

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hermeneutic issues raised by our reading of 1 John in the Zulu context.

7.1 Introduction

Hillman (1993:31) rightly points out that all people exist only in limited historical periods, and within concrete cultural contexts, all with their respective symbols system of communication, symbols which would convey no meaning to anybody, unless a society of people agreed on what the symbols stand for, as far as they were concerned (Verryn 1982:2). Hillman further states that God's dynamic self-communication always has an incarnational tendency. There is an indispensable need for fleshly visibility, audibility and tangibility in particular historical and cultural forms capable of mediating the meaning of God's message in the respective times and contexts of each distinctive people (Hillman 1993:31).

Any reading of the Bible presupposes the interpretation of the very text that is being read. The interpretation also depends on the inter-action between the text and the reader (Suggit 1997:77). A valid hermeneutic therefore is dependent on the following condition being met. First, awareness that no one approaches the text from a neutral standpoint. We all come to it already (culturally) programmed (West 1994:18). Our cultural programming, which gives us our cultural identity, is imposed upon us.

Cupitt (1990:161) explains how this programming takes place. He states that everyone is and has to be a member of a language-group because a person's

own identity is bound up with her mother-tongue; because culture is undeniably intimately linked to language; because language is never a neutral communication-medium but is very highly ideologically loaded, and because we learn language in idioms, in language games and in cultural practices. All these play a significant role in constituting each person as he or she is. Therefore, as Bosch (1980) rightly points out we all involuntarily read from within a specific socio-historical context, and then we project our own convictions back into the Bible (in Mouton 1994: 359).

What is emphasised by these scholars is the effect of context and identity on individuals and groups in their reading of the Bible, something that warns us of the danger of assuming that one can adopt an absolute view of 'what the Bible says'. We read the Bible through the windows shaped by our own culture, our education, and our social and financial situation. The danger begins when we start to assume that our own particular lenses are the only ones that are valid.

Second, readers or hearers must at all times be prepared to examine and reconsider their beliefs and attitudes in response to the text (Suggit 1997:77). Readers must be committed to critically analysing and examining their own culture and the subjective conditionings it imposes upon them. The difficulty that will be faced by each reader relates to what he or she takes as his point of departure. If, as Ukpong (1995:5) points out, the reader consciously takes his/her socio-cultural context as a point of departure, this then would be reflected in the outcome of his/her reading. If his/her point of departure arises from his/her Christian orientation, that as well would reflect itself in the end product of the reading process. One has got to come clear why one identifies

two points of departures. The researcher is not naïve to the fact that we are all culturally conditioned. The question the researcher wants to raise is towards which of these are we strongly oriented? That in the last analysis is what determines our approach and the outcome of our reading. Having discussed above the two preconditions for reading, an important hermeneutic question we need now to consider concerns the reader.

7.2 Who is the reader?

Botha (1992:25-6) mentions that the active and creative role of the reader in any act of interpretation and, subsequently, a renewed emphasis on the importance of context, is widely recognised by scholars in literary criticism, rhetorical studies, and biblical studies. Who is the reader? is a very apt question that needs to be clarified before we proceed. Botha et al (1998:8) raise the following questions, which are being asked in reader-response criticism. (1) Is reading primarily an individual or social experience? (2) Which dominates the reading experience, the text or the reader? (3) Is ‘the reader’ an expert reader or an ordinary reader?

Before venturing to answer these questions, let us note what Mgojo (1986:114) says that the community has to act as the formulator of theology, and Cochrane (1994:13) emphasises that it is from the base (community) that the living force of contextual theology will have to come. What these theologians say underline the importance of reading and theologising in context.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on what it means to read 1 John in a Zulu context and the hermeneutical issues raised by this kind of reading. Who

is the reader? Three kinds of readers are envisaged in the context of thesis. Apart from discussing here the possible advantages and disadvantages of these readers due to their varying vantage points and background, we will in the ensuing discussion narrow ourselves to one reader. These readers represent the various perspectives from which contextual reading could be undertaken.

First, the reader could be an expert or a trained person who shares to a certain degree the symbolic universe of Zulu people, a category that fits the researcher. Second, the reader could be a trained reader from outside the context, who attempts to read the text ‘with the people’ (West 1994:20). Third, the reader could be an ordinary Zulu person endeavouring to make sense of the text of 1 John in his/her context.

7.2.1 Reader One (the theologically trained Zulu person)

It has already been pointed out that the researcher fits in the first category, that is, of a trained reader within the context of Zulu people. This reader has to be understood as the reader-in-context (Ukpong 1995:5) in that he shares the socio-cultural context and world-view of the Zulu people within whose context he seeks to do the reading of 1 John. This reader also shares tensions and opposition within himself, as he does what Long (1994:402) calls the crucial act of self-disclosure.

The reader is first, a Christian, a priest, a teacher of the faith, a counsellor, a person of prayer, a fervent believer in evangelism, and a leader of a

congregation. Second, an African, to be precise, a Zulu, who has been equipped with various skills for reading and interpreting the Bible. This raises a very serious tension for the reader. The tension arisen from the fact that even though he shares in the symbolic universe of Zulu people, the core of what constitutes his universe is legitimated by his new orientation and Christian identity and all that goes with it.

Another source of constant tension arises from the suspicion he has of the western garb with which texts of scripture are usually clothed and the hegemonic control (Draper 1998:3) that those who have been trained in western methods of interpretation think they have over others. The reader is at the same time suspicious of the cloak with which African theologians are uncritically attempting to re-dress and obfuscate the text of scripture, under the guise of Africanisation, inculturation, indigenisation, and contextualisation.

The reader is rather encouraged by the fact that by belonging to the wider circle of theological thinking, he has a tinge of that influence which frees him from the shackles of contextual bondage and minimises his biases. But he is also aware of the hegemonic attitude and position with which he approaches the text and the condescending manner that might have on his context.

7.2.2 Reader Two (the trained reader ‘reading with the people’)

Reader two has a dual problem. Not only is she/he seeking to read the text of 1 John, which originated from a different context from her/his but also she/he is trying to read this in another context foreign to his/hers – the Zulu context. The world of the text can to a certain degree be hypothetically worked out with the help of the bulk of information that has been made available but the Zulu context is a living organism influencing people here and now.

One is not suggesting that it is impossible to read the text if one is from a different context. Reading in another context other than one’s own requires time, an attitude of openness, a willingness to be partially constituted (West 1999:45), a willingness to learn, and a willingness to be transformed by what one discovers.

A reader from outside the context has to guard against the danger of ethnocentrism (Kraft 1979) and a condescending superiority, which can only further her/his estrangement and biases. The training, which this reader brings to the task, whilst it places her/him in an advantageous position, can also pose serious problems to being open to new ideas and perceptions. Theologians know the golden rule given by C.E. Braaten (1968), that is, to be self-conscious about their own presuppositions (in Stanton 1977:61).

West (1994:19) has outlined one of the temptations of trained readers as having a tendency to read for the people without hearing them. This tendency shows itself in the temptation to interpret for ordinary readers or in simply and uncritically accepting the interpretations of ordinary people. In order to

avoid pretending to be hearing what ordinary readers are saying in the process of reading, West (1994:20) suggests that the trained readers should engage in the process of reading with the people.

This kind of reading means that trained readers acknowledge the privilege and power their training gives them in the group. It also means that trained readers must empower ordinary readers to discover and then to acknowledge their own identity and the value and significance of their own contributions and experiences (West 1994:20). In this process of 'reading with', West points out that all are active and all are subjects.

While one finds West's approach laudable because of one's inclinations towards it, a concern should however be voiced. A trained reader reading with ordinary people will always find himself or herself in a difficult position. The expert /trained reader stands in a hegemonic position over the people he is reading with. Without meaning to superimpose his/her knowledge over the ordinary reading she/he will in very subtle ways do just that.

In fact, what causes suspicion in the researcher is admitted by West himself when he says the trained reader should acknowledge the privilege and power their training gives them (West 1994:20). This is not like dealing with presuppositions, where awareness assists in keeping the theologian close to being objective. The situation here presents itself, or should we say superimposes itself on the trained reader. The end result is that a condescending kind of attitudes surfaces as the trained reader begins to assume the role of empowerer. One may be unfairly critical in this because

the process, which West describes, is closer to what the researcher is wrestling with.

In the process of 'reading with', especially when the trained reader is from outside that particular context, two very different symbolic universes are brought together. What is likely to happen is what the Comaroffs call the symbolic transfer whereby those of a weaker culture will appropriate symbols from the imposing culture into the belief system of their own (Balcomb 1998:9-10). Would they be appropriating symbols emanating from the text or from the world of the reader? Reading of the text by an outsider to a particular context provides a situation of confrontation. Such a confrontation even though unequally executed is never a one-sided venture, which touches one and leaves the other. Both are equally and transformed by their contact with each other (Draper 1998:3). The extent to which transformation takes place would be determined by the extent of the influence exerted by one over the other.

7.2.3 Reader Three (the ordinary Zulu reader)

The third scenario involves 'real readers' embedded in their own concrete social location. The statements that all theology is contextual theology (Mosala 1985:104), rooted in the community's experience of faith (Mgojo 1986:114) emphasise the importance of 'real readers' in the process of formulating a contextual theology. In contextual theology, interpretation and meanings are shaped within communities.

This is also an apt reminder as West rightly points out, that it is not only the professionally trained theologians that do theology and Biblical interpretation (in Botha 1994:293). This leads us to focusing on our third reader/s. We suggest untrained Zulu reader/s venturing to read 1 John, a document which is ideologically pregnant. These readers have no other conditioning except that of their culture, and they bring with them variety and a vast range of experiences to the reading of the Bible (West 1955: 66). In their reading they are bound to come up with variegated interpretations, which are informed by the angles from which they approached the text. The host of difficulties in their regard outweighs the apparent advantages. 1. The text being read is foreign in origin. It was conceptualised and concretised outside their culture almost two thousand years ago. That on its own constitutes a huge hermeneutical barrier. 2. Without knowledge of the background and symbols the author of 1 John employs, they are bound to read into the text their own interpretation and claim them to be what scripture is saying. 3. The lack of interpretative skills also impoverishes their reading venture. 4. In this kind of reading the text can easily be compromised to individual interpretation.

If a trained reader is involved reading with ordinary readers, to ensure that the text is not mutilated and contextualised in an arbitrary manner, it is incumbent upon the trained reader to enter as an equal and then bring his/her critical skills to bear upon the reading process. Our approach differs slightly in that our reading within a Zulu context of this dissertation is with the view to establishing congruence so that a hermeneutical bridge between the two symbolic universes may be established. We do however share the same convictions with West that a reading of this nature needs to be critically conducted, a task that can only be executed by the trained reader.

7.3 Hermeneutics in context

Reading understood in its proper perspective embodies interpretation, that is, when we read, we are engaged in hermeneutics. The focus of this study is therefore on practical hermeneutic issues emanating from the perspective of the reader, in this case a Zulu person embedded in his concrete cultural context. Smit (1994:309) points out that it is an illusion to think that we are ‘innocent’ readers without presuppositions. David Tracy puts it even more succinctly when he says that there is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text (in West 1992:4). The Zulu person brings his/her baggage to the reading process. The text which she/he reads, that is, 1 John, is itself a communicative device from the past, first intended for the original readers and therefore ideologically loaded but which by divine permission has come to address the modern reader as well.

We think that Wink is right in saying that the texts of the Bible speak to practical issues about life, especially life in the community (in West 1995:61). Therefore, a theological hermeneutic that is required is one that will speak meaningfully to the concrete situations of the readers or else it will be rendered irrelevant. The issues raised by this study are not so much on a literary but sociological basis, that is, what lies ‘behind the text’ (West 1995:18) one is reading.

In chapter four and five of this study it became clear that the same dynamics that obtained in the original reading or construction of the text, apply in the reading of the same in a new context but with some variation. The modern reader attempts to understand this text within his own situation, which is very

different from the situation of the original readers. His or her reading of the text, then, as Croatto points out is done from a given situation - from and in a context that is no longer that of the first addressees of the text. The reader interrogates the text from and in the reader's own being and concerns - not in order to impose an extraneous meaning, but in order to interpret the text itself (in West 1995:157).

Croatto's discussion of the Bible as the text upon which we focus regardless of the context we find ourselves in, is very important. By saying this Croatto does not mean to disregard the fact that the very text from which re-readings flow (in West 1995:162) is full of very implicit assumptions, which are not at the disposal of the modern reader.

It is these implicit assumptions that force the reader to search behind the text with the hope of finding more information that sheds light on the text as it stands. Whilst it is important to note the difficulty of trying to get what is 'behind' the text, we believe also that it is not easy to understand the message without attempting to get a slight glimpse of (into) the socio-historical world within which it was first conceptualised and constructed. The past should be sought for in order that it may inform the present. If that does not happen then Croatto's critique that the historical-critical method and other such like it run the risk of shutting up the message of the Bible in the past by clinging to the intention of the author or redactor as the sole meaning (in West 1995:163), is justified.

A relevant hermeneutic we propose will be one that is deeply rooted and incarnated in the context of the readers. Draper like Schillebeeckx points out:

incarnation is inconceivable in the abstract: it can only be incarnation into membership of a specific and particular community and world-view; into a network of human and material relations (in Cochrane 1994:11-2). A deeply incarnational approach is bound to be effective in that it will be based on concreteness rather than abstractness.

If the reader is a professional reading with the people, it is incumbent upon him or her to begin from the known and proceed to the unknown (Mijoga 1996:61). The known here stands for the life situation of the people. This kind of reading requires some understanding of the symbolic universe of the first readers of the text as well as that of the present readers of the text and the situation obtaining at the time of reading the text. These are all relevant in the reading exercise for they exert influence upon each other.

The reading of the Bible cannot be seen as a one-way process, but a dialectical one. Draper (1999:14) referring to the missionaries' entry with the Bible into Africa, points out that the reception of the Bible must be seen as a dialectical process, an unequal one in many respects to be sure, but nevertheless a more intricate, contested and mutual process than has usually been recognised.

Voelz referring to the impact of context on readers (receptors) says that they themselves are complexes of beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and so on. When they engage in reading which is an interpretive venture, these factors are activated and brought into connection with a text, as (reading) interpretation proceeds, they become part of the very matrix for textual interpretation (Voelz 1999:159). For genuine reading to take place, one must

begin with the culture of the receiver and imagine a dialectical approach to the relation between text and context (culture) in which the reading process of the text is gradually disengaged from its previous cultural embeddedness and is allowed to take on new forms consonant with the new cultural setting.

7.4 Describing the process

We have attempted in the previous chapters to explore the various contours discernible in contextual reading. ‘Reading’ conjures up a number of expectations among readers. There will be those who see the text as the monopoly of academicians who possess exegetical and hermeneutical skills. As Botha (1994:293) rightly notes, it is no longer only the professionally trained theologians that do theology and Biblical interpretation. There are other important role player in the production of meaning – the ordinary readers.

If the text is dealt with in the academic echelons of university, reading becomes rather an easier exercise because in that context it would probably mean tracing the accumulated legacy of the nineteen hundred years of reading (Smit 1994:315). But the pragmatic reading of the text within the situation of a particular people poses enormous challenges. How then do we read an ancient document in a new social context with ordinary readers? This in the reading venture becomes an important hermeneutical issue. We will therefore offer a description of the reading process as we see it.

Reading in the context of this thesis refers not to an individual venture but a reading with people embedded within a particular social location and reality-

the Zulu context. Therefore, reader and receptor belong together; they are the reading core, that is, those who are involved in the actual reading of the text of 1 John. The researcher will not offer a detailed description of the actual reading process but what he envisages as steps to be followed by those who read with others.

As reader/receptor their aim is to make sense of 1 John and to discover what message it has for them. Without participating in some context, it is virtually impossible to make sense of the Biblical message. Esler (1994:22) is right in pleading for the piercing of the veil of familiarity with which the text has been wrapped. He goes on to state that if we do not recognise the cultural gap and seek to bridge it, we are like boorish and uncomprehending visitors to a foreign country who make no attempt to understand local customs and institutions. An important hermeneutical question is: Which context should dominate in this process?

7.5 Which dominates the reading experience, is it the text or the reader?

Texts are essentially a means of communication. They convey thoughts and stimulate reactions within the (readers) receptors with a greater or lesser degree of intentionality (Voelz 1999:157). During the process of interpretation, the reader is hardly passive. Vorster (1991) rightly states that the text 'operates' on the reader, which causes him to respond (in Le Roux 1994:12).

As the text of 1 John is read in a Zulu context, the reader activates certain signifiers whom he or she detects in the text. An interactive (Vorster 1991) or dialectical process (Draper 1999) is envisaged as signifiers within the reader's own context are activated and as each begins to engage creatively with the other. As a result, the reader is in a real sense, constructing (and not only re-constructing) the text which is being read (Voelz 1999:159) but he or she is also being remade by the text he or she is reading. The dialectical relationship between the symbolic universes of the text and that of Zulu people will provide vital clues to a theological hermeneutic which respects the plurality of readings of the text.

The interaction between the text and the contextual readers (i.e. readers embedded in their social context) will begin at a very slow pace as the latter try to decipher meanings encoded in the text. The process is accelerated as certain symbols are triggered in the process. However, where inadequate symbols are simply affirmed, distortion takes place, and the more inadequate the symbol, the greater the distortion (Macquarrie 1977:162)

This raises a hermeneutical issue since symbols or words cannot be interpreted independently of their context. Every symbol belongs within a stream of history. What needs noting is that no symbols have exactly the same meaning in any two cultures. The context determines the meaning given to each symbol. In the case of symbols activated in the text during the reading process, readers should look for correlative symbols activated within their cultural context. The correlativeness of these should be critically examined before a claim can be made that the symbol concerned embodied the same meaning as the one encapsulated in the ancient text.

The text of 1 John and its context are inextricably interwoven, constituting an indivisible phenomenon. For that reason, we have got to 'read context' if we want to read the text adequately (Botha 1994:292). As it crosses the cultural boundary and enters into a Zulu context, it encounters a context, which is significantly different from its own. As a result a plurality of readings and interpretations are made possible. Both the text and the reader play a significant role in the production of meaning (Ukpong 1995:10).

The plurality of interpretations cannot be divorced from the contexts from which they emanate. The hermeneutic significance of particular contexts would therefore lie in the correlation between contemporary interpretations and classic interpretations of the text (Cochrane 1994:12). The involvement of trained readers reading with people should ensure that the faithful commitment to the critical mode of reading the Bible (West 1992:6) is not lost in the reading process. A critical hermeneutic that recognises and takes seriously the significant understandings emanating from local contexts, would facilitate the appreciation and integration of local thoughts, experiences and traditions into their foundational theological statements.

If criticalness is divorced from the reading process then obviously the resultant meaning will be completely foreign and divorced from the intended meaning of the text or the meaning of the symbols in the new context. The only time it is possible to transfer meaning from one context to the other is when the words and symbols used in the ancient document have meanings consonant with theirs in the new context. In such cases easy access is granted. Even this should not be taken for granted. The reader should constantly

engage his or her critical skills to ensure that a valid hermeneutical significance of these symbols is established.

Some of the symbols that were investigated in this study show that between the universes of 1 John and Zulu people, there exist symbols whose meaning is almost consonant with each other. But where cultural specific meanings have to be derived, it is necessary that a critical search for such meanings within that specific culture be conducted. Finding conventional symbols which appropriately express the meanings embodied in the text will enhance reader understanding.

The recognition given to the reader's embeddedness within a social context means that the text has to be presented, interpreted and integrated in such a way that the reader can truly claim to have met God in Jesus Christ and in the unity of the Holy Spirit in his/her own context. Therefore, a hermeneutic that ignores the influence of the reader's culture on the person's attempt to understand scripture, is seriously deficient (Kraft 1979:143). But a proper hermeneutic should involve a process whereby there is a dynamic interaction between the reader or readers and the text and context.

Kraft (1979:144) has aptly expressed that a concern for the contextualisation of Biblical message is a concern that scriptural meanings get all the way across what might be pictured as a 'hermeneutical bridge' into the real-life contexts of ordinary people. In a 'multi-contextual reality' (Vergeer 1994:391) such as obtaining in the present day South Africa, a 'hermeneutics of dialogue' is the only logical approach when endeavouring to read ancient documents within a new cultural context. There is nothing condescending

about the approach suggested, all it seeks to do is discover and integrate as well as create a new reality with fresh insights and interpretations of scripture. Berger and Luckmann (1966:37) state that understanding of language is essential for any understanding of everyday reality. Since language plays such a key role in the process of reading, understanding of the language of the local people within which such reading takes place becomes then a hermeneutical requirement.

7.6 Language as a hermeneutic requirement

According to Cupitt (1990:163) the whole of our life is lived inside the influx of language and history, language preceding history. For people to communicate, language is required. Therefore, as Tlaba (1995:66) states language whether written or spoken, whether in gestures or symbols of one kind or another, all of which are intended to signify something to others which one experiences internally or externally, is the principal means of communication between people.

Language comprises a system of signifiers that are designed to evoke conceptual signifieds in the minds of receptors. Such signifieds, according to Voelz (1999:157) which are embraced by a given community and learned by its members at various stages in life, are called forth as people attempt to express conceptual signifieds, which themselves arise in their minds as they interact with their environment.

If two speakers belong to the same language group, and the same language that pervades their entire social world runs through each one's head, then the

capacity for mutual understanding is secured by the public character of linguistic meaning (Cupitt 1990:161). Language enables people to make symbolical statements to represent that which they perceive to be reality, which in fact represents reality for the people in that context (Sanneh 1993:144). Language therefore makes one feel one has an inside (Cupitt 1990:159). If language is the vehicle through which people are allowed to have the inside of a particular culture, then language becomes an important hermeneutical requirement.

If one does not possess this feeling of having the inside, then a hermeneutical question is raised: how can one be sure that the thoughts and feelings that one encoded into the language one has just transmitted are being faithfully reproduced in the other thoughts and feelings into which the receiver at the far end decodes one's statement (Cupitt 1990:161). This statement assumes that the text is read and communicated by someone from one culture into another culture. If no attempt has been made to acquaint oneself with the culture and the dynamics of the culture as they are embodied in the language, then one can be sure that miscommunication is bound to take place (Schreier 1994:16).

It is therefore becoming increasingly clear that to penetrate a local culture, there is a need to learn not only the language but also the social values, which language embodies and in which it is written. A living language is always cultural in that it is freighted with a set of local valuations and practices. Learning the language, we learn the local customs and assumptions. So the programming within which our identity is constituted is in effect our linguistic programming, our induction into the framework of human

communication (Cupitt 1990:161). If language is so central in understanding a culture of the people then, Berger and Luckmann (1966:37) are right in contending that in the process of reading in the context of a particular people, learning the local language is a hermeneutical requirement essential for an understanding of the reality of everyday life.