

Empire: Through the Looking Glass and into the Well

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Abstract

The presence and influence of the idea of 'empire' is not something that was left behind with the end of the Roman Empire, for where the study of the Historical Jesus is concerned, we find that we are still dealing with concept and consequences of 'empire'. Working from the principle that the study of any topic is also the study of one's self and one's own context - for when looking into a well one also sees one's own reflection - this short article will aim to establish the importance and function of empire in New Testament research today, as well as its connection with the researcher.

Keywords: Empire, Historical Jesus, rhetoric, interactivism, interpretive analytics, anthropology of credibility, meaning-making



Source: <http://s.hswstatic.com/gif/long-lived-empires-1.jpg>

Introduction: The well

There is an oft-repeated, and potentially rather cheap, gibe that researchers (and, in the context of New Testament Studies, Historical Jesus researchers specifically) are simply looking down a deep well and seeing their own reflections from below. One of Crossan's (1999:303) pet peeves with this gibe, and one of the reasons that it could be considered cheap, is when the gibe is used against others by someone that does not apply it to themselves as well. As an attempt at avoiding that pitfall, I will thus begin with a little treatise on myself.

My reflection

I began this journey in theological studies not because of the toss of a coin, but because I was convinced it could mean something - to myself and to others. And the fact that I am still here, still busy studying the New Testament, attests to the fact that I still have a vested interest in the subject - I am still convinced that it can mean something, and my own experience is that it does. I undertook my studies at the University of Pretoria, unbeknownst to me precisely at the same time as the unfolding of what now can only be called 'ground zero' at the Faculty of Theology - i.e. the saga which had its beginning with Ferdie Mulder in 2005, but has since escalated into countrywide (even worldwide?) conflict, politics, and an on-going battle¹, of which there has never really been a cessation. In fact, with the help of movements like the Evangelical Initiative², scholars such as König, and church members bringing out books like *Die Trojaanse perd in die NG Kerk*³, to call the debate alive and well would be an understatement⁴. In this process and through the years many forms of media releases have been (self-) made, people's lives have been irreparably hurt and changed, and many new facets of the church and its members have come to the fore. One of the biggest bones of contention has always been the study of the Historical Jesus in general, and the work of the Jesus Seminar (aka the devil's handmaidens) specifically, because of the negative effect their research would have on the poor theological student's soul and the future of the church and its faith. Now, I have never been one to leave anything well enough alone, and so I decided to venture into this 'valley of the shadow of atheism (aka the devil)'; a desire only strengthened when reading that 'it is not accidental ignorance but essential arrogance that dooms empires to the dustbin of time and the graveyard of history' (Crossan, 2007:28). And so began this journey into a more thorough, and hopefully more responsible, reading of the various quests in search of the Historical Jesus.

¹ Stormfront, **NG Teoloë Frons oor Student se Aanval op hul 'Opstandingsdwalings'**:n.p.; Mulder (2006); Die Burger, **NG Kerk Gons oor Opstanding**:n.p.; Bibleguidance, **The Afrikaner are a Cowardly People, says Theologian**:n.p.; NG Kerk Nuus Argief, **Opstandingsdebat Slaan die Bal Mis**:n.p.; König (2006); Kletskerk, **Effens Versigtige Versugtinge oor die Opstanding**:n.p.; Craffert (2007); Mulder, **Die Ontkenning van Jesus se Liggaamlike Opstanding uit die Dood - 'n Teologiese Agtergrond**:1-21; Riviersonderend, **Oor die Opstanding**:n.p..

² On 26 and 27 July 2007 a group of Dutch Reformed members, ministers, and theologians, led by theologians such as Profs. Hoffie Hofmeyr, Adrio König, and Drs. Johan van Schalkwyk and Danie Malan, came together in Pretoria. This meeting led to the formation of the *Evangeliese Inisiatief in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (or the 'Evangelical Initiative'); a movement aimed at confirming and protecting the classic mainstream theological traditions of the Dutch Reformed Church (Truth Exposed, **'Evangeliese Inisiatief' in NG Kerk**:n.p.).

³ Glo die Bybel, **Nuwe Boek is Hier!**:n.p.; Steyn (2011).

⁴ Oosthuizen (2009); Kletskerk, **Toeskouers van die Opstanding**:n.p.; Kletskerk, **Morele Dilemma**:n.p.; Meyer (2009); Die Burger, **Krisis oor die Opstanding?**:n.p.; Müller (2009); Spangenberg (2010); Landman (2010); Resurrection Hope, **First Ever World-class Debate on the Resurrection in South Africa?**:n.p.; Antwoord, **Spangenberg vs Craig: DIE GROOT DEBAT**:n.p.; Kletskerk, **Jesus se Opstanding 'n 'Verdraaing van die Bybel'?**:n.p.

The real empire

What has struck me the most is to find that, in Historical Jesus research, we once again have to do with an empire - neighbouring that of the church - for 'despite the traditional story that the Historical Jesus is the fruit of a scholarly rebellion against the church, it is Christian discourse, and the shadow of Christ that justify the quest' (Vorster, 2008:8). In fact, 'without the underpinning of Christian discourse, Jesus loses the uniqueness that justifies the focus and effort expended on this antique figure' (Aichele, Miscall & Walsh, 2009:392). Many Jesus researchers, then, are actually busy modernizing Christian discourse, denuding it of mythological elements so that it will appeal to modern rationalists (Vorster, 2008:7). Such desires are obvious in much of Historical Jesus research (Vorster, 2008:18-20). In fact, it would not be too extreme to describe much of this research as markedly Christian or, at least, fundamentally religious. No wonder, then, that some recent critics have noted the fundamentally religious nature of historical criticism and have called for a more secular Biblical criticism⁵. Nonetheless, even the most conservative Historical Jesus research adopts the standards and worldview of the modern discipline of historiography, rather than that of traditional Christianity (Aichele *et al.*, 2009:393). Berger (1990:159-160) wryly caricatures the kind of 'bargaining' that ensues: 'we'll give you the miracles of Jesus, but we'll keep his ethics'; 'You can have the virgin birth, but we'll hold on to the resurrection'; and so on. In the process, Christianity loses its status as the taken-for-granted truth, and modernity becomes the final arbiter and judge of truth. This modern distance from Christian tradition is the quest for the Historical Jesus' *raison d'être*, and the Historical Jesus is a modernized version of Christ. Thus, the pattern of the typical Historical Jesus study, like that of the modern myth itself, revolves around the individual's tension *vis-à-vis* society and that tension's resolution, not the delivery of a heroic/divine message or salvation (Borg, 1996:17-19; and Aichele *et al.*, 2009:393). To an extent it would be possible to argue that the whole Social Scientific enterprise that has flourished within New Testament Studies can be seen as a way of modernising Christian discourse in order to provide a credible version to 'modern rationalists'.

The road less travelled

This discovery has led me on a different road where this article is concerned - for now, instead of just comparing different scholars' views on empire, I want to take a step back and look at the empire that Historical Jesus research has become. The fact that Historical Jesus research has been able to both morally justify and radically criticise any and every 'establishment' makes it well worth investigating how such a contradiction is possible - it may just be that a bird's eye view might help us to find fresh ways of engaging with the topic and would probably tell us a lot about the Historical Jesus, earliest Christianity and about ourselves as historians and/or Christians (Crossan, 1999:288).

Historically speaking

Historical Jesus research is much like any other historical research - an operation that retrospectively tries to describe and disseminate a present perception of some *exempla* (whether it be events, activities or persons) located in the past (Braun, 1997:92; and Vorster, 2008:13-14), and is the product of nineteenth century knowledge production. It was also at this time that the Humanities in their diversity originated, a diversity mostly driven by one objective - to enquire into 'man' as the universal, primary originator of meaning (and here

⁵ Cf. e.g. Berlinerblau (2005); Arnal (2005); Crossley (2006); Avalos (2007); Blanton (2007); Botha (2008:92-141); Craffert (2008a:219-273); Craffert (2008b); and Vorster (2008:6-48).

'man' is deliberately put into quotation marks, since the enquiries were heavily engendered, extremely elitist, and obviously Western-oriented). Interesting to note here is that it was also during this period that Darwin's theory of evolution emerged, searching for a plausible and workable theory on the origins of 'man'. So it only stands to reason that the categories provided and formed by this underlying desire to locate 'man' as the primary originator of meaning, would also be used in Historical Jesus research. It is at this time that Historical Criticism emerged as the methodology sanitising the production of knowledge from theological influences and from the monolithic, hegemonic imperialism of Theology (Schweitzer, 1964:2); providing categories that functioned in non-theological disciplinary spheres, thereby adding intellectual status and respectability to the enquiries of scholars within the field of Biblical Studies (Vorster, 2008:12).

Prompted by Historical Critics, Historical Jesus enquiries emerged during this same period, with Historical Criticism starting its move into a position of dominance within mainline Biblical Studies (which it has held for at least the last century). Historical criticism comprises of well-known methods such as source criticism, form criticism, grammatical studies, and archaeology; attempting to combine them in ways that will produce solid and agreed-on interpretations of the Biblical text (whether these be the author's intention, the understanding of the original audiences, or reference to actual historical events [Aichele *et al.*, 2009:384]). 'Authorial intention' functioned as the target of enquiry of Historical Criticism, thereby rendering the writings of the New Testament the status of sources providing with access to their authors' minds within their diverse communal settings. This led to a focus on *how* and *what* questions - the *how* of the methods (*how* do you distinguish strata?) and the *what* (*what* do you get as end result?) of the results. So, in this research, the *why* question was never really asked - i.e. questions as to whether Historical Jesus research and the Jesus reconstructed by scholarly integrity is *necessary* for Christian faith?

Validating empire

In the process, scholars did not think it necessary to defend the validity of Historical Jesus research, as it was considered an established part of the scholarship landscape (Crossan, 1999:283), i.e. as self-evident. Neither 'Bible' nor 'religion' was perceived as problematic terms, nor was there any question as to their relationship - 'Bible' and 'religion' mutually entail each other, with no discrepancy between the datum (the Bible) and its model ('religion') - the datum is co-extensive with its model (Smith, 2000:88). One source of this common-sense agreement is community, for the scholarly study of the Bible remains, to a remarkably large degree, an affair of native exegesis. One consequence of this is that, for all the hermeneutic subtlety at times displayed in wrestling with problems of historical and linguistic difference, Biblical scholarship, unlike most other fields in the Western enterprise of the study of religions, has not been formed by that cluster of urgent and complex methodological and theoretical issues gathered together under the label, 'the insider/outsider problem' (i.e. the anthropological situating of the Christian materials [Smith, 2000:88]).

The space from which knowledge concerning the Historical Jesus has thus been produced is therefore a space still within the confines of Christian discourse; for, although it wants to distance itself from the space occupied by the Confessional Jesus, it still operates within the same discursive space, functioning subserviently to the grand project of constructing 'man' as the primary originator of meaning and so providing a myth that is acceptable and accessible for modern consumption. Within the circle of New Testament scholars working on this project, the theological enterprise has been made a taboo - it is not regarded as a legitimate process of knowledge production. To be able to exclude theological elements as well as confessed personal experiences as grounds of knowledge, Historical Jesus research

functions within the sphere of the disciplinary. It has established its own field even within the realm of New Testament Studies, and it features in several programmes of Biblical Studies as a self-sustaining field of knowledge. It has even established its own maintenance mechanisms in creating space for Historical Jesus research in syllabi, in the construction of structures within the fellowship grouping SBL and even with the initiating of a journal concerned only with Historical Jesus matters. Experts contribute to the maintenance of this space and also function in implementing surveillance techniques - in this case formal examinations, peer reviewing, evaluation of journal articles, but also public attempts, such as responses to newspaper articles and participation in public debates concerning Jesus - all to ensure that a particular version of truth concerning Jesus is placed on the foreground.

Winds of change

The postmodern shift

But, it would seem, influenced by postmodern shifts in historiographical sensibilities, that Jesus historians are becoming increasingly aware that the 'past' is not just sitting back there, ripe and waiting to be plucked. Slowly but surely across the last two hundred years of scholarly research, we have learned that *gospels* are exactly that (Crossan, 1999:285) - *gospel* written *for* faith, *to* faith and *from* faith; i.e. *good news* (*good* demonstrating that the news is seen from somebody's point of view; *news* signifying that a regular update is involved, that a process of constant actualisation is taking place). It is our problem if we wanted journalism (Crossan, 1999:285), for we received gospel instead. The implication hereof is that the 'past' is pliable and subject to shaping by the historian, selectively identified from items in an 'archival' record (Braun, 1997:92; and Vorster, 2008:9) - by applying complex value judgements and evidentiary standards, these items are then counted as evidence or assigned factual status and then interpreted in relation to each other by some explanatory schema of coherence and meaning (generated by the creative intellectual activity of the historian). Each of these constructive operations - selection, valuation, and explanation - of representing the past, however, is deeply embedded in the contemporary social, institutional, and disciplinary settings that furnish the historian; not only with the motivations and aims, but also with conceptual and analytic tools for 'doing history' in the first place (Braun, 1997:92). This situation is complicated further when we remember that there is always a general difficulty when the contemporary present looks at the distant past - not because *we* are different from *them* (as there is probably as much divergence among modern-us as there is among ancient-them), but because *we* know the future of *their* past (Crossan, 1999:286). What does make it all even, of course, is that we do not know the future of our own present, and it is only that understanding that can make us internalise both their ignorance of past-to-present and our own ignorance of present-to-future.

And, just when we thought it couldn't get any more complicated, it does - we have to remember that the earliest Christians lived in a world not yet bedevilled by either straight or reversed rationalism⁶. No, they lived in a world where divine and human, eternal and temporal, and heaven and earth were porous (Crossan, 1999:292). This means that *they* could never have argued that Jesus was uniquely unique because what had happened to him had happened to him alone; so when we read them as saying that, we are misreading *them*. Add to this the specific problem when religious belief or disbelief, commitment or

⁶ Anti-Christian (or straight rationalism) says that certain things cannot or, more wisely, do not happen as they are so far beyond the publicly verifiable or objectively provable consistencies of our world that, whatever their value as myth or parable, fable or story, they are not to be taken as fact, event or history (Crossan, 1999:292).

distaste, or love or hate is involved, for hate as well as love can write a life of Jesus⁷. And strange things happen to historians when the subject is Jesus - 'if historical construction is often described as a minefield, then Historical Jesus reconstruction should be described as all mine and no field' (Crossan, 1999:287). And then not just because of personal or emotional idiosyncrasies, but also because of social and historical forces - a social impetus that continues right into the start of the twenty-first century - illustrating that socio-economic factors and religious emphases interpenetrate one another (Foucault, 1972:221; and Vorster, 2008:13).

A biased opinion

A common meta-concern in current historical-Jesus studies is the issue of bias (Foucault, 1977:27-28; and Arnal, 1997:316). Normally this issue is treated entirely negatively - as something to be avoided as much as possible - and this is true despite the growing recognition that bias is ubiquitous and can never be eliminated (Smith, 2009:19). For decades the academic focus has been on identifying and 'bracketing' bias in reconstruction; with openly biased scholarship simply not considered as a serious part of the discipline, as it neglects to shroud its work in the trappings of disinterest (Arnal, 1997:317). As a result, these types of scholarship are relegated to the margins - not so much because it is biased, but because it is deliberately, self-consciously, and openly so. But what exactly is at stake in the desire for objectivity? A desire to view the object of one's inquiry through the lens of things-as-they-are (Moore, 1992:93; and Robbins, 1997:43), with the distinction between a fact and a value in itself not based on fact but on the dichotomy between things as they are and things as one wishes them to be. The removal of so-called 'value' from scholarship is really the removal of hope, something which is not central or necessary to the daily ideological work of the privileged (Arnal, 1997:317). The ultimate value that undergirds the desire to avoid epistemic bias - hence the most basic and hidden epistemic bias of all - is the desire to conserve the world roughly as it is. This is not by any means to imply that older scholarship succeeded in eliminating all value from its assessment of the facts; it is just that it exhibited conservative values in its purported aim to treat only 'the facts' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983:122-125).

Contextualisation

But this rhetoric has another purpose as well - the concealment of the ideological character and force of historical description (Jasper, 1997:481). For history is really about ourselves; it is a rhetorical game, played by certain rules, commenting elliptically on the world as it is by casting current categories and basic understandings into the past; serving the universalising function of ideology to make particular and contingent world-views appear to be ubiquitous and absolute (Bloomquist, 1997:115). Thus the value of the more-or-less postmodern insight that bias is inevitable - a value that has so far been capitalised on only by the 'unserious'

⁷ 'The greatest of them (the lives of Jesus) are written with hate...it was not so much hate of the person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround him, and with which he had in fact been surrounded. They were eager to picture him as truly and purely human, to strip him from the robes of splendour with which he had been apparelled, and clothe him once more with the coarse garments in which he had walked in Galilee. And their hate sharpened their historical insight. They advanced the study of the subject more than all the others put together. But the others, those who tried to bring Jesus to life at the call of love, found it a cruel task to be honest. The critical study of the life of Jesus has been for theology a school of honesty...it was fortunate for these men that their sympathies sometimes obscured their critical vision so that, without becoming insincere, they were able to take white clouds for distant mountains' (Schweitzer, 1964:4-5).

Biblical scholarship - is the way it forces recognition of the inevitable positionality of one's perspective (Foucault, 1972:215-216; and Arnal, 1997:318).

Ultimately, it may be exactly through this ability to point out the delusion and its origins that we, as Biblical critics, can make a profound contribution to the rest of our colleagues in the field of rhetoric and, more importantly, beyond (Amador, 1997:64). Our sensitivity to intertextual allusions, shared metaphors, and argumentative analogues between the Biblical 'text' and our world puts us in the unique position of offering 'revelatory' insight into areas of thought, theories, philosophies, beliefs, and convictions which have long since discarded the metaphysical discourse trappings of traditions such as our own (Amador, 1997:64).

The looking glass

When trying to find an alternative way forward, it is good to start with a few questions, first raised by McCutcheon (2003:x), that are still very pertinent for today: 'How do academic disciplines develop? How do scholars develop a sense of themselves inhabiting the discipline? How do they rise to dominance? How are they interconnected to larger political and economic forces? How do those who oppose such developments effectively make tactical interventions that are able to have some consequence? And what, if anything, does all this have to do with that slippery collection of things that some of us call religion?'

For once, something

A poem by Robert Frost (1979:225) helps us sort through these thoughts, for in his description of a well and the process of looking into it, we find the two current alternatives for (and opposite modes of) historical reconstruction - one an impossible delusion (Crossan, 1999:303), the other a possible illusion (Crossan, 1999:304). Why is this useful? Because, if we let the interplay of the poem's alternatives flow over and through us, we also find hidden a third option; and it is this third option that opens up for us a new way forward. The possible illusion is *narcissism* - an illusion in which you ignore the fact that it is the water that is reflecting your face, therefore only focusing on your face's reflection and falling in love with it. Put differently, you are actually only seeing what was there before you began, imprinting your own present on the past and calling it history. The impossible delusion is *positivism* - the delusion that we can observe the water without our own face being mirrored in it. So, just like Alice (Carroll, 1958:141-148), we think we are able to walk through the mirror (looking glass) and past ourselves into the reality (Wonderland) beyond; imagining that you can know the past without any interference from your own personal and social situation as knower. But (luckily) Crossan (1999:304) provides us with the beginnings of a third alternative, *interactivism* - here it is recognised that you cannot see the surface without simultaneously seeing, disturbing, and distorting your own face; and you cannot see your own face without simultaneously seeing, disturbing, and distorting the surface. In this approach, then, the past and the present must interact with one another, each changing and challenging the other, enabling a fair and equal reaction between one another. This *dialectic of interactivism*, as distinct from either narcissism or positivism, is both possible and necessary (Crossan, 1999:304). Not because it will guarantee the truth (nothing can), but because method - and then as self-conscious and self-critical as we can make it - is our only discipline. Though it cannot ever take us out of our present skins and bodies, minds, and hearts, or societies and cultures, it is our one best hope for honesty. For it can assist us with the development of a method that allows for conversation (while protecting from violation), that provides room for discussion (without the threat of disfigurement), and at the same time develops an equal awareness of your own as well as your subject's historicity.

Opportunity = responsibility

But such a context of opportunity is also a context of responsibility (Robbins, 1997:24) - we live in a time where we are daily bombarded with multiple rhetorics, coming into our lives through every possible avenue. This makes it appropriate for rhetorical analysis and interpretation to become a major player in religious studies, the humanities, the social sciences and even the practical and hard sciences. Yes, people are becoming more and more aware that the use of language is as important as the use of science for the lives of millions of people on this planet (Robbins, 1997:24) - people's use of words play a central role in who benefits from our knowledge and abilities, who is put at a disadvantage, who is put to flight, and who is destroyed from the face of the earth. In short, the ability to use language across this entire planet and throughout a growing part of our solar system makes us substantive co-creators of life and death. This means that we need a mode of rhetorical criticism that programmatically revalues and reinvents itself into a new *modus operandi* (Botha, 2008:103; and Vorster, 2008:26) - i.e. *interpretive analytics*, making use of the strategies and insights of both theory and method in a manner that perpetually deconstructs its own boundaries and generates new ones in the ongoing process of interpretation (Robbins, 1997:29). The stance of the interpreter is to 'take seriously the problems and conceptual tools of the past, but not the solutions and conclusions based on them' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983:122), the goal being to replace 'ontology with a special kind of history that focuses on the cultural practices that have made us what we are' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983:122) and 'to find the rules which determined or controlled the discourse that there was' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983:123), since 'the practitioner of interpretive analytics realises that he himself (or herself) is produced by what he (or she) is studying; consequently he (or she) can never stand outside it...he (or she) sees that cultural practices are more basic than discursive formations (or any theory) and that the seriousness of these discourses can only be understood as part of a society's ongoing history' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983:124-125).

Rhetorical criticism re-evaluated

As an interpretive analytics, rhetorical criticism moves beyond method and theory, beyond the role of a discipline that performs restrained rhetorical analysis and interpretation into a revalued and reinvented rhetorical criticism that brings resources from multiple disciplines of study into dialogue with one another on their own terms (Robbins, 1997:30). The implication thereof is that there is no future for a conversation about the Historical Jesus mired in debates over 'criteria of authenticity' or the search for canons of universal, independent judgement (Vaage, 1997:181). If we are all prepared to say at the outset what is at stake for (each of) us in our search for Jesus - whether it be ideologically, academically or personally - then there is some possibility that we can reach an approximation to the truth of things (at least for now). We thus need to not only become more conscious of who we are, what and for whom we work, where our allegiances, commitments and limitations lie, and what our experience has been; we also need to state these things more openly into our work. Why? Exactly because this 'bias' may in fact have a positive role, for our angle of vision heightens our awareness of certain realities - a bias may thus alert a historian to possibilities of reconstructing the past which others without a similar prejudice may not have noticed (Shiner, 1982:387). But what is then at stake here is not the old-fashioned epistemological problem of 'perspective'; what captivates us here, rather, is the social fact of situated discourses and their specific subjects (Robbins, 1997:24, 29). For the more honest and the more precise we can be about exactly what makes 'the Historical Jesus' worth discussing, and what we can hope to gain from our Jesus, the better the chance is that our conversation about the Historical Jesus will produce not just scholarly smoke but intellectual fire and human warmth (Botha, 2008:133-136). This sort of classification is necessary even if one wishes to contend that the purpose of Historical Jesus research is merely 'knowledge for

knowledge's sake' - of course a conviction with its own social location. Otherwise debates about the Historical Jesus only function as a new empire of academic junk bonds, suggesting real growth in knowledge, but serving mainly as a chance for scholars to engage in intellectual competition with one another (Vaage, 1997:182).

Conclusion: A human process

Simply put, the production of seamless meanings and identities, and thus the containment of competing meanings and identities, should be our object of study, not the justification of any specific local meaning or identity (McCutcheon, 2003:22) - we must be wary of simply invoking our authority as careful hermeneutics to elevate one interpretative frame above the rest, as if we are in the position to declare which meaning is right and which is wrong; in doing so, we are engaged in the self-serving activity of declaring one among many social worlds as right, truthful, and normative and all others as wrong. This implies that, in service to one social world, we sacrifice our ability to study the process whereby competing worlds bump and grind against each other (McCutcheon, 2003:23).

It is only if we take seriously the role that context, history, grammar and structure play in all claims to know that we will find assertions concerning genuine experience troubling (McCutcheon, 2003:23-24) - e.g. the troubling fact that religious texts have been used equally by parties who disagree, sometimes vehemently; both (driven by very different politics) locked in the same vortex, hunting for timeless standards and values, for a meaning and a content that somehow transcends their specific context or present-day structural setting. For all the reading process is, is a human practice (McCutcheon, 2003:27) - the human process does not contribute to anything, it's all there is! To speak only of 'human involvement' leaves the door open for other sorts of factors that also play a role in interpretation, as if humans participate in something larger than themselves - something extra-historical - when they read and write. But if we admit that interpretation is a thoroughly historical and contestable human activity, then there can be no other factors and no values external to the human act, since values are the result of human acts; which means that morality, too, is thus a thoroughly historical and contestable artefact.

Coming to grips

Coming to grips with history rests on routinisation, on the ability to organise a present and a sense of self that is juxtaposable to some distinct, chronological 'other'; for, without such routinisation, we would see no need to 'come to grips' with anything in particular. If all reading is interested in is the enaction of a particular routine or a specific repertoire, then there is no non-reified reading and interested routinisation is the inevitable means by which we discipline both unruly texts and unruly pasts in service of some specific present (Botha, 2008:103). But if indeed meaning is in the eye of the beholder, then there is nothing to be gained from the scholar *qua* critic entering into the interpretive fray, intent on finding out what the text 'actually means'. Up until now, our discipline has mostly been propelled by 'the etymological conviction, still regnant, that there is something of surpassing value hidden "beneath" the words, a something that is essential, as opposed to the verbally accidental, and that may be uncovered only by decipherment' (Smith, 2001:134). But, wouldn't it be more interesting to focus on the problem of meaning-making? (McCutcheon, 2003:28) That would mean asking such questions as: how could this one text be made to mean such different things for such different readers? And this is exactly what will save us from continually building different versions of essentially the same empire - instead of merely counting the 'flowers of meaning' in the garden, our gaze needs to shift from the meaning to the meaning-making (Braun, 2001:171). For, if these things that scholars call text, ritual, myth etc. are behavioural sites where rhetorical rules are enacted and policed, sites where groups are continually remade; then it follows that varying contents can be attached to the

same myth-ritual-text complexes, so that in different discourses contents of assorted political and religious stripes will be authorised by means of common techniques (Botha, 2008:113-116) and allowed to be understood as meaningful or persuasive. For every commentator performs some configuration of modern and postmodern modes of intellectual discourse as they perform their commentary, since every intellectual mode of discourse makes its own range of ideological interests available to a commentator (Robbins, 1997:43) - the particular goals of the commentator, along with the mode of intellectual discourse he or she performs, invite certain aspects of a text rather than others to comprehend or grasps their commentary (Moore, 1992:93). Commentators, then, re-inscribe select aspects of a text as they perform a twentieth-century mode of intellectual discourse in their own particular way (Robbins, 1997:43).

The name of the game

The major implication I want to evoke is that none of us has the final say on ideology - ancient texts are richly textured environments of analysis and interpretation, and twentieth century commentaries on these texts adopt various locations in various twentieth-century modes of intellectual discourse (Robbins, 1997:48), re-enacting highly different aspects of ancient texts. For this reason the name of the game here needs to be perspicuity and humility. So perhaps, in the first instance, we should be looking more closely at ourselves before we attempt to suggest any meta-critical language of analysis, and when we do finally do that, we must remain profoundly alert to the text, what we are doing to it and what it is doing to us (Jasper, 1997:482). The study of religion thus being proposed is concerned with what can be termed an 'anthropology of credibility'; examining and then explaining the conditions and socio-rhetorics that enable a group to portray a piece of social data as meaningful, significant, and credible in the first place; rhetorics such as sacred/profane or private/public that make seemingly stable 'selves' and 'groups' possible (McCutcheon, 2003:151). As Jameson (1991:96) says: 'We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage'.

Is this the same as saying that all we have left are the whims of postmodernism? That there exists no truth, no history, and no starting point other than that to be found within every individual? That, in essence, dialogue is futile for there is only the individual and his/her opinion? No. For there does exist an abundance of research, history, and literature outside the individual - and to ignore the existence thereof would be to reinvent a perfectly functioning wheel. So it remains of the utmost importance to engage as comprehensively as possible with this 'other' as valuable equal. It is rather that, in our engagement, we must accept and recognise our own being and our own reasons for the engagement. We do not approach history or research neutrally, and the conclusions that we reach are not haphazard or simply by chance. And it is only in the acceptance of - no, the relishing in - the importance of the meaning of our study for each and every one of us that we can begin to be freed from our obsession with being right or wrong (thereby running in the same circles and actually hampering dialogue). It is only with our vested interests on our sleeves - which is not the same as saying that there is nothing other than our interests and opinions - that real dialogue becomes possible, that our obsession is no longer only with the 'facts', but with the meaning of those facts and the discourse that those facts create. For therein lies meaningful dialogue and possibilities for life, for insight refers to the depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences - yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old - side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another. So it is no longer enough to be smart, since all the technological tools in the world add meaning and value only if they enhance our core

values and the deepest part of our heart. And acquiring knowledge is no guarantee of practical, useful application. Wisdom implies a mature integration of appropriate knowledge, as well as a seasoned ability to filter the inessential from the essential. If we do not venture on this way, then the Japanese proverb becomes true of us - 'knowledge without wisdom is a load of books on a fool's back'.

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