Narrative rationality, morality and readers’ identification

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ABSTRACT

Taking its point of departure from Toulmin’s description of the heritage of modernity, this paper intends to discuss the problem of readers’ identification with characters in the Bible that provides them with a model of virtue or an impetus to structure their own lives or the life of their religious community. Identification boils down to acting as the character once acted in a given situation. But following that act to its consequences can be disastrous, since the readers’ context and the context of the character in the story are utterly different. This is the problem with Esther’s request to prolong the Jewish defence, thereby causing more bloodshed. A few questions arise: (a) given the epistemological privilege of the Biblical text, can one simply sanction the moral of the story by making it a moral for the readers now? (b) or does the epistemological privilege of the Bible allow readers to overrule the link between the moral of the story and its narrative rationality in turning something else into the moral of the story? The essay elucidates the problem of character identification with the help of Esther 9 in terms of readers’ identification with her character. The story is about a powerful woman ending up doing what her adversaries intended to do to her and her people, a dubious act judged from the context of a twenty-first century liberal society with a Bill of Human Rights. Two kinds of readers or readings are discussed, namely that of a critical feminist group within Western European Christianity and that of a simple close reading of African students in the context of Southern Africa. Ensuing from these readings, the degree to which readers are able to identify with Biblical characters and the moral force of identification are addressed. The essay concludes with a discussion on narrative rationality that requests readers to look for moral meaning and not legalistic principles with which society can be ordered.

A THE HERITAGE OF MODERNITY

Stephen Toulmin claims in his book Cosmopolis. The hidden agenda of modernity that the Second World War can be regarded as an event that finally destroyed the three pillars of modernity established earlier by Descartes. These pillars are called ‘certainty’, ‘systematicity’ and ‘a clean slate’ (Toulmin 1990:160). Toulmin (1990:184-185) argues that the late twentieth century (and one could add, the early 21st
century) has become a time of increasing interdependence, cultural diversity and historical change. It is a time of incessant mobility. Hence the increased focus on context, demanding a careful eye to the particular, the local and the timely.

Toulmin (1990:200) says the following:

Rationally adequate thought or action cannot, in all cases equally, start by cleaning the slate, and building up a formal system: in practice, the rigour of theory is useful up to a point, and in certain circumstances. Claims to certainty, for instance, are at home within abstract theories, and so open to consensus; but all abstraction involves omission, turning a blind eye to elements of experience that do not lie within the scope of the given theory, and so guaranteeing the rigour of its formal implications. Unqualified agreement about these implications is possible, just because the theory itself is formulated in abstract terms. Supposing that we adopt the standpoint of Newton’s dynamics, for instance, it will follow necessarily that any ‘freely moving satellite’ must trace an orbit of elliptical, hyperbolic, or parabolic shape. Once we move outside the theory’s formal scope, and ask questions about its relevance to the external demands of practice, however, we enter into a realm of legitimate uncertainty, ambiguity, and disagreement.

Bible readers are not excluded from what Toulmin describes. It is my opinion that sometimes readers interpret the Biblical text and make decisions on the basis of that interpretation that lie outside the scope of that text. An example, and the social context for this essay, is the current deliberations within the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA) on the issue of women in the ministry. Briefly, the Bible is interpreted and used in such a way that a particular social hierarchy is enforced within the churches (Acta 1988:507-523). The social order is patriarchal in nature which, inevitably, excludes women from becoming deacons, elders or ministers (preachers/pastors).

For example, instead of acknowledging the patriarchal context of the references to the social status of women in the stories, the mere textual reflection of the position of women in the different contexts of text production is transformed into a rule related to the order of creation (Acta 1988:510-511, 519). Thus, the position of women, inter alia, is linked directly to Eve, who had the (mis)fortune of being created after Adam, yet taking the fateful first bite. Instead of focusing on the moral meaning of the different stories and texts found in the Bible where women are mentioned, the hierarchical social structure reflected in these stories is highlighted and used as legitimisation for the exclusion of women in the ministry.
Subsequently, the role of women in the current religious society is associatively identified with their role under hierarchical strictures. Associative identification, that is, a reading strategy according to which readers positively identify with a character’s actions and dialogue, is based on two presuppositions. First, the Biblical text is regarded as a benign text, so that associative identification is more or less expected (cf Snyman 2001). Second, a peculiar timelessness ascribed to the text assures that the focus stays on the morality of the acts and not on the context in which that morality is practised. For the purpose of the paper, this ‘timelessness’ is important. One should distinguish two interpretations of this ‘timelessness’ within the tradition of the RCSA, namely a text is read, as if ‘aimed in time’ or, as if ‘limited by time’ (cf Coetzee, De Klerk & Floor 1980). Vergeer (2001:6) talks of an anomaly that is created in the sense of preserving a certain timelessness of Scripture, but at the same time acknowledging that its origins are closely linked to a context of text production which does not limit the scope of the text to its historical context of production. The introduction of being ‘aimed in time’ softens the blow of the time limitation, but it does not provide a real solution to the problem of deciding which is of timeless value and which is not.

The recognition of a text being ‘aimed in time’ carries within it a time limitation whereas the term ‘timeless’ recognises a line of continuity with the story in some way or the other. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:102), an anthropologist in religion, presupposes what he calls a fundamental truth about human societies: ‘[A]lthough different people have different histories and live in different contexts, cultures always have features that resemble those of others.’ This line of continuity, expressed as ‘timelessness’, is recognised by readers and not enforced by an epistemological framework.

The reading of the Book of Esther, for example, brings to light certain wisdom aspects even readers of the twenty-first century can ascribe to, such as the reversal of roles or speaking at the right time. But women, feeling oppressed by a male hierarchy, will side with Vashti and may scorn Esther for participating in the system. There may be a real discontinuity between their perception of the social order and that which they find embedded in the text. For various reasons, the Bible does not regulate a social order in terms of hierarchies. First, in terms of gender, the hierarchical social order simply represents or reflects the patriarchal nature of the Jewish and early Christian societies in whose midst these texts were produced. Second, by abstracting a principle from Biblical texts regarding hierarchical positions in society, the complexity of human experience is not
acknowledged (cf Anonymous 1999:5-6). Third, the search for a clear-cut doctrine on gender participation in the ministry constitutes a use of the Bible that lies outside its scope.

Does it mean that the order readers find in the text is also timeless and should be regarded as a value to be enforced? Apparently this happened in the RCSA’s reading of other texts regarding women in leadership roles. The timelessness ascribed to Scripture, ties in with a Cartesian aspiration to bring to light permanent structures underlying all changeable phenomena (cf Toulmin 1990:34). In contrast, the reference to the timely recognises the fact that principles address issues prevailing at a particular time (cf Toulmin 1990:188).

The problem this paper wants to discuss, is that of readers’ identification with characters in the Bible that provides them with a model of virtue or an impetus to structure their own lives or the life of their religious community. Identification boils down to acting like the character once acted in a given situation. But following that act to its consequences can be disastrous, since the readers’ context and the context of the character in the story are utterly different. This is the problem with Esther’s request to prolong the Jewish defence, thereby causing more bloodshed. Despite the epistemological privilege of the Biblical text, can one simply endorse the moral of the story by making it a moral for present-day readers? Or does the epistemological privilege of the Bible allow readers to overrule the link between the moral of the story and its narrative rationality in turning something else into the moral of the story?

The problem of character identification will be elucidated with the help of Esther 9 in terms of readers’ identification with her character. The story is about a powerful woman ending up doing what her adversaries intended to do to her and her people, a dubious act judged from the context of a twenty-first century liberal society with a Bill of Human Rights. Two kinds of readers or readings are discussed: a critical feminist group within Western European Christianity and a simple close reading of African students in the context of Southern Africa. Ensuing from these readings, the degree to which readers are able to identify with Biblical characters and the moral force of identification are addressed. The essay concludes with a discussion on narrative rationality that requests readers to look for moral meaning and not legalistic principles with which society can be ordered.

**B ESTHER AND HER SECOND REQUEST**

According to Esther 9 the Jews in the kingdom of Persia defended themselves
successfully against those who sought to execute Haman’s decree that would have wiped out the Jewish exiles in the Persian kingdom. Although the first day was successful elsewhere in the kingdom, only five hundred men were killed in the city of Susa. Esther then asked the king to proceed with the killing for a second day.

Her request for a second day is problematical. Regarding the character of Esther, a reader may be faced with the following question: is there anything in the story that warrants a request for the ongoing bloodshed? If Esther is vindictive, can readers identify with her? Readers would be inclined to identify with her, because she is the heroine in the story and she has divine blessing. After all, was it not in times of calamity that she was chosen to be queen (Es 4:13-14)?

Athalya Brenner’s book *A feminist companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (1995) contends that readers whose particular social and historical circumstances find a structural resonance in the story, will feel an affinity with Esther.

1 Brenner (1995a:12) argues that in a gender conflict, Esther was a notable success in a male-dominated Persian court and a patriarchal Jewish society. She succeeded in transforming a gender conflict mortal to women into a conflict deadly to Persian men.

2 Susan Niditch (1995:45) argues that readers in gender and racially oppressed groups will find a resonance in the theme of liberation from oppression in the book.


4 Wyler (1995:126) says that Esther and Vashti experienced the violence of the male ruling class against women. Esther had to do what Vashti refused in the face of male power. She survived, but did not solve the gender issue.

5 Klein (1995:149) sees in the story a racial issue that is solved by putting shame on the Persians. As Jews under Persian rule, Esther and Mordecai live in a dependent position. It is a position associated with women in general, and dependence implies shame. Esther knows when to protect her shame and when to act shamelessly.

There are also a few other perspectives from which one can side with Esther and her cause. In terms of rigid wisdom, success and misfortune are directly linked to wise or foolish acts. Esther’s success implies her wisdom in maintaining God’s order of creation. Haman’s foolish actions imply that he wanted to disturb that order and received his just desserts in the end. The prevailing reception of
Esther is a reception that does not really disapprove of her actions. Readers tend to be quite partial towards her because she symbolises righteousness in contrast to Haman’s evilness.

Brenner (1995b:75) cautions against an understanding of Esther’s character in terms of morality. To her, morality is not the question. Esther merely served as a mirror to Vashti and did what Vashti refused to do. The Book of Esther is not a simplistic moral tale and no character is wholly good or evil. She says that readers side with the Jewish characters because they are simply superior. The Book of Esther is a guide to life and survival, an answer to the question of what it takes for a diaspora Jew to survive and succeed as a Jew. The answer Brenner (1995b:79) finds is that one should mutate into one’s former adversary.

From studies of the Persian or Achaemenid period we know what the adversaries were like. They were administrators or government officials like Haman who were part of the Persian ruling class, described as an ‘ethno-classe dominante’ (Briant 1990:167). They were an aristocracy that surrounded the king and their aim was to preserve their privileges. They refrained from assimilating with the immediate surrounding cultures of the deportees of the subordinated states. They kept themselves apart in terms of customs, language and beliefs, although in the provinces they would not destroy existing infrastructures. They would co-opt the ruling local elite by letting them keep their privileges, but they would never absorb their customs and belief systems (cf Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990:265). Instead they tried to safeguard the traditions and the purity of their community in order to maintain their status and power (Briant 1987:12).

The Persian aristocracy defined themselves in terms of and in relation to royal power. Subsequently, their position in the court did not belong to an individual, but to the entire tribe. This meant that if the king became dissatisfied with a person keeping an office and he wanted to dispose of someone, the entire family was disposed of (cf Briant 1987:25). The absolute power of the king was only counterbalanced by the cohesion of the family structure. It was not easy to dispose of someone, as it could lead to a revolution in the palace.

The story of Esther deals with a conflict between two families, which the author disguises in religious terms by creating a duel that originated at the entrance of Israel into Canaan when they met the Amalekites, the tribe Haman is said to belong to. Mordecai and Esther are said to belong to the tribe of Benjamin, direct offspring of Kish’s son Simei. Saul is ignored, but there is an allusion to Saul and
Agag in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul did not kill Agag as Samuel ordered. The allusion with the genealogies is that Haman’s wish to annihilate an entire group of people in exile originates from a situation where Israel once had the opportunity to annihilate his ancestors, but did not avail themselves of it. The revenge scene in Esther 9 finally resolves this old conflict by killing Haman as well as his ten sons.

The killing of the sons and the exposure of their corpses indicate the finality of the end of the feud between Israel and Canaan. But it also fitted the Persian court system. When an aristocratic official was fired, his entire family suffered. The deed was fulfilled by the Jews, whose ruling elite in the guise of Esther and Mordecai became as powerful as the Persian officials and as violent as the Persian system. The Jews became fully assimilated to Persian power. In Esther 3 they are described as scattered, with their own laws and customs, but in chapter 9 they are seen to resemble the Persians. In fact, they even took up the Persian way of communication, that of writing letters. Bal (1991) argues that the central role of writing and the efficiency of the Persian postal system corresponds to the king’s rule over many peoples. The events are also chronicled in the form of a Persian chronicle without any explicit reference to Yahweh. The Jews were not understood as a citizen-temple community like the exiles in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. In Esther, they were a nation just like any other.

Brenner is correct in suggesting that the Jews became more and more like their adversary. Assimilation was a strategy for survival. But assimilating with the adversary makes identification with the heroes problematical, as the book paints a vivid picture of human capacity for evil and violence (cf Goldman 1990:27). In the end, the Jews’ assimilation to Persian culture resulted in an embracing of the less charming character traits of the Persian court. Ultimately, they did not change the society, but merely positioned themselves very close at the centre of power.

The story provides good reasons for Esther’s actions. First, from a wisdom perspective, one can argue that Esther acts wisely. She speaks and acts on the right time. She warily deals with power at court. In her rhetoric with the king she continues to create a relationship with the king as superior and herself as the subordinate. She knows when to hide her origins and when to reveal them. When she reveals Haman’s plot, she uses her words very cautiously so that the king is not threatened by being exposed as incompetent. The killing of Haman and his ten sons ensures that they will never again bother Esther or her people.
Does Esther need a second day to kill people? The Purim feast requires festivities over the span of two days. The author needed to justify these two days, hence Esther’s request. Structurally, there is another good reason for a second day of killing. In order to justify the duration of the Purim (two days), an extra day of killing the adversary is inserted. Yet this addition comes at a price. The story loses credibility, because a cloud is thrown over the character of Esther. What kind of identification with the book should one expect? The gender conflict allows readers sensitive to gender issues to have sympathy with the women in the story. Yet the cruelty and vengeance in chapter 9 render Esther and Mordecai less than proper role models of character, integrity and piety (Craig 1995:132-133).

Brenner believes that morality is not the central issue in Esther. That is true regarding Esther’s actions. However, the readers’ reception of Esther’s character introduces the problem of morality. The book illustrates the typical role reversal of which traditional wisdom speaks. These roles are linked to morality, because the reference to reversal implies that one character is more moral than the other. When Brenner suggests that characters mutate into the adversary (understood as being immoral and part of the chaos that disturbs God’s order), morality becomes a problem for readers who are compelled to identify with Esther in one way or another.

The reason for not accepting Esther and Mordecai as proper role models can be found in the readers’ Western European context, which is a society where brutality and revenge are not values people subscribe to. How does the Book of Esther fare in the African context? In a context of gender discrimination and economic oppression, I would say, much better.

C ESTHER AND THREE AFRICAN READINGS

Over the past few years I taught a course on exegesis of the Old Testament and came across three readings of the Book of Esther which illustrate how readers’ circumstances steered their understanding of the book.

1 A Zimbabwean reception

The most recent reading was by a student in Zimbabwe. The behaviour of the Zimbabwean president gave the student a framework with which to interpret Esther. The president’s securing of power by whatever means at his disposal seemed to have affected this particular African student negatively. She found her
reason for composing a message from the Book of Esther in some kind of identification between a situation in the book and the situation of political instability in Zimbabwe in 2000.

a The first line of identification was drawn on the issue of power and the rule of law. A comparison was suggested between King Xerxes and the power kept in the person of a country’s president.

b A second line of identification was felt in a structural resonance between the evil planning of Haman and the King, celebrating in the night, and the Zimbabwean government’s issuing decrees during the night, affecting the lives of ordinary citizens the next morning. She detected a whiff of furtiveness. In a way, her identification of the king with the president (and not with Haman), sidesteps the problem of violence, which is not addressed. At issue was the mere threat of violence, whereas her situation was probably one where she was still trying to figure out an answer to this threat. Haman’s day of reckoning has not yet arrived, so to speak.

c A third line of identification is found between the Jewish opposition to Haman’s decree and opposition to the authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe. The student did not divide the opposition along racial lines, but described the minority of a ruling elite and the majority of subordinates. The issue was not race, but the responsible use of power. The opposition found a structural resonance in the Jews in the Book of Esther: They prayed and fasted like their Jewish compatriots did in the city of Susa, hoping for God to intervene. The fact that the Jews were eventually saved, gave the Zimbabwean student courage to begin speaking out.

d A fourth line of identification was found in a comparison between the Persians who helped the Jews in the end, and a growing unease in government circles about government policies, causing them to help the opposition movement on grass roots level, even to the point of criticising the notorious farm invasions.

The meditation ended with a final call for using power responsibly, alluding to the irresponsible use of power in the story and the irresponsible way the current Zimbabwean government uses power. The power, as in the Book of Esther, is controlled by a few persons who have lost touch with the rest of the people.

2 A rural reception in the Northern province

In a meditation in 1996, an African student from the Northern Province used
Esther 9 to justify the violence of the struggle for liberation. He wrote at a time when the TRC opened apartheid’s can of worms. The student wanted to compare the struggle with the killing of the Persians in order to legitimise the use of violence and Christian participation in it.

He did not want to condemn the violence when people were innocently struck. The ensuing violence was merely a defence mechanism for killing the adversaries before they kill you. He saw this principle illustrated in the Book of Esther. Haman and the Persians manipulated the king to issue a decree to have the Jews killed. Esther and Mordecai had no choice but to defend their people against such an envisaged massacre. There was no other way out. After all, the situation was provoked by the Persians.

Those good reasons for the actions of Esther and Mordecai became reasons for employing violence during the struggle. It was perceived as counter-violence against the state’s violence of tear-gassing, sjambokking, detention without trial, and torturing. The apartheid system was likened to the Persians and the liberation from apartheid was likened to the Jews’ fight against the Persians.

3 An urban reception in the context of extreme poverty

A year later, another African student from a very poor township in Randfontein provided a very crude reception of Esther chapter 9 by explicitly identifying the black people of South Africa with the Jews and the white South Africans with Haman and his ilk. The Book of Esther related directly to his social and religious experience which he thought was similar to that of Esther and Mordecai. He saw God at work for justice in the history of Israel, although his actions were veiled.

He understood the book in terms of race: black versus white. The blacks were associated with poverty (his social context is a township consisting of poorly serviced shacks and poverty everywhere) and the whites were associated with wealth. Because of their wealth, they were regarded as enjoying the favour of God. It is for this reason that he believed that blacks wanted to liberate themselves, whereas whites would defend their wealth and their favoured position as the elected race.

He realised very well that God might not in future be with the blacks, but at least he was behind them in their struggle for liberation. The Jews refraining from plundering served as an indication that hard-won democratic rights should not be used to destroy others.
What struck me in this meditation, was the ease with which black oppressed citizens were identified with the oppression of the Jews and wealthy powerful white citizens with the abuse of power in Haman. An identification of this nature is very powerful, as it clearly designates who possessed the moral high ground. With a religious text such a designation receives ultimate significance. One is either good or damned. There is no rest for the wicked!

By identifying with a Biblical character, the reader can get a grip on how to handle life. It does not imply doing what the character did, but the character can illustrate a certain kind of behaviour. Esther’s so-called revenge can provide a pretext for admitting a motive that is inadmissible in current society. It expresses a kind of wish that should not be taken too literally. In this sense, the revenge visited upon Haman and his subsequent identification with white support for apartheid can be interpreted as a wish for retribution of some sort without expressing it in so many words.

In the three examples one finds an identification of the president of Zimbabwe with King Xerxes, the Jews with black oppressed South Africans and Haman with white people who supported apartheid. The latter identification is to me, to say the least, highly uncomfortable, since I come from a tradition that gave tacit theological support to apartheid. What is important in these identifications, though, is that the president should not be identical to King Xerxes, nor should the (former) oppressed be identical to the Jews and the whites who supported apartheid identical to Haman.

These characters are all separated from us by time as well as culture. Yet, they can be identified with individuals or groups within our current context because they are joined by their interests. President Mugabe is deemed to be ‘consubstantially’ one with king Xerxes, the former black oppressed in South Africa are ‘consubstantially’ one with the Jews and the former oppressing white group is ‘consubstantially’ one with Haman. By which interest are they joined? In the case of Zimbabwe, it is power that provides the basis for identification; in the case of South Africa, it was the bleakness within the oppressive system of apartheid and the eventual salvation that joined the black people with the Jews; and in the case of Haman and the white people, it was the evil of the apartheid system and that of the systematic removal of the Jewish people.

D IDENTIFICATION

According to Kenneth Burke (1969:21), identification means to become consub-
stantially\textsuperscript{1} one with something or someone else. The basis is mutual understanding, so that one can argue that the more two persons understand each other, the more they are united in substance in terms of ideology, emotions, ideas, lifestyle, culture and even possessions. To Burke, it is an acting together, having common sensations, common concepts, images, ideas and attitudes. It does not mean the two persons are identical with one another. It only means that insofar as their interests are joined, they are identified with one another. And the interests do not have to be the same in reality, they only need to be perceived in this light (Burke 1969:20).

Identification with different aspects of a story relates to the influence the story has on the emotions of the reader. The text has a cathartic effect (cf Jauß 1982: 166) on the reader who, by identifying with the characters, achieves a change in conviction or a liberation of feelings. The catharsis in the three examples cited speaks volumes. In all three instances the catharsis is one of frustration in a situation that is perceived as oppressive. By portioning blame, in the latter two, the wish for retribution soothes a powerless anger towards poverty and joblessness. The first one is a result of the loss of understanding of the power play taking place in Zimbabwe. There is not need for retribution yet, as Mugabe is not identified with Haman. He is perceived more as being manipulated than as being the instigator of evil.

A necessary precondition for such a catharsis is a recognition on the side of the reader that he or she is dealing with the experience of another. It is a recognition that there is a distance between the own experience and the text (or the experience of the other that resulted in a text). When the text is enjoyed while this distance is ignored, the reading experience cannot but result in an ideological reception where an idealised model for behaviour is passively taken over (cf Jauß 1982:116).

In this case the persuasive appeal of the text is predominant. Readers are so taken up by the story world and the trials and tribulations of the hero that they do not realise they have entered a world that is constructed in a particular way to ensure a certain response. Readers forget that the world of the text cannot entirely be identified with their own world. The narrative nature of the text is not recognised and there is no contemplative distance from the story. The joy in the exemplary as proof of truth is substituted for the joy of the imaginary that can only provide possibilities. The removal of an aesthetic contemplative distance turns the
Biblical text into a factual account which enables moral identification. When that
distance is not recognised, the reception of the text results in an ideological reception
and a premanufactured consumption.

Is this not what is happening when the issue of women in the ministry is put on
the table and where identification with the Biblical narrative has become the
overriding aspect that denies them any justification for entering the ministry. There
are various reasons for such a close identification between text and readers’ context
(cf Snyman 1998):

1. An epistemological privilege is attached to the Biblical text (cf Van Huyssteen
   1987). The text as the Word of God receives absolute authority. The readers
   are exhorted from the beginning to heed to the advice fostered in the text. In
   other words, there is ‘external’ pressure to take the text seriously.

2. The absolute authority attached to the Biblical text constructs an immediacy of
   perception which ignores the distance between a text and its readers. Readers
   are led to believe that they share with the Biblical text a basic common world
   and a network of beliefs that enable communication and reasoning (cf Forguson
   1989:104). The assumed closeness between the text and the reader facilitates
   an affinity the reader has to develop with the text.

3. The affinity between the text and the reader is strengthened by the assumption
   underlying a literal reading, namely that understanding is based on shared
   meaning and mutual interest in an intersubjective world (cf Rommetveit
   1988:15-16). It is assumed that the text and the reader have a joint commit-
   ment with respect to the meaning of the text. In other words, the characters’
   portrayal in the stories can direct current readers’ behaviour.

The relative closeness conceived between the text and its readers denies the
latter the ability to recognise a distance between them and the ancient Biblical text.
When the text receives an epistemological privilege, it is very difficult for the readers
to recognise that the reading process is in fact unbalanced in that they have to deal
with elements or aspects that are completely strange to their own personal context.
The religious authority ascribed to the text pressurises them to honour its religious
appeal. With nothing important but the Biblical text, the text receives the status of
being sacrosanct, beyond reproach. In this way the Biblical text receives an
absoluteness in its truth claims. And because nothing can be said against it, it
assumes a position of hierarchy.

People, when making moral choices and decisions in their lives, represent
those choices and decisions by telling stories about them. But in order to facilitate those moral choices and decisions, people also need stories. The Bible provides one with a rich resource, and it comes with religious authority. A very good example would be the strong mimetic identification between ancient Israel and a group of people who called themselves ‘Afrikaners’. The Biblical story of Israel, from creation to the post-exilic period, provided a group of people with a paradigm for their own actions, so that, ultimately, they became a derivation of ancient Israel with strong ties between them and the Israel they read of in the pages, so that they were united and for all practical purposes, the same.

Biblical characters seem to have a powerful and convincing demeanour. Stories about great people in the Bible possess the power of an example. It is common knowledge that the story of Israel became exemplary for apartheid as well as for the struggle for liberation from apartheid, although very selectively in both instances!

- In the late nineteen-thirties, within a group of people struggling with poverty and the lack of political power (although not totally powerless), the figure of Joseph was an attractive model on which to base political action and decisions to alleviate the poor. Hitler and Mussolini were likened to Joseph (cf Du Toit 1977:278).

- In the labour movement, on the side of the struggle against apartheid, the figure of Moses was notable. In a praise poem for Fosatu, the predecessor of Cosatu, the following is said (cf Gunner 1989:49):

  Lead us FOSATU to where we are eager to go.
  Even in parliament you shall be our representative
  Go and represent us because you are Moses –
  Through your leadership we shall reach our Canaan ...
  Hero deal with them and throw them into the Red Sea ....

In both instances one has a visible world described in terms of a particular event in the Old Testament. Joseph, with his plans to alleviate the hunger in Egypt, personifies a longed-for leader that would help the Afrikaner. Moses, the liberator of Israel, personifies the leadership role of the trade union movement.

But both identifications pose a problem. In Joseph’s case, the exemplar is extended to include the likes of Hitler and Mussolini. When these words were uttered, no one yet knew what Hitler was really up to. But his and Mussolini’s
earliest fascist actions were known. In the light of history, the identification has become extremely problematical. In Fosatu’s case, the adversaries (the employers and officials of the apartheid state) simulate the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea whereas Canaan is where the workers will have the power.

If identification is based on unity and sameness, the readers or hearers of the story become like the characters in the story, or the characters in the story are turned into replicas of the readers or historical figures in the time of the readers. The latter happens in Joseph’s case. With the association with Hitler and Mussolini, Joseph’s actions are interpreted along the lines of their conduct. In other words, if one wanted to see what a twentieth century Joseph looked like, one could look at them. In Fosatu’s case, the hero is equated with Moses, and the adversaries with the drowning Egyptians. The hearers become the characters themselves.

In following the principle of interpreting the strange and unknown in terms of the known, one seems instinctively to turn the characters into persons one can recognise. This is proper, as long as one realises it can be different once one adds other aspects, especially historical ones. However, as long as one stays with the ‘basic instincts’, this kind of identification becomes very problematical and even uncomfortable. The fascism of Hitler and Mussolini makes Totius’ association with Joseph incredulous. The implication of the equation of the Egyptians with the employers and the apartheid state, when taken to its consequences, is suggestive of a sphere where life has no value, especially if you have God behind you.

E STORIES AND THE MORAL FORCE OF IDENTIFICATION

The use of Biblical figures and images is very potent, and in not drawing the consequences in the presentation itself, the audiences are left to draw their own conclusions. This use of Biblical figures as exemplary models is in line with the nature of story-telling. In this regard, Canonici (1995:14) argues that stories do not present a systematic exposition of dogma or belief systems, nor do they explain morality, social organisation or knowledge. Stories only reveal these aspects indirectly, because they are dramatic representations that mirror the ancient and common wisdom of the group in whose midst the stories are produced. They teach social and moral values through the actions of the characters, but are seldom explicit in what they reveal. Most of the time the audience has to infer from the actions what is being taught or revealed. Most of the time, values, norms
and wisdom are imparted through the fostering of a culture of feelings engendered by a demonstration of the playing of social forces and motivations (Canonici 1995:21).

This is what narratives do. They moralise. The story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible is a story about a contest between chaos and order, like the case in the typical traditional African story. It exhibits an interest in a social system which creates the possibility of conceiving all kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles and resolutions. As a story these series of events point to a moral. It gives the events a significance they would not have had when listed as a mere sequence. For this reason, Hayden White (1987:14) makes the important remark that a narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralise* the events of which it treats. He even argues that narrativity (factual and fictional story-telling) is intimately related to, and is the function of, the impulse to moralise reality.

‘Moralising’ can be interpreted as an understanding of human actions in the light of the actions and demands of God where morality is intimately linked to a divine being. However, to understand the idea of ‘moralising’, which is not intended to mean ‘moral lessons’, let us briefly have a secular look at it. Tappan (1991:9) observes that one can never narrativise without moralising at the same time. He says that people make moral choices and decisions in their lives by presenting their choices and decisions in story form. The narrative format endows their choices and decisions with meaning. The fundamental dimension of stories is time and relationship, two elements also constitutive of human experience. He says (1991:8):

> Whenever it is necessary to report ‘the way it really happened,’ therefore, the natural impulse is to tell a story, to compose a narrative that recounts the actions and events of interest in some kind of temporal sequence. Such a story, however, does more than outline a series of incidents; it also places those incidents in a particular narrative context, thereby giving meaning to the human experience of temporality and personal action .... Narrative is thus an essential means by which human experience is represented and interpreted, whether it is as mundane as a trip to the grocery store or as monumental as a moral crisis that changes one’s life forever ....

A story endows a certain sequence of events with moral meaning. A story accords a sequence of events with a kind of legitimacy and meaning that would justify and sustain the moral perspective on behalf of which it was written or told
in the first place (Tappan 1991:9). A story is told because there are good reasons for it to be told. An author, by telling (or writing) a story, gives meaning to those events. This is achieved by imposing a narrative form and plot on the sequence of events so that those events receive meaning, value and coherence that only the story can give.

The Book of Esther expresses an experience of a group of people in exile that felt threatened by their circumstances. The acts of the characters give a certain legitimacy to the sequence of the events and the outcome of the story. Vashti is removed in order to get a Jewish girl in the palace so that Haman’s planned calamity can be averted by a woman directly linked to the seat of power. On another level the story gives content to the celebration of Purim, a feast celebrating deliverance from an enemy. In terms of the story, Esther acts wisely. She speaks at the right time so that Haman’s evil is dramatically revealed. One would think, however, that the removal of Haman from the scene is enough and that the story can end. It does not, and it seems as if Esther seeks further revenge. Not only are the ten sons of Haman killed and their bodies exposed, but she asks for a second day. Is she bloodthirsty? From a perspective infused with a Bill of Human Rights, she seems to be. But within the story, she has to ensure that Haman’s offspring does not present a problem later on, as the conflict with Haman is merely the final act of a religious conflict began with the Amalekites at the entrance into Canaan.

F NARRATIVE RATIONALITY

Would narrativity not demand an approach that will do justice to a text’s narrative character? Reading the Bible with the idea of a message for all times and centuries inevitably leads not only to an a-historical reading of the text, but it also causes the Biblical text to be used for purposes it never was intended for, namely inferring rules for the social order of society (i.e. the church). The text is treated as a law code and proof for existing rules in society is found in certain Biblical texts which serve as expressions of self-evident propositions that are not related to the contexts that produced them. This approach can be linked to what Fisher (1987:59-60) calls a rational-world paradigm. Regarding the role of women in the ministries, readers would search for clear-cut inferential or implicative structures that would allow or disallow women entering the ministry.

The question is whether reading the Biblical text as a law code is in line with
what most of the Biblical texts were intended for. Regardless of whether the Bible is seen as divine revelation or human acts, the fact is that more than half of the texts constitute stories of groups of people and their deity. It seems to me more sensible that the preponderance of stories in the Bible should admonish what Fisher (1987:63) calls a narrative-world paradigm.

The main metaphor of the narrative paradigm is a *Homo (sic) narrans* who creates and communicates symbols as stories in order to structure human experience and to induce others to dwell in the story worlds with the aim of establishing ways of living in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one’s life (Fisher 1987:63). When narrative is the main form of communication, recounting takes the form of history, biography or autobiography. Accounting for human (and divine) action and choices takes the form of theoretical explanation or argument, expressed in poetic forms (drama, poetry, novel). The act of recounting and accounting for constitutes in itself a story we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life-world. The character of the narrator, the conflicts, the resolutions and the styles may vary, but each mode relates a truth about the human condition.

The key to understanding the idea of narrativity in the Bible would be the notion of a ‘meaningful life-world’. A narrative imposes meaning on a series of events that comprise its story. The reality of these events does not consist in the fact that they could have occurred, but that they have found structure in a chronologically ordered sequence, a sequence which would have received another order if the author attached another significance to the events. The reality created by the ordered sequence wears the mask of a meaning. The desire to moralise gives the narration closure, a completeness or fullness an audience can only imagine, but never experience.

The demand for closure in a story is a demand for moral meaning, not for minute legalistic principles structuring society. It is a demand that the sequence of events be assessed for their significance as elements of a moral drama, and not as principles of a code of law.

**CONCLUSION**

The brief discussion of the reception of Esther’s character illustrates the pitfalls of identifying with Biblical characters who operated in a society whose values differ considerably from ours, even when one proclaims with the story a line of
continuity in terms of religious commitment. There are aspects in the story that through lapse of time have become simply unacceptable, even when the characters have a powerful and convincing demeanour. Their use is in correspondence with the nature of story-telling, but they do not explain a particular doctrine or principle. In stories, the explanation is done in terms of narrative rationality, a (new?) paradigm that readers of the Bible can use fruitfully. This paradigm inquires into a logic of good reasons where reasons are conceived as those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by the text (Fisher 1987:107). Warrant means here that which authorises, sanctions, or justifies beliefs, attitudes or actions. Those reasons are textual as well as extratextual as readers struggle with a text in terms of their own context.

The Book of Esther indicates that the advice fostered in the text can be quite problematical if accepted without due consideration of the readers’ own context. The reason readers feel uncomfortable with advice fostered by a text is a changed context, be it social, cultural, economic and/or political. It makes a difference when one reads a text as part of a ruling elite or as part of the ‘suffering’ subordinates.

Because of a pious eagerness to honour the religious appeal of the text, one should remind oneself of the fact that one is dealing with an unbalanced manoeuvre. Readers move from the known context into the unknown territory of the stories of the Bible that were produced in contexts we find difficult to gauge because of a lack of knowledge and information. It is of the utmost importance that one should recognise the distance between a reader and the text. Without that distance, the text achieves an epistemological privilege enabling readers to equate their situation with that of the text. Then it is easy for someone to garner support for an exclusion of women by claiming he or she is merely saying what the Bible is saying.

Within this realm, the Biblical text becomes a storehouse of facts which the reader of the Bible must systematise in a set of doctrines. The narrative character of the ancient stories in the Bible is completely denied and readers are denied retelling those stories as stories that shape their lives. Instead, the stories are reduced to principles without a context. Readers are forced to identify with these principles in a premanufactured consumption of the text.

Narrativity is part of being human. As Fisher suggests (1987:66), narratives enable us to understand the actions of others because we live out narratives in our
lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of these narratives. The absence of the ability to narrate indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself.

NOTES

1 The word ‘consubstantiality’ is based on a doctrine according to which at the eucharist the substance of Christ’s body exists together with the substance of bread, and in like manner the substance of his blood together with the substance of wine. Consubstantiality is also associated with the concept of the trinity, expressing the view that the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as Son of God is consubstantial with the God as Father. What the Father is in divinity, that is what the Son and the Holy Spirit are also.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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