the means through which I began to unearth the hidden norms of whiteness in my theological formation and to reorient my interpretive practice toward humility, justice and solidarity. Through encounters in the church, academy and socio-political life, I began a slow, sometimes painful, but deeply necessary process of unlearning and re-learning. I have come to affirm that yes, it is possible for a white South African Bible scholar to read from *this place* in a new way. But doing so demands continual conversion; epistemologically, ethically and spiritually. It requires repentance in the truest sense: a turning away from inherited patterns of interpretive dominance and a turning towards ways of reading that centre context, community and conscience.

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