

## All Interpretation is Contextual Interpretation – in the Past and Today: Towards an Analogical Hermeneutic

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### Abstract

*The debate about “context” in Hebrew Bible / Old Testament scholarship often centres around the question: “Which context: ancient or contemporary?” Depending on whether the scholar answering the question comes from a Western educational background or from a global southern (including African) background, the question might – with some exception – be answered differently. Because of their training in historical models of understanding, Western-minded scholars will often emphasise that the context(s) within which the texts were produced is (are) our primary focus in biblical interpretation. Scholars from the Global South who are often exposed to all kinds of life interests of Bible readers, would mostly give primacy to the contemporary contexts of appropriation. Who is right? In this contribution I want to argue that it is not a matter of “either .... or” but rather “both .... and”, and that the dynamic of re-interpretation should also be brought into our discussions on this matter.*

**Keywords:** Analogical hermeneutics; Ancient Contexts; Contemporary context; Interpretation

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The debate about “context” is not a new one in biblical scholarship.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was still broad consensus (at least in European scholarship – see e.g. De Wette 1806; Wellhausen 1885; Gunkel 1913; Von Rad 1930; Noth 1943; Nicholson 1998) that the so-called “world-behind-the-text”<sup>3</sup> is

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered as part of a panel discussion on “context” in biblical studies at the SBL International Meeting held in Pretoria in July 2023. I thank Esias Meyer and the organisers of the conference for inviting me as panel member in a ProPent session at this conference.

<sup>2</sup> In two previous publications, I have evaluated reception-oriented African interpretations of the Bible as well as South African feminist interpretations (see Jonker 2018; 2022). In the present contribution, the task is broader. I was asked for the Pretoria meeting, where the paper was delivered to provide a reflection on why “context” is such a contentious theme in – particularly – South African Old Testament scholarship. By publishing my contribution to the panel discussion as an article, I want to bring more attention to the analogical hermeneutical model that I have already described in the mentioned publications, but that has remained in the background there.

<sup>3</sup> The very popular terminology of “world-behind-the-text”, “world-in-the-text”, and “world-in-front-of-the-text” can be problematic. It is often understood in a linear-communicative fashion, constituting a one-directional flow of information from the author (of the past) to the text (in its final form) to the reader (today).

the determining factor for the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (cf. the broad outline of these hermeneutical developments in Lategan 1992; Jonker and Lawrie 2005). With the so-called “linguistic turn”, facilitated by New Criticism (a theoretical approach in general literary studies) in the 1930s and onwards, a first phase of criticism against a strong historical approach emerged. Disillusioned with the historicism and idealism of the previous decades, this junction in biblical interpretation led to an exclusive focus on the texts themselves (Alter 1981, 1992; Hauser, Clines, and Gunn, eds. 1982; Berlin 1982, 1983; Alter 1983; Jobling 1986; Sternberg 1987). “Context” was redefined as “literary and textual context”. The historical dimension of biblical interpretation was thereby totally abandoned. Since the 1960s, another turn started influencing biblical interpretation, namely the turn towards “contextual interpretation”. From the start, it was clear that “context” had been redefined again. “Contextual interpretation” – then and now – refers to contemporary context, to modern-day socio-political embeddedness, and to social location. A range of reception-oriented hermeneutical approaches emerged, such as liberation hermeneutics (e.g. West 1995), feminist hermeneutics (e.g. Schottroff, Wacker, and Rumscheidt, eds. 2012; Scholz, ed. 2020), African and indigenous hermeneutics (e.g., Adamo 2015b; 2015a), intercultural hermeneutics (e.g., De Wit et al., eds. 2004), queer hermeneutics (e.g., Hall 2009; Tabb Stewart 2017; Van Klinken 2017), and so forth. Again, as with the previous turn, the historical and textual dimensions were abandoned, focusing exclusively on the reception of biblical texts in concrete modern-day contexts.

I see these developments as the reason for our debates about “context”. Unfortunately, every new phase of development abandoned the insights of the previous. Therefore, we have landed (at least in South Africa, and in other global south contexts) in a situation where one is forced to choose to work either historically (which is often associated with old-school scholarship that has no bearing on life today), or textually (but with a diminishing pool of scholars who are able to work from the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts), or contextually (that claims the moral high-ground in Bible interpretation in the specific socio-political circumstances).<sup>4</sup>

In the next section, I will point out some challenges in our present-day (South-) African biblical hermeneutics before making a twofold proposal in the next part.

## **Some challenges in our (South-)African biblical hermeneutics**

### ***My social location***

Before I start with this section, let me be overt about my own position from which I do this evaluation. I belong to that part of the guild of South African Old Testament scholarship that was trained in European-style, but I am practising my trade within an

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The hermeneutical situation that brought about the Bible is much more complex than this one-directional understanding. Particularly with reference to the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, we are well-aware of the fact that the text grew over a period of almost 1,000 years. That implies that this basic communicative model of author-text-reader was in operation in every stage of the development of the text. “Contextual interpretation” is thus important in every one of the stages over the ages, and not only in our own contemporary contexts. See below for a further discussion of the double meaning of the concept “historical dimension.”

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. the debate that was sparked by Madipoane Masenya and Hulisani Ramantswana as witnessed in the following publications: Masenya (ngwan’ a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana (2012; 2015). See also the following response: Meyer (2015).

African context. I value the scientific input that I have received from mostly European contexts (also Northern-American), but I also see the flaws of those approaches. My own views are hybrid: When I am teaching in (South-)African contexts, I tend to emphasise that the historical dimension should not be neglected in our biblical interpretation. When I am speaking in European contexts, I tend to emphasise that biblical scholarship cannot simply be a historical and textual exercise (the emphasis of European scholarship), and that the reception aspects should not be neglected (African scholarship). It is thus important to note that the social location within which I am making my contribution now determines the emphasis of my views.

### ***Neglect of the historical dimension***

As a result of the hermeneutical shifts discussed above, one could argue that there has been a great neglect of the historical dimension in (South-)African biblical scholarship.<sup>5</sup> This neglect plays out on two levels:

(i) “Historical dimension” refers firstly to the socio-historic contexts *long ago* in which the biblical writings were produced (Jonker 2013). Sometimes, this aspect is neglected in (South-)African biblical interpretation because the historical dimension is simply not seen as important in modern-day applications of the texts (although not in all). In other cases, the argument goes that one does not have any certainty about the times of origin of biblical texts. Scholars offering this criticism against historical approaches normally refer to the fact that there is normally a huge diversity of views on the dating of individual texts, so much so that we can just as well ignore their diverging opinions. Admittedly, one cannot pinpoint each and every biblical text in a very specific socio-historical context. However, we have enough information available in biblical scholarship of the broad periods and transitions in the history of Ancient Israel. It is indeed possible to work with broad periods such as pre-monarchical, monarchical / pre-exilic, exilic, post-exilic, early Persian, late Persian, Hellenistic, and so forth. It is indeed possible to categorise the majority of the Hebrew Bible in terms of these broad periods. To argue that we simply do not have evidence about the contexts within which biblical texts originated is ignorant of all the latest developments in biblical scholarship.

One should admit that in many African contexts there is indeed a sensitivity for the socio-cultural background of the Bible. Since there are so many similarities between the socio-cultural conditions of traditional African societies and those reflected in the Hebrew Bible, there is often a great interest in involving this aspect in modern-day African appropriations of the Hebrew Bible. It becomes problematic when the narrated and narrative worlds are confused (see below), but in general the involvement of the socio-cultural backgrounds of the Hebrew Bible does indeed constitute a historical dimension in these African interpretations (see e.g., the many excellent studies of the Ghanaian scholar, Kojo Okyere: Okyere 2018ba, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2021; Ntrel and Okyere 2012; Okyere and Effah Darko 2019).

(ii) “Historical dimension” also means that the Hebrew Bible grew *over a long period of time* (Jonker 2013). The history of reception does not only start after the canonisation of the texts, or in our own modern-day contexts. Contextual reception and re-

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<sup>5</sup> See my discussions where I have made this point with reference to African comparative approaches, as well as to (South-)African feminist interpretations: Author (2018; 2022).

interpretation already happened during the production of biblical texts in the different epochs of the long history of the production of the Bible (Jonker 2011). In fact, these processes of reception and re-interpretation were the dynamos that drove renewed processes of textual production (Jonker 1999).<sup>6</sup> This diachronic aspect is often neglected in modern-day (South-)African receptions and appropriations in favour of purely synchronic approaches. The implication is that one does not get insight into the hermeneutical dynamics that produced the Hebrew Bible.

### ***Confusion about “narrated” and “narrative” time***

A second challenge is the confusion about “narrated” and “narrative” time that often characterises (South) African biblical interpretation. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Jonker 2018; 2022), many (South-)African interpretations use a comparative model where the narrated world is directly connected to the modern-day reception of the texts. That means that the dynamics of historical reception is not taken into account. This boils down to the silencing of the voices of the “fathers and mothers” of the past, in favour of the voices of “brothers and sisters” today. This strategy of direct comparison often leads to ignorance about the continuities and discontinuities with past receptions.

The hermeneutical strategy of directly jumping from the “narrated” world to a contemporary context provides creative and fruitful avenues for showing the relevance of the biblical contents for modern-day contexts. However, this strategy also leaves the door open for abuse, and even dangerous interpretation. In this strategy, the ideological position of the modern-day interpreter goes unchecked, and it can easily lead to *eisegesis* instead of *exegesis*. When these kinds of interpretations are offered from moral ideological foundations, they can be liberating to those who live under oppression, and can expose power differentials in society. However, when such an interpretation departs from self-centered moral values (such as in the apartheid ideology – see discussion later), it can lead to further oppression and abuse of power. The Dutch Reformed Church’s interpretation of Genesis 11 in the document that gave theological legitimacy to the ideology of apartheid worked with such a hermeneutical strategy. This specific case will be discussed further below.

What would/could be an alternative hermeneutical strategy that can cross-check the modern-day interpreters’ ideological points of departure? It is my contention to argue that our contemporary interpretations should be analogical to the interpretations of the ancient past that brought about the biblical writings. This means that interpreters should rather make a hermeneutical detour before linking the Bible to their contemporary contexts. In the next section, a twofold proposal will be made of how this can be accomplished.

### **A twofold proposal**

As indicated in my introduction above, I am convinced that we should not be pushed into an “either-or” situation, but should rather work towards a “both-and” approach in our hermeneutical reflection on context in (South-)Africa. I have indicated that it is problematic that each shift in hermeneutical focus over the past 150 years and more

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<sup>6</sup> See also the work of Levinson who works with the assumption that the legal traditions of ancient Israel were preserved thanks to the fact that they were re-interpreted in new contexts: Levinson (2008).

resulted in the abandonment of the previous focus. That means that the latest phase, with its emphasis on contemporary/contextual reception, is dominating the scene in (South-)African biblical scholarship. The exclusivistic claims that are often associated with these reception-oriented approaches should be problematised and criticised (Jonker 1996). I would like to suggest two complementary proposals that build on my hermeneutical scholarship of the past three decades:

(i) I would like to emphasise that the biblical texts and the interpretation processes are too complex to be viewed from only one exclusivist methodological position. It does not benefit our understanding of the Hebrew Bible if we focus exclusively on the historical dimension, OR the textual dimension, OR on the reception dimension in our exegesis. I have therefore argued in the past that a multidimensional exegetical approach would lead to both responsible and accountable interpretation (Jonker 1996; 2006; 2007; 2013). Multidimensional exegesis is not suggesting a super-method for our exegetical work, nor is it suggesting that all “good” aspects of existing exegetical methodologies should be combined. A multidimensional methodology is rather an alternative attitude in our exegetical endeavours that moves away from exclusivist positions towards the intersubjectivity of all three dimensions (Jonker and Lawrie 2005). No interpreter can claim objectivity or neutrality. In fact, in some modern-day reception-oriented approaches, it is an imperative not to be objective or neutral but to choose sides. However, it would be dangerous to simply move to hermeneutical subjectivity. Intersubjectivity implies that various subjects – representing different hermeneutical approaches – should interact in order to cross-check one another’s ideological blindspots. This also applies to those “subjects” of the past, namely those communities of faith who brought about the biblical manuscripts through their processes of re-interpretation. If those “subjects” are ignored in our own processes of reception, it can potentially lead to abuse of the Bible.

(ii) The second part of my proposal is to work with an analogical hermeneutic as the operationalisation of multidimensional exegesis. I am arguing that there is an analogy between the relationship between text and context in the biblical times, and text and context in our own contemporary contexts. The contextual re-interpretations in biblical times should therefore inform contextual interpretations in our own time. Contextuality is therefore not something that can be claimed exclusively in reception-oriented hermeneutical approaches. Throughout the centuries-long processes of biblical formation, contextuality always mattered (Jonker 2005; 2013). All productions of new biblical texts over the ages were contextual receptions. The late Jurie le Roux, the father of ProPent (the Pentateuch think tank based at the University of Pretoria), always said that we get the answers in the biblical texts, but it is our task as exegetes to discover what the (theological) questions behind these answers were. To neglect the historical dimension, the valuable theological enrichment of our contemporary interpretations, by the interpretations of the past will simply not be possible.

I deliberately use the term ‘analogy’ and not ‘similarity.’ ‘Similarity’ would suggest that the ancient and modern contexts are the same, and that the interpretations of the past should simply be repeated in modern contexts. ‘Analogy’ means something different: Any analogy presupposes continuity and discontinuity. Taking note of the historical contextual receptions of ancient texts when we try to interpret them contextually for our own time will remind us that there are huge differences (discontinuities) between these

contexts, but that there are also similarities (continuities) in terms of the theological discourses that we participate in. Such an analogical hermeneutic will guard us from misusing texts of the past (the narrated world) to serve the ideological/theological purposes of our own time. When the narrated world is viewed against the background of the (ancient) narrative world, we become aware of the continuities AND discontinuities that should guide our own contextual receptions.

An example might help to understand what I mean with an analogical hermeneutical approach: If we take a text such as 2 Samuel 13, we may think that the historical setting is the time of David. It seems then that the issue addressed (or not) is the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. If the narrated world of David's time and the conduct of his children are directly taken over to our social-political contexts of today, the text could be seen as an example of how patriarchal values dominated even the powerful environments of David's time. The text can then be used to oppose the same kind of gender-based sexual violence of our modern-day society.

This, in itself, is a worthy cause. However, we also know of past situations where a similar direct hermeneutic was used in South-African biblical interpretation that led to the legitimation of apartheid theology (Jonker 2001). The story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11) was used directly to indicate that God himself separated language groups from one another in order to fulfill his wish that they should fill and cultivate the earth. It was argued that the people who congregated to build the tower of Babel committed a "horizontal" sin. Against the traditional interpretation of the narrative reflecting on human beings' aspirations to become like God (a "vertical" sin), the Dutch Reformed document on this issue argued that it was rather a transgression of Genesis 1:28, where God commissioned the first human beings to fill and cultivate the earth. By congregating at Babel, the ancient human beings did not spread over the earth as ordained in Genesis 1:28. The confusion of languages by God then became God's providence in this interpretation, that is, Godself managed to get the ancient human beings to spread over the earth and to cultivate it. The language confusion was thus not a punishment, but rather God's gracious providence. Under the influence of the apartheid ideology "language" very quickly became a symbol for different peoples and nations, and eventually of different races in the contemporary South African contexts of the 1970s and early 1980s. With such a direct hermeneutic where the narrated world is taken as the point of departure, all kinds of crimes against humanity could take place.

The difficulty with the apartheid interpretation of Genesis 11 is that it did not take into account the historical dimension. To be more precise, it did not take into account that the Genesis texts grew over a long period of time. We know from biblical scholarship that Genesis 11 belongs to the so-called non-Priestly (or Lay) textual material, in contrast to Genesis 1 that originates from Priestly circles. We know that the non-Priestly tradition, and thus the narrative in Genesis 11, is much older than the narrative about creation in Genesis 1. Genesis 1:28 thus did not exist in the time when Genesis 11 was written, and it is impossible that the Babel narrative directly responded to Genesis 1:28 (e.g., Von Rad 1961; Westermann 1981). Attention to this historical aspect would have guarded the theologians in the 1970s and 1980s from an interpretation that resulted in the oppression of fellow South Africans.

An analogical hermeneutic thus wants to guard against a direct approach. To return to 2 Samuel 13: When the exegete gets access to the world within which the

Deuteronomistic text originated, she/he will be aware of the fact that the story about David's children was told in an exilic context where the people of God tried to figure out why they lost the promised land and were sitting in Babylonia (see e.g. Römer, ed. 2000; Römer 2007, 2015). The issue at stake is thus not gender-based and sexual violence, but rather the failure of the past leaders of Israel, who abused their power positions and did not act to ensure justice to those on the margins of society. If that theme is taken over to today, it will surely interact with many modern-day discourses (also theological) on political leadership, on the abuse of power, and of the neglect of the responsibility to care for the marginal in society. Such an analogical approach would safeguard us from reading biblical texts exclusively through the lens of our own ideologies (like in the time of apartheid).

### Conclusion

With this short input, I am expressing my desire (again) to see multidimensional exegetical work in our (South-)African contexts that will enable us towards an analogical hermeneutical approach. I am also expressing my desire that our thinking about context will be more nuanced, taking into account that there is context all over, not only in our own contexts.

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