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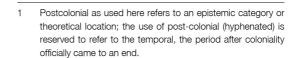
Decolonising Bibles? Image, imagination, and imagin(in)g in the post-colonial academy

ABSTRACT

The complicity of the Bible in the colonial endeavour is no longer seriously disputed. However, efforts to decolonise the Bible, biblical studies, and their roles in colonising theology, that start with accounting for interpreters' social locations, remain few and limited in scope. Ensconced in the image of ideologically secure and contented intellectual space, epistemological and hermeneutical approaches, which explicitly involve the social location of interpreters and academic discourses, are still viewed with concern, if not suspicion. Antipathy towards cultural studies approaches such as postcolonial[1] theory, on the one hand, is born from ideological preoccupation, intellectual comfort, and turf-protection. On the other hand, it deprives the biblical studies guild (and associated studies in theology and religion) from a broader spectrum of resources and reimagined engagements with biblical texts and their colonialist-infused legacies.

1. INTRODUCTION: COLONIALISM AND COLONIALITY

Colonialism is a cypher for peoples' systematic repression and its lingering effects in material resources as well as in knowledge, ideas,

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1 Postcolonial as used here refers to an epistemic category or theoretical location; the use of post-colonial (hyphenated) is reserved to refer to the temporal, the period after coloniality officially came to an end.

and beliefs. Especially through the latter, colonialism created a social imaginary whose reach in world history at times knew almost no end. Indigenous people's beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, and knowledge that were deemed not useful for the colonial project aimed at global domination were cast aside. The colonisers imposed their thought and knowledge systems on the indigenous and local, including their conceptualisation and images of the supernatural (Quijano 2007:169).[2] Such regulating of the cultural production of the colonised served the double purpose of inhibiting local, indigenous production, while ensuring ongoing, constant, and systematic control over cultural production. The breadth and scope of its impact requires a distinction between historical colonialism and enduring coloniality, even if the two cannot be separated. Colonialism refers to a political and economic situation with control and sovereignty exercised by an empire, while coloniality indicates the resultant, enduring relations and patterns of power that flowed from colonialism, "that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243).

Its lasting impact characterises the colonial project as much as its complex intersections, with their interrelated and enduring complexities. For example, and with Spanish imperialism as his primary reference, Grosfugel traces colonial developments to the so-called discovery of what was called the Third World, and points to the variously intertwined and often religion-interwoven nature of the colonising endeavours of the past.

> The entanglement between the religious Christian-centric global hierarchy and the racial/ethnic Western-centric hierarchy of the 'capitalist/patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system' created after 1492, identified the practitioners of a non-Christian spirituality with being racialized as an inferior being below the line of the human (Grosfoguel 2013:76).[3]

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2   "The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual" (Quijano 2007:169).

3   Anderson (2009) takes up and expands Grosfoguel's description of entanglement, pointing out how Christian theology has been complicit in inventing a fictitious norm for what is considered to be authentic readings of biblical texts, namely White, Eurocentric, male, heterosexual, wealthy, middle class, and Christian. The result was the creation of an "Other", who unsurprisingly is Black, African/Asian/Latin, female, homo-/bi-/transsexual, poor, working class, non-Christian. See also Mbembe (2017) on entanglement.

Amidst these entanglements, Christian religion claimed a superior nature and made itself definitional of the normative but, conversely, granted itself the wherewithal to contingently formulate self-serving contra-norms, ostensibly for the sake of safeguarding the normative.[4]

The role of religion in the colonial project and subsequent coloniality, and the colonial dominance of Christianity, more particularly, is pronounced. Christianity, in the way it was understood at the time, and perhaps not unlike other religions, was implicated in particular colonising tendencies, including the ideological or theological justification of colonialism. Since, in all of this, the Bible was an important mainstay or locus for the confirmation and endorsement of colonial practice, in a range of different ways (see Punt 2004), both the Bible, in terms of its perceived status and role, and its interpretation require attention. Moreover, for a very long time in the history of the continent, the translated Bible has been the book in Africa with the widest circulation figures, read, studied, and used by an astonishing variety of people for religious and related purposes.

> There is no doubt that the Bible is the most influential, most widely translated and the most widely read set of documents in contemporary Africa (Mugambi 1997:78).[5]

Given the entanglements of colonialism and Bible, I argue that to come to terms with the Bible's complicity in coloniality requires a new, post-colonial imaginary. My argument consists of three parts, with the first dedicated to tracing the importance of the Bible in Africa, but also acknowledging its ambiguous role which has led to calls for its decolonisation. In a second part, the thrust to reimagine the Bible in Africa, if not rewrite these texts, is in focus, before turning, in the third part, to considerations in the development of a post-colonial social imaginary for the Christian Bible in Africa.

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4   "When the conquerors came to the Americas they did not follow the code of ethics that regulated behaviour among subjects of the crown in their kingdom. ... What happens in the Americas is a transformation and naturalization of the non-ethics of war, which represented a sort of exception to the ethics that regulate normal conduct in Christian countries, to a more stable and long-standing reality of damnation" (Maldonado-Torres 2007:246).

5   The history of the status and role accorded to the Bible in Africa is chequered (see, for example, Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:63-118).

2. THE BIBLE, CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALISM: THE IMAGE, UNSETTLED

More than other artefacts, the Bible is a vital image on the African continent, already before the onset of Western colonialism.[6] The continent was the birthplace of Bibles such as the Septuagint and ancient versions such as the early Ethiopian dialects. From earliest times, Bibles played a significant role in African societies, and since colonialism, Bible translation activities regularly initiated a first detailed inventory of local language and culture, with far-reaching but ambiguous consequences (see Mbiti 1986:24).[7] In subversive contradiction to the dominant Western paradigm of missionary translators,[8] a focus on local language and culture provided an impetus to nationalism (Sanneh 1992:16-17).[9] Vernacular Bibles informed African Christianity, and, to some extent, also the sociocultural fibre of African communities from the mid-19th century. Translated Bibles contributed to indigenous languages with tangibles such as grammars, dictionaries, and lexicons, which, ironically, assisted colonising agents to acquire linguistic knowledge that enabled more effective rule, justice administration, and revenue-collection. With ongoing ambiguity, translated Bibles contributed simultaneously to the education of indigenous people and to their embracing of consumer class values.

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6   The discussion can and probably should be much broader, of course, given the presence and important contributions of other sacred scriptures and traditions of other religions in Africa, but our focus, in this instance, is on Christianity and the Bible.

7   See also Dahunsi (1972) and Majola (2017). This is, however, not unlike the early years of Christianity, where translated Bibles would present those on the frontier zones of the Roman Empire with the first literary corpus of their future reservoir of national literature; examples include the Armenian, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic translations (Trebolle Barrera 1998:125). Constantine-Cyril's translation of the Roman Mass into Slavonic in the 9th century led to the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet (Sanneh 1989:73). For an optimistic view of Christianity's contribution, in general, to the development of the vernacular, see Sanneh (1989:51-53).

8   Some scholars are even more optimistic about the Bible's role, viewing it as the "time-bomb" that would eventually help to blow colonialism apart (Schaaf 1994:166), among others, by providing subversive texts and readings. For the larger scope and setting of Bible translation on the African continent, see Mbuwayesango (2019).

9   "An important difference, however, is that mission furnished nationalism with the resources necessary to its rise and success, whereas colonialism came upon it as a conspiracy" (Sanneh 1989:106). Sanneh is, at times, more reluctant to separate mission and colonialism, reminding his readers that the growth of new Christian churches after the 20th-century independence of African states indicates how colonialism inhibited the spread of the gospel (Sanneh 1989:112).

2.1   Co-opting a deracialised Bible

The Bible took on a sinister role when it was co-opted as supporter of colonial endeavours through reinforcing stereotypical images of the Other. Notwithstanding ambiguities inherent to the Bible, encouraging processes of Othering count among the less benevolent uses that Bibles were put to in Africa (see Punt 2004). Racial superiority, supported by a Western, progressive notion of history, was achieved by demonising the Other and emphasising racial, gender, and class differences. Robert Moffatt could assert about the people of Botswana: "[T]hus by the slow but certain progress of Gospel principles, whole families became clothed and in their right mind" (Sugirtharajah 1998:88-89). Eventually, translated Bibles were trapped by questions about their proprietorship and the control of their meaning, a situation that prevails to this day. While

> [t]he battle over the Bible in South Africa ... is a contest of conflicting claims over legitimate ownership of that constellation of sacred symbols (Chidester 1991:22),

the colonial involvement of the Bible in tangible and subtle ways inevitably led to questions about its decolonisation.

The persistence and extent of coloniality, the colonisation of the mind (Wa Thiong'o 1987) reached further and wider than what is often acknowledged, with its inception linked by many to the rhetoric of modernity.[10] The discourse of Christianity entrenched a spatial and temporal understanding that provided the rationalisation, if not legitimacy, for such hegemony. Flowing from the hegemony, especially since the 16th-century colonial endeavours, people and regions of the world and other religions were increasingly described, categorised, and hierarchically ranked. With groups and religions accorded submissive roles in hierarchies, the social construction of "barbarians" produced a malevolent component in spatial colonial difference (Mignolo 2007a:471). Later, in the 18th century, barbarians or its more palatable form, noble savages, were portrayed as primitives, and as such they became indicative of incorporating a temporal dimension in the by then normalised spatial hierarchy of colonial difference. In the construction of these constellations of identity and superiority, the Bible was claimed to uphold a universal rather than pluriversal identity, and true to form, the powerful got to define that which constituted the universal, namely a "Western" identity.

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10   The discourses of Othering, for which the Bible was co-opted in Africa, was not new but flowed from established theological and religious thought, which, in large parts of the world, has essentially taken over the rhetoric of modernity and through it the hegemonic dominance of Christianity (for example, Mignolo 2007a).

The predominance of racism, with its scientific backing and intellectual architecture in the late 19th century, gave rise to historical constructions of early Jesus follower communities and early Christianity that widely assumed that the notion of Jesus follower or Christian identity excluded racial connotations (Buell 2001:449-452).[11] Yet, racial and ethnic (to use our terms) categorisation was basic to ancient stereotyping, and Jesus follower texts invoked racial and ethnic categories, even if the ancient use of such notions is often denied nowadays in the interest of contemporary theological considerations. The deracialisation of the ancient world nevertheless remained dominant, and impacted on mainline scholars who insisted on the perceived universality of early Jesus movement thought as authoritative ideology.[12] It also impacted on scholarly voices from the margins that reiterated the seeming inclusive nature of early Jesus communities as embracing the vulnerable.[13] Both sides tended to share the modern opinion of race as a biological, natural identity and the conviction that early Jesus movement thought detached itself from any such racial or ethnic categories. The notion of the early Jesus movement as "spiritual" supported the idea of a movement beyond ethnic notions, where race is best ignored, with a de-emphasised or even denied corporeality. Like history co-opted by the victors, a Bible deemed irrelevant for use in issues of race meant that it could become the handmaiden of those claiming racial superiority.

Race-related sentiments are not absent from the Bible, and the early followers of Jesus are depicted in the New Testament as moulding their own identity along 1st-century aligned notions of race and ethnicity. Resorting to stereotype, so typical of the time, and relying upon binaries as the other common strategy for claiming identity, the New Testament

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11   Buell (2001:449-476) focused her attention on authors around the time of early Christianity, including Christian authors such as Diogenes, Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, and Origin, but also a wider array of ancient authors of a wider temporal spectrum such as Philo of Alexandria, Isocrates, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and so on. Biblical references to race and ethnicity include, for example, Matthew 21:43 (γένος); John 1:46 (Nazareth), 7:52 (Galileans); 1 Peter 2:9-10 (γένος, ἔθνος, λαός), and so on.

12   Together with erasure, silencing, and marginalisation, universality can be an ideological strategy in racialised thinking, intent on reinforcing the Euro-American perspective (Kelley 2000:214).

13   A number of texts in the New Testament are often invoked in the debate on whether the Bible promoted universalism or particularism. One of these, the Pauline text of Galatians 3:28, has, over many decades, evoked much discussion with some scholars viewing the text and Paul, in general, as model for harmonious, multicultural communities (for example, Barclay 1996:197-214). More recently, Paul has been connected to universalism even from a decidedly non-confessional point of view, stressing a philosophical concern to identify the subject and the universal through singularity (Badiou 2003).

shows how Jesus followers used ethnoracial language to denounce their rivals as barbarians and Jews (Buell 2001:473). Greek and Roman world kinship and ethnicity were expressed with a variety of different terms in the 1st century.[14] Regardless of their links to birth and descent, race and ethnicity terms were used interchangeably, often signifying different understandings than those prevailing centuries later. Race or ethnicity was closely associated with religious practice, as mutable terms that did not presuppose essences or givens.[15] The terms accommodated changes between and the ranking of ethnicities tolerated both an insistence on ethnic particularity and a universal ideal,[16] and allowed Christian conversion to be expressed in ethnic terms (Buell 2001:469, 473). The terms "race" and "ethnicity" were heavily involved in identity negotiation in the communities of Jesus followers (see Punt 2010).[17]

All of this is a much longer discussion. Renouncing the New Testament's ethno-racial language for some bland, unhistorical universality filled in by the historically powerful feeds of a colonial social imaginary. A racialised understanding of humanity did not originate in the Bible – even if it is not innocent of such notions – but it also does not offer a benchmark for the universal. However, persistent, underlying ideas feeding into the

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14 Γένος, ἔθνος, λαός, and φῦλος can all four be translated interchangeably with terms such as "people", "race", and "ethnicity", among others. When early Christian literature referred to the "Christian race", λαός or φῦλος were mostly used; in the Roman imperial period, the terms 'γένος' and 'ἔθνος' were preferred for referring to ethnoracial groupings, amidst great variance on how such groups were defined; ἔθνος as reference to the inhabitants of a πόλις or πόλεις was used interchangeably with γένος with the same reference in mind, while γένος was also used to refer to family group (Buell 2001:456-457, n20).

15 "Early Christians inhabited a world in which many facets of one's self, including race or ethnicity, were perceived as mutable – sex, status, citizenship, even humanness [so that] boundaries between animals, humans, and gods, those between slave and free, and those between male and female were all seen to be breachable". Rather than understanding race or ethnicity as givens, early Christians used these concepts when speaking of conversion (Buell 2001:466-467; 467, n50).

16 Christian universalism was, at times, expressed in ethnic terms (see 1 Pt 2:9-10), demonstrating that it was less about the incorporation of other ethnicities into an agglomeration where such distinctions were unimportant, than about other ethnicities co-constituting a new race or ethnicity: it was more about enlisting for a new identity than being included in non-ethnic or race-less obliqueness. See Buell (2001:473).

17 Early Christians found race and ethnicity useful for self-definition against outsiders, as "central organizing concept for Christianness" as well as for authorising specific forms of Christian conviction and practice as universal norm, and also against other insiders, in competition with rival groups and in asserting a particular form of Christian identity (Buell 2001:451). Of course, race is not to be confused with nation, and the claim to be a real-life autonomous group often comprises more than being an ethnographic or linguistic groups (see also Renan 1990:8).

arguments of those choosing not to recognise coloniality are still present in contemporary religious and theological discourse and, depending on social location, are steered and even determined by sentiments associated with the Bible and its interpretation.

2.2   Decolonising discourse and the Bible

In biblical studies, decolonisation discourse features as a spectrum of stances and practices. It often emerges with awareness of the role and impact of imperial forces, past and more recent, and accompanying domination strategies on the colonised. The origin of decolonisation as concept, or rather as set of ideas is disputed; but the presence of decolonising ideas is evident among indigenous people who have suffered colonialism and its consequences.[18] Decolonising studies generally include strategies for resistance, while exploring alternative positions and practices to foster "liberating interdependence" between nations, races, genders, economics, and cultures (Dube 2000:39). In the words of Mignolo (2007b:159), decolonial thinking

> is the pluriversal epistemology of the future; an epistemology that de-links from the tyranny of abstract universals (Christians, Liberals or Marxists).

Decolonial approaches are celebrated for providing epistemic frameworks, even amidst the lack of conceptual clarity; for identifying "the wretched of the earth", and for distinguishing between coloniser and colonised; perpetrator and victim; powerful and weak. Decolonial work has contributed to charting the terrain through and in terms of the notion of the "coloniality of being". This notion is helpful, even (although) if it is not so singularly and comprehensively qualified as the use of colonial may perhaps wish to suggest; in fact, coloniality of being remains rather ambivalent and ambiguous.[19] Concern about the tendency by decolonial approaches to perpetuate binaries need both acknowledgement and critique, and awareness that insistence upon binaries may take its revenge in the future. Not only is binary thinking embedded in colonialist thinking but perpetuating and celebrating (insistence on) binaries provide scaffolding for the continuation of the colonialist social imaginary.

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18   As borne out by even a brief investigation or two of the notions of post-colonial(ity) on the internet, the sentiments purveyed by the notion can be traced to various historical periods across a broad geographical range since antiquity. Our focus, in this instance, however, is on the colonial endeavours of more or less the past five centuries.

19   And if ambivalence and ambiguity are indeed the intention, then that is good; see my argument below on the inevitable ambivalence brought about by the postcolonial and the need to seriously engage the ambivalence.

In fact, one must ask whether decolonial approaches are willing to also take on board what lies beyond the "public transcripts", to peek behind, beyond, and underneath structural contexts of empire, to also reflect on the web of self-implicating relations of domination and submission that constitute the blood of the imperial body. How is decolonial studies gearing itself to take on the messiness of imperial-colonial relationships, to relate to hegemony as domination by consent (Gramsci 2012:12)? Apart from its focus on ideology and power-mongering, the normalisation of authority, control and violence across all spheres of human life within imperial contexts is a concern that can too easily be pushed to the back in decolonial inquiry (see Punt 2013). Is a trade-off between decolonial and post-colonial beneficial or even necessary, especially when there is not an insistence on "post-colonial" as concept with a primary temporal reference, even when critical questions remain?[20] Does not perhaps decolonial readily suggest closing the imperialist book on the (*sic!*) colonial chapter, without remaining vestiges or structures or discourses of the colonial? Is the urge for a decolonised existence a responsible social imaginary, or maybe more susceptible than others to become overwhelmed by unrecognised but not uninfluential vestiges of coloniality? Is the striving for the utopian end of coloniality, or preparedness for an engaged wrestling and continuous dismantling of an ingrained coloniality, the more responsible response? Or both?

We need to return to decolonialising studies' valuable concept of the coloniality of being,[21] often considered in conjunction with the coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo 2007a; Maldonado-Torres 2007). The recognition of the constructed and negotiated nature of these notions at times seems to bend the knee to more essentialist and mechanical understandings, which is where post-colonial work is helpful. Taking our cue from decolonising thinking, it can be suggested that the *post-coloniality* of being is a useful heuristic device to explain

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20 The difference between post-colonial and decolonial studies is largely situated in the different genealogies of thought that gave both energy and vision to them. Post-colonial theory often relies on Foucault, Gramsci, Derrida, Lacan, Said, Guha, Bhabha and Spivak; decolonial projects, on the other hand, claim as critical foundation in intellectual debates from the base established by Mariátegui from Peru, as well as dependence theory and philosophy of liberation that spread through Latin America in the 1970s, and even insists on the influence of earlier individual thinkers (for example, Puma de Ayala, Cugoano, Ghandi, Cabral, Césaire, Fanon, DuBois, and Anzaldúa [Mignolo 2007b:163–64; see Sugirtharajah 2012]). Nevertheless, claims to the same historical figures are often found among both post-colonial and decolonial theorists.

21 Already in Fanon's 1952 work, *Black skin*, white masks referred to the harmful psychological constructs caused by racism, such as the blind subjection of Black people to a universalised White norm and the alienation of the conscience of Black people.

disproportionate power relations within ancient and modern contexts and texts.[22] Post-coloniality of being acknowledges the coloniality of being, of knowledge, and of power, but also the ambivalence of all three, complete with mimicral actions and with identities hybridically constituted. The nature of a post-colonial social imaginary and its relevance for biblical studies will be addressed in more detail below.

3.   (RE)WRITING, IMAGINATION, BIBLES: TOWARDS OTHER/NEW SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

Perhaps not quite yet in the wake (in its ambiguous connotations of wave and post-mortem) of either the social imaginary of coloniality, or of a purged, essentialised, and universalised Bible, it is in any case clear that to decolonise Bibles is no small task. By social imaginaries is meant thinking in a way that honours the creative potential of the imagination, and, therefore, of human societies as more than inter-subjectivities or systemic logic, but as collectively and politically established constructions. For Taylor (2004:23), social imaginaries imply

> the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.[23]

Reaching for a new social imaginary, exemplary of decolonial thrust, has fed Bible-rewriting attempts for some time.

3.1   A rewritten Bible in Africa

Some theologians in Africa have insisted that the biblical canon and texts should be revised to push back against a colonial mindset but also

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22   As suggested earlier, the relationships between power, on the one hand, and ideas, language, and knowledge, on the other, sustain hegemonic texts, theories, and learning (Sugirtharajah 1998:16-17).

23   Scholars note that the history of the "social imaginary" can be traced back to Sartre's popular *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*, later adapted by Lacan, and eventually taken up in social theory to become the social imaginary. See Loraux (1995) on the imaginary in Antiquity. The Greek-French philosopher Castoriades invoked the notion of "social imaginary" to describe the broader conceptualisation of societies with its structures, systems, and processes as based on a certain perception of the world and the place and role of human beings in it. Consideration of social imaginaries are valuable on many levels, pertaining to ontological, philosophical, and phenomenological framings, cultural and sociopolitical constellations, and so forth.

to reflect more adequately current indigenous sensitivities, to disclaim texts deemed oppressive so as to render an *African user-friendly* Bible. In Zimbabwe, Banana called for a new, rewritten Bible.[24] Insisting on the Bible's liberation from culture-specific views, he lamented its use as oppressive instrument,[25] and insisted on the continuing revelation of God. The person of Christ supersedes the Bible. He claimed that the Bible's purpose was to unite Christians against forces that wanted to divide them, and that its readers again need to recreate the Bible into a "unifying element". The rewriting entails the modification of the existing texts and format of the Bible, including "revision and editing to what is already there, but would also involve adding that which is not included" (Banana 1993:30). He insisted that "re-writing is a necessary component to liberating the Bible" (Banana 1993:17), a broad but also simple way towards decolonisation.

The call for rewriting raises various issues. However, it is about more than the longing for a tailor-made Bible or confirmation of its translatability. The insistence upon rewriting is indicative of efforts to produce a text that would reflect the identity and sentiments of its readers within a particular context.

> Translation in a postcolonial context is not merely seeking dynamic equivalence or aiming for linguistic exactness, but desires to rewrite and retranslate the texts, as well as the concepts, against the grain. Rewriting and retranslating are not a simple dependence upon the past, but a radical remoulding of the text to meet new situations and demands (Sugirtharajah 1998:97).

The ambiguities mentioned above are best remembered, such as how translated Bibles contributed to and fostered the development of an independent consciousness and nationalism.[26] Rather than reflecting nostalgic notions of (re)discovering Africa in the Bible, or the Bible in Africa, the rewriting debate resonates at a deeper level with concerns about

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24 See also Mofokeng (1988:40). Parratt (1995:148-153) provides a short biographical sketch and brief introduction to Banana's theological views. For a historical account of Banana's call, claiming that it became a "catchword that inflamed an intense controversy", see the introduction of Mukonyora, Cox & Verstraelen (1993:x-xiii).

25 On the other hand, see Pollard's (1995:47-50) three reasons for holding on to the Bible in its current form, even though it was used in the past as instrument of oppression. In the United States context, Cone argued that the notion of the Bible as "Word of God" limited Whites' use of the Bible in the oppression of Blacks (Mosala 1989:15).

26 Bible translations often assisted in the establishment of a literary language and legacy, which, in turn, contributed to increasing independence from the coloniser's ideology and world view, as well as imperialistic attitudes and hegemonic practices.

control and canon, ideology and power (see Punt 2004). Rewriting is about reimagining the Bible by re-inscribing it, creating another social imaginary where the purged canon can once again become the all-powerful, self-contained repository of truth. But is this really a new social imaginary, if the lingering effects of such perceptions of the Bible might outlast other more material hegemonies, in the wake of dispossessing the colonising and still imperial West from the control of the (their) Bible?

3.2   A re-imagined Bible in Africa

The tenacious impact of the colonial social imaginary in numerous ways on material and cultural production is vast and far-reaching. With the close alignment between colonialism and Christianity, and their imposition on the indigenous, the colonial project was, at the same time, devastatingly violent and overwhelmingly controlling. It was not, however, simply a matter of capitulation, and not even Christianity was such a simple, top-down effort pushed down the throats of the indigenous. Notwithstanding the centripetal force created by coloniality's social imaginary, it will, in fact, be a further and colonising imposition to simply assume that all were swept off their feet by the colonial. It is equally folly to assume that all, even all those severely negatively affected by historical colonialism or enduring coloniality, simply pushed back or confronted either or both. In this instance, post-colonial work is helpful.

The quest for a reimagined Bible, or a Bible figuring differently in a reimagined, decolonised Africa did not always conjure up the urge to rewrite it. But not advocating a rewritten Bible did not exclude restlessness for a re-invented or reconstituted Bible, which is both understandable and necessary, in order to engender and sustain the movement toward a (radical) new imagination, a radical newly inspired notion of Bible. Historically, a translated Bible claimed as the benevolent gift from the West to indigenous peoples, whether in Africa, India or other former colonised space, generally ensured that it remained under European control and maintained a Western character (for anecdote, see Sugirtharajah 1998:123). But when indigenous people claim a translated Bible as originating among themselves, they not only register a claim for a different biblical genealogy in their identification with the Bible, but they simultaneously deny Western control and assert their own ownership of the Bible.[27]

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27   This is not to forget that a translated Bible can also become a pivotal element in forms of post-colonial nationalism, mimicking the ideological power of the colonisers, and their mechanisms of exclusion (see, for example, Mbuwayesango 2019).

Often, in theology and religion, the study of (authoritative) scriptures remains outside of post-colonial and decolonial discussions and contestations. The aloofness of studies of scriptures – and here our focus remains on biblical studies in the Christian context – probably has to do, in part, with the guild itself, and the extent to which modernist discourse, with all its mostly unarticulated presuppositions, influences, controls, and even dominates what is considered proper and acceptable biblical studies. The apparent indifference to post- and decoloniality in studies of scriptures probably also, and worryingly so, has to do with the extent to which the scriptures in the three so-called Abrahamic traditions are positioned. When these scriptures are marked out as the foundational, the theological Archimedean point, scholars as much as adherents skirt around and avoid frank conversations about the scriptures, and in Christian-oriented contexts, about the Bible in its socio-historical contexts.

In recent debates, the nature of decolonisation in established disciplines has been questioned and the very possibility at times reduced to naught. But decolonisation need not be equated with "dumbing down" the established tenets of scholarship, as its concern, rather, is the ways and wherewithal of both these tenets and how they were established. Does it not matter that New Testament scholarship was born when colonial-era slavery informed societies and people's thinking and doing?[28] Are the contributions of scholarship that date back to the era of National Socialism in Germany, or locally, to colonised Africa and, more recently, to apartheid South Africa, considered as such? Or do scholarship and its contexts become parallel universes, perpetuated in our day where social location is not considered when accounting for the theorisation and practices of biblical hermeneutics?[29] Decolonisation clearly is neither a simple nor a rapid process. Earlier attempts to deal with the Bible and biblical studies in more and less drastic decolonising ways, show upon the numerous difficulties involved (see, for example, Togarasei 2022; Ukpong 2003). A longer term but perhaps also a more sustainable approach, still fraught with difficulties if attuned to the complexities of decolonisation, can be found in the post-colonial social imaginary.

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28   See, for example, Leander's (2013) study on the modern-imperial/colonial impact on biblical studies and its methodology(-ies).

29   To phrase such concerns more comprehensively: "If coloniality is constitutive of modernity, in the sense that there cannot be modernity without coloniality, then the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are also two sides of the same coin" (Mignolo 2007a:464).

4.   A POSTCOLONIAL SOCIAL IMAGINARY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES: IMAGING AND IMAGINING

As noted earlier, decolonising studies proposed the notion of the coloniality of being, power, and knowledge to describe the confluence of colonialism and power, and its effects on the indigenous (Mignolo 2007b; Maldonado-Torres 2007). However, a *postcoloniality* of being may be more readily capable of demarcating the ancient and modern contexts of disproportionate power relations, including the human engagements in negotiating those power relations, in both texts and contexts. A post-coloniality of being acknowledges the relationship between ideas and power, language and power, as well as knowledge and power, but also how these relationships prop up Western (read, hegemonic) texts, theories, and learning (Sugirtharajah 1998:16-17). Post-coloniality further allows for recognising the ambivalence of all three (being, power, and knowledge), complete with mimicral actions and with identities hybridically constituted. A post-coloniality of knowledge pushes for deliberation in and of scholarship, for establishing and accounting for its social location, and how social location engages the postcolonial social imaginary. A post-coloniality of knowledge runs counter to the contemporary and in-vogue emphasis on branding, imaging as branding.

4.1   Imaging as branding

Scholarship does not drop from the sky, but always has traceable temporal and spatial roots and articulable goals and means, if sometimes at best (only?) in hindsight. By naming, describing, classifying, and insisting on categories, scholarship creates room for the production of knowledge. Relationships between themselves as well as with the guild construct scholars and scholarship, while scholars are, at the same time, socially located in contemporary (post-)modern economic and cultural structures or neoliberalism.[30] The current neoliberal era overlaps and is interlinked with post-modernity and multiculturalism as distinctive historical and cultural trends of the past 40 years (Crossley 2011:8), all three of which impact New Testament scholarship and implicate it also in technologies

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30   Neoliberalism can be used as an overarching designation for the socio-economic dispensation that developed over the past few decades. "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005:2).

of the self and branding culture.[31] As far as branding and brand culture is concerned, it is

> a mode of identity-making, is a cultural phenomenon closely associated with the development of neoliberal, late-capitalist economic discourses and cultural practices during the 20th century (Penner & Lopez 2015:273).

Although branding culture is crucial in contemporary neoliberal scholarship, it remains a "critical, and critically underdiscussed, aspect of how the methodological landscape of New Testament studies looks in our late-capitalist economic context" (Penner & Lopez 2015:205-209, 172). Participation and academic location within a discipline situate scholars temporally and spatially, often unintentionally but at times with conscious awareness of the impact of their situatedness on their scholarship.[32] Imaging, as a result, is to a large extent about perpetuating the conventional, with attempts to go beyond remaining locked into the conventional framework, serving only to strengthen the conventional. And so the ascribed strength of branding in rendering a clearly identifiable product is in the academic environment not necessarily and not all gain. In fact, when imaging squares off against imagining, the latter means going or at least pushing to go beyond the frontiers of the guild.

4.2   Theory and imagination

Scholarly approaches and methods reflect and sometimes feed into social imaginaries. Methods are scholarly homes (see Punt 2020). Methodology as heuristic devices create and define the spaces within which scholars work, and define their identity. "Method, as home, as *habitus*,[33] can be a comfortable and comforting mediating space between social relations and individual behaviors", in the case of biblical scholars, "between professional hermeneutical and interpretative practices situated within the

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31   Foucault (1988:18) referred, amidst technologies of production, sign systems, and power, also to a fourth category, "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality".

32   Penner & Lopez (2015:208-209) propose to de-introduce the New Testament "as an orientation and practice … to unveil some of the ideological scaffolding surrounding common conceptions and presentations about, among other issues, scholarly image and identity in the study of the New Testament".

33   Habitus explains how social groups undertake reasonable actions without having necessarily deliberated on, or consulted about it. Sociologists have also recorded how people are socialised or "programmed" from birth in their society's values, convictions, and norms, with the effect that each person contributes unquestioningly to the functioning of the system (see Berger 1967:3-52).

social relations and hierarchies of professional disciplinary orientations" (Penner & Lopez 2011:152). Home or *habitus* entails that scholars, as social agents, develop strategies adapted to the needs of their social worlds.[34] While method constitutes home, it also identifies home by making it discernible for its inhabitants; in fact, method maps or constructs the route towards home (back home?), giving scholars intellectual comfort, a familiar place to proverbially put up their feet. Method's role is more important and wide-ranging than serving a heuristic function, then, as it functions also as mediating ground between scholarly work and academic structures, and between individual and social relations. In a similar way that map is not territory (Smith 1978), method is not procedure; at least, method is not simply procedures and techniques to be followed. Method is not merely the roadmap of the academic journey, but it also scripts the landscape, brings the territory into being – and, of course, it simultaneously fences it off, delimits, and restricts. Theory and imagination are related, but in complex and intriguing ways.

Thinking of methods as homes does not mean that home is only or primarily location, whether institutional (for example, a university), disciplinary (for example, academic society), or ideological (for example, meta-theoretical or epistemological or theological stance). Rather, home is a person's situatedness or social location that informs a person and from which a person constructs his/her identity and social relations.[35]

> [H]ome ... shapes our selves ... provides the structure in which our daily actions and thoughts are shaped and reconfigured in relationship to our environment (Penner & Lopez 2011:154).

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34 Agency depends on habitus, which is a range of embodied socialised frameworks that supply agents with a rationale of social practices and a sense of the social structure that leads to sensible behaviour in a given context. Agents differ from subjects, as the latter supposedly know what they are doing (Bourdieu 1990:52, 75; see Perkins 2009:12). "The habitus is a spontaneity without consciousness or will" (Bourdieu 1990:56), or with deliberate focus on the sense in it all: "It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know" (Bourdieu 1990:69).

35 Situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) counter bland social constructionism that disempowers and dissolves into balcanised positions, each entitled to its own positions, which then become transcendent to criticism.

Rather than thinking of imagination as unbridled, in scholarship disciplinary theoretical and methodological strictures impact on imagination, not only for the worse. Without structure, there is no home; in the absence of method, research is impossible – not so much in the sense of epistemological tools required to work with, but because research depends on methodological presuppositions and approach, explicitly expressed or not.[36] Hermeneutics amounts to more than erudite taxonomies, with the related implications.[37] Hermeneutics involves us and impacts us as scholars and our scholarship on personal and structural levels, and even the communities (academic and otherwise) in which we live.

4.3   Towards a postcolonial social imaginary[38]

What would entail a new, postcolonial social imaginary for biblical scholarship in South Africa, informed by and feeding into decolonisation? Postcolonial studies flows from cultural studies (Gallagher 1996:229), which functions with and from a grounded position. The grounded-ness makes postcolonial biblical hermeneutics significant for explaining texts in historical, imperial settings but also in understanding texts in post-colonial South Africa, and influenced by our global (post-) modern and often neo-colonialist world. As broader, grounded framework, cultural studies encourages inclusive biblical studies (Anderson 2009), and does not exclude theological or religious dimensions, even if it resists the imposition of preconceived theological epistemologies or predetermined religious imaginaries as determining heuristic frameworks for biblical hermeneutics and exegesis (see Punt 2016). South African religion scholarship is also becoming more cognisant of, and interacts more readily with contemporary contexts. The tide is (slowly) turning from detached scholarship to socially engaged academic work and efforts to deal effectively, responsibly, and

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36 "Hermeneutical presuppositions, rather than being regarded as a problem or even illegitimate are part of the business of interpretation and should not be deplored but recognized as part of our interpretive conversations" (Ehrensperger 2013:219).

37 Such shifts are understandable with the shifting pendulum of interpretation to include and account for readerly positions, roles, and participation in interpretation, and is best if not exclusively signalled by autobiographical hermeneutics (for example, Kitzberger 1998; Staley 1995).

38 It should be clear by now, to reinvigorate an earlier point of contestation in its theorisation, that postcolonial is not used, in this instance, as chronological or temporal gauge, but as epistemic category. Continuing and persistent impact of neo-colonisation include for example, the involvement of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Nigeria, which saw the education budget slashed in that country vs resistance against the IMF's monetary proposals in Mauritius and whose continuing spending on education is often connected not only to high levels of literacy, but, for all practical purposes, also to the eradication of poverty (Gustafsson 2018).

accountably with contextuality.[39] Accounting for theoretical positions means to debunk ingrained analytical categories, by recognising their heritage, particular utilisation, and vested interests. With a nod to cultural studies, it is, for example, helpful to acknowledge the redescriptive deployment of the notion of "religion" in ancient times (Nongbri 2013), in conjunction with the deployment of other social sphere categories that are common to, and appropriate for our contemporary contexts.

The use of language to create reality and mould the world necessarily has implications for indigenous concepts. Indigenous categories are vital for theologising, but even more so for biblical studies and translation (see Mugambi 2001:9-29).[40] However, it is a finely poised balance, since the danger of ethnocentrism (see Wan 2000:107-111) looms large, in the attempt to recover elements from the ancient past ("mummified fragments", Fanon 1963:160) rather than to try and modernise and accommodate to new economic, political, and cultural contexts locally and globally (Sugirtharajah 1998:134). The decolonial shift aiming at "de-linking" in distinction from postcolonial work which amounts to "a project of scholarly transformation within the academy" (Mignolo 2007a:452) is commendable, but in the final instance may prove too idealistic. Then again, postcolonial includes decolonial sentiments, but goes beyond and may be more attuned to the messiness and impossibility of complete delinking.[41] Decoloniality's utopianism can ultimately become disempowering and misleading, not least in creating the impression that past, present, and future, separately or altogether, can be separated off the compelling and lasting impact of modernism and colonialism.[42]

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39   "This scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry insists that the biblical critic needs to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life and stresses the alien character of biblical materials. A-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the rhetorical postures that seem to be dominant in the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:10-11). Scholars explicitly moving away from detached biblical scholarship in Africa include Dube (2000), Mbuwayesango (2019), Togarasei (2022), and others referred to in this contribution.

40   Dube's (2001:145-163) strong reaction regarding the translation of Badimo in the Setswana Bible is not only about reclaiming ownership of a translated Bible, but it also attests to how such claims play out in the use of indigenous concepts.

41   A particular challenge is to get beyond reactionary anti-Western and anti-language discourses, which only succeeds to retain the West as the yardstick, and to promote and support reactionary approaches. Although decolonial approaches are mostly more than knee-jerk reactions, their origins and alignments are nevertheless suspect at times.

42   Gender-attuned biblical interpretation is devoid neither of challenge nor irony. What is the effect when social location-attentive biblical interpretation becomes an off-shoot of mainstream scholarship? When gender perspective in biblical studies amounts to little more than a feminist-focused derivative of established, conventional "malestream" scholarship, what are

Engaging and destabilising coloniality remains an ongoing challenge and involves dealing with the historical development of critical theories and with those structures and ideologies keeping them in place. Growing acknowledgement for the ethnic concerns informing and influencing the biblical texts and their rhetoric is opening up a wider berth for concerns typically not considered in conventional biblical scholarship, which favoured a universal Christianity devoid of issues of race and ethnicity (among others).

> The narrative that Christians developed about themselves was very much an ethnic history, one in which human difference and diversity was made to conform to the theological and ideological interests of early Christian thinkers (Berzon 2018:191).

Biblical research alert to the rhetoric of Christianisation and civilisation established by Western colonial thought as the norm and denied, or at best, considered the indigenous as inferior (Mignolo), are also embedded in discussions of what qualifies as disciplinary excellence or "real academic work". Particular consideration is due for those entering from the scholarly margins, not wanting to go about the disciplinary business in a way that their work is either dismissed or judged to destabilise the disciplinary canons, either preventing their participation or scuttling the very project they intend to join.[43] If ethics is understood as critical engagement with the social norms that move people to act in certain ways, and not as sets of rules to create and maintain these norms,[44] social location cannot be considered a novelty, or its consideration, optional.

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the implications for the particularity of human lives in all their gender and sexual diversity? And when gender is equated with woman or women, do their gender exnomination in gender not cover up tensions and strains as well as intersectionalities regarding, for example, race, class, and sexuality?

43   Many ironies are locked into the conventional vs post-colonial biblical studies approaches debate. Primary is the ostensible concern in biblical studies for "original" meaning or "real" socio-historical contexts and texts, submerged under and clouded by secondary concerns; granted that the possibility of establishing the original is unlikely and the ability to construct (not re-construct) the most likely will always remain contested. However, the conventionalist approach both hampers or limits such endeavours and simultaneously obscures, through conventionalised strategies, the possibility to construe credible texts and contexts.

44   "If the 'I' cannot effectively be disjoined from the impress of social life, then ethics will surely not only presuppose rhetoric (and the analysis of the mode of address) but social critique as well" (Butler 2005:135).

5.   CONCLUSION

Biblical studies has not yet made great strides in the effort to engage "the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality" (Mignolo 2007a). Therefore, the question mark in the title of my presentation is neither aesthetic nor periphrastic; the question is, can Bibles, Christian or otherwise, as a genre in theology and religion, be decolonised?[45] A simple answer is improbably, since

> scholarly analysis of early Christian material occurs at the highly contentious crossroads of personal and institutional faith orientations, articulations of individual and collective identities, political ideologies and social imaginaries, and multiple operative scholarly discourses (Penner & Lopez 2015:30).

Patrolling the borders of biblical studies through imaging and branding can only result in ensuring the maintenance of the status quo, focusing on the conventional, and continuously polishing a social imaginary put in place centuries ago. By contrast, though, a new, reimagined post-colonial social imaginary for biblical studies holds much promise for decolonising the Bible.

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45   This includes notions such as the importance of "pluralising" Bibles; not to lay a singular claim to "the Bible", partly because the Bible is a theological construct rather than a historical product (library of books), and partly because various communities in different ways relate to and rely on the texts; then also the importance of acknowledging one (set of) sacred text(s) alongside others, like the Qur'an, and especially when certain documents as shared in different faith traditions, like the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
Bible	Bybel
Post-colonial	Postkoloniaal
Social imaginary	Sosiale verbeelding
Decolonial	Dekoloniaal