

# Postcolonial and Contrapuntal Reading of Revelation 22:1-5

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The task of this article is to offer a postcolonial reading of Revelation 22:1-5, using especially a contrapuntal approach. This method will engage in a dialogue between the Johannine apocalyptic text and a Kikuyu myth about the creation of a garden of peaceful life. Before this dialogue, methodological presuppositions of this study will be explained, underlying the relevance of a postcolonial reading to contextual interpretations of the Bible. The theoretical framework of this paper is based on previous studies by Edward Said (1993), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981), Musa Dube (1998) and Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah (1998), though Said represents the major driving force behind the present study. Its key terms include Bible, Contrapuntal, Garden, Kikuyu, Postcolonial, and Revelation. The reason behind the use of Revelation which anticipates the destruction and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth is the fact that, in postcolonial studies, there is a common belief that African culture has been destroyed, requiring a renewal of it. A new reading and a new understanding of African traditions is paramount.

## Introduction

Africa has entered a new era of postcolonialism, in which her biblical scholars are challenged to discern new approaches and insights to propel biblical scholarship into the twenty-first century. As Gerald West (1995:15) puts it, 'the older ways of understanding and practice, even experience itself, no longer work'. Therefore a new way of interpreting the Bible in Africa becomes necessary, particularly because African states have gained their political independence creating a new context for biblical studies within our present situation. The task of this article is to formulate a theory for African biblical scholarship and then use it to read the passage (Rev. 22:1-5) from a postcolonial point of view in dialogue with an African narrative. In the nineteenth century the Bible played an important part in the legitimation of colonialism in that it constructed a 'self-validating' world in which empire and domination appeared normative and permanent. While the Bible is 'reducible to a sociological current', it is equally important to recognise that it cannot be read in isolation from our (African) context. Therefore we seek a reading of

Revelation 22:1-5 within our own context of a Kikuyu myth of creation of a garden with all that is necessary for life. To achieve our goals, the following steps will be taken: (I) we will start by explaining methodological presuppositions; (II) we will explain a postcolonial theoretical approach for the contextual interpretation of the Bible using various Majority World scholars as seminal thinkers (Dube, 1998, Sugirtharajah, 1998, Ngugi, 1981) and in particular Edward Said (1993) by presenting their views on postcolonial criticism in the most selective and condensed form possible; (III) we shall then formulate our theory and use it in interpreting our passage of interest.

### **Methodological Presuppositions**

In the recent past, as African biblical scholars, we have come to realize that the Bible legitimated the imperial assumption of control of African culture (Dickson 1984:74-85). This has raised the question of how to deal with the Bible as a text that is so zealously taught and read in Africa. Such a question sought its answers within the paradigm of contextualisation as the means for biblical interpretations within postcolonial situations. This involves taking time to investigate who we are and our location and history in a postcolonial society. Draper argues that 'we recognize our specific location at the end of a long history of colonial domination, cultural dispossession and economic exploitation' (2002:16). We have come to recognize the need to affirm our culture and identity, especially in the field of biblical studies and to study a text that has often been used as a tool of domination, and largely accepted by the majority. As a result there is a danger that in reading the Bible, Africans will continue to internalise and perpetuate their own oppressions. Hence we have undertaken contextual reading strategies and with them, new methodologies which have overshadowed the more traditional methods of research such as form, text and source criticisms and which had absolutized the context of the origin of the text and simply omitted the context of the reader as relevant for the meaning of the text. Recognizing the importance of the context of the reader raises the question of how to relate the two contexts as both contribute to the creation of the meaning of the text.

No longer can biblical studies exist in isolation from the milieu of cultural studies of groups, practices and discourses found in, and not limited to, literary discourses in the colonised societies. This would mean that the process of Bible interpretation in postcolonial Africa is a 'conversation' in line with Gadamer's

use of language as the medium of hermeneutic experience (1989:383-491). This is because two cultures will be in a conversation where each can interrogate the other. In African tradition what has been going on (in myths and other narratives) for a long time has an important influence on what is happening at present. As African readers of the Bible, therefore, we have turned to methods common in our own contexts such as ‘postcolonial theories’ of research and practiced them to interpret the Bible. Boer (1998) writing on postcolonial biblical criticism states that—

Biblical studies is itself a subset of religion, which belongs to the superstructure of the totality of society, sharing that space with art, culture, philosophy, politics and ideology...; it is then dependent upon the economic forms and social relations of that society, yet it may also anticipate possible future forms of social and economic organization (1998:43).

As a result of this new birth, many scholars in the Majority World have embraced the postcolonial criticism which has now spread across the academic world. Since biblical scholars in this World have turned to this mode of interpreting the Bible, probably for the first time in the history of biblical scholarship, the Majority World is placed at the centre of its dominant discourse. We need to read the Bible from the Majority World’s perspective rather than from the Western World’s perspective. This research has the potential to usher in another method of approaching Bible, particularly in postcolonial Africa—a method developed within the context of a comparative approach to biblical interpretations in Africa and which has been in use in comparative religions (Dickson, 1984: 85). We therefore need to investigate the development of the comparative and inculturation approaches in order to be able to locate our approach within African biblical scholarship.

### **The Comparative and Inculturation Approaches**

African religion and culture were condemned as demonic and immoral and therefore required to be phased out, before Christianity could take roots in Africa (cf. Bewes, 1952:19-20). For Bewes, African religious life was similar to that great, vague and nebulous inheritance of animism which needed to be replaced. In response to such an attitude to African religion and culture a number of missionaries and some African theologians were sympathetic to the

African cause. As a result, they were able to develop methods that showed a correction between African traditions and Christianity. As Upkong (2000:12) argues, both these groups undertook research that sought to legitimize African religion and culture by way of comparative studies carried out within the framework of comparative religions and philosophy. The main purpose of this endeavour was to show continuities and discontinuities between African religions and the Bible, particularly the Old Testament (2000:12). Because many saw a close affinity between the Old and the New Testament world view, the comparative method was also taken to be of value to the interpretation of the New Testament (cf. Dickson, 1984:180-182).

The major African scholars who have applied the comparative method such as Mbiti (1971); Dickson (1984) and Upkong (1987) were keen to illustrate the similarities in patterns of thought and feelings between the Bible and African religion and culture. They were aiming to demonstrate how certain basic notions have been expressed by both the people of the Bible and the African peoples. For instance, a West African scholar, J. J. Williams, wrote a book entitled *Hebrewism of West Africa: from Nile to Niger with Jews* in 1930, where he sought to show a correlation between the Hebrew language and the Ashanti language of Ghana basing his comparison on similarities both in sound and in deity worship. Such comparisons were later seen as superficial and weak (Upkong 2000:13).

With the above understanding, African scholars moved to another kind of approach which aimed to make Christianity relevant to the African religio-cultural context and this gave rise to the inculturation approach which has come to be associated with scholars like Upkong (2000:14). He has determined a preliminary condition and a series of components, which constitute an important aspect of this approach (2001:191). The preliminary condition is the commitment of the interpreter to the Christian faith and to the process of actualizing the biblical message with the context of people's situation in life. Here the context of the reader of the biblical text is his/her actual situation, which may result in an interpretation that is dependant on the mindset and the concerns of the reader. Inculturation hermeneutics uses an African conceptual framework for reading, where the African culture is the subject of the interpretation (2001:191). This methodology seeks the continuity of African culture and its identity. So through the use of an inculturation approach, one

draws together the meaning from comparative analysis in a coherent fashion, at the same time showing commitment to analyzing the message of the biblical text in concrete life situations (Upkong 1995:13). This means that the engagement of doing exegesis witness that the reader is involved in the community. For Upkong, 'the Bible is life-oriented' and its interpretation leads the scholar to be transformed and to transform the community in the light of the Scriptures (1995:13). During this process the reader seeks to actualize 'the gospel message' in the actual situation of life in so far as the actual context is intensified by the problem at hand.

From the material discussed here we can easily discover that what matters in interpretation is the aim of the researcher. A comparative approach will seek to show the continuities and discontinuities between African culture and the Bible in order to legitimize African culture (cf. Dickson 1984: 84). The inculturation approach will, on the other hand, seek to make Christianity a relevant religion for Africans (Upkong 1995: 14). The approach undertaken in this paper is a further development of these approaches within a postcolonial context. So while it can also seek either to legitimize the African culture or to make Christianity relevant to Africans, it does recognise both as two independent contexts which can dialogue with each other to evoke a new meaning in a postcolonial context. Our methodology in this paper is similar to that of a comparative approach but it has an overt link with postcolonial criticism. We therefore need to look at the postcolonial criticism and the way it has emerged.

### Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonial criticism has emerged as an alternative to liberationist and inculturationist readings of the Bible which had sought to confront all forms of oppression, poverty and marginalisation in society (cf. Upkong 2000:14), and has staked a claim to represent Majority World voices. Once liberation is achieved, the prophetic voice in that context shifts to another context. Postcolonial criticism emerged in the Majority World with its theoretical underpinnings sketched out in the work of cultural critics Edward Said and Homi Bhabha (1994) among others as an alternative voice. Said's (1978) evaluation and critique of the set of beliefs known as Orientalism forms an important background for postcolonial studies. In 1993 Said wrote another thought-provoking work entitled *Culture and Imperialism* where he re-

examines a popular mode of thought and challenges our thinking about our cultures. Said turns a critical eye to the nineteenth century novel which he claims played an important role in legitimating the Western imperialism, in that it constructs a 'self-validating' world in which empire and domination appear normative and permanent (1993:62). His evaluation and critique of culture and imperialism provide avenues for developing an approach to the study not only for the African novels but also for the Bible. Said's approach is an attempt to question various paradigms of thought which are accepted on individual, academic, and political levels (1993: 32-33). Our interest with Said's use of the term 'contrapuntal' is not based on the way he applies it but on the meaning of the term as a way forward in biblical scholarship in a postcolonial setting.

Postcolonial criticism is an interpretive act that is gaining momentum among scholars of formerly colonised societies. It means a resurrection of the indigenous people who were once marginalized and oppressed. According to Ruiz (2003:123), it is an act of reclamation, redemption and reaffirmation against the past colonial and present imperialist tendencies which continue to exert pressure even after political independence has long been achieved. Said blamed European states for a creation of a body of knowledge known as Orientalism and urges a 're-thinking of what had for centuries been believed to be an unbridgeable chasm', to rephrase his words 'separating the rich and the poor' (1978: 350). Indeed, if a postcolonial criticism seeks to subvert the master narratives that have shaped the way societies are identified, Said's efforts are undoubtedly the roots of a postcolonial criticism.

Musa Dube (1998:228), following the steps of Edward Said takes the term 'postcolonial' to imply that we have all been thoroughly constructed by imperialism to perceive each other from a particular stance. Dube (1996:37-59), therefore, sees a postcolonial criticism as methodology for interpreting biblical texts for decolonisation of the same. She argues that as postcolonial African scholars, we must now seek ways and means of understanding our past and present exploitation and at least develop new ways of encountering and respecting 'the other'. In this case she sees a postcolonial approach as the way the Bible is to be interpreted within our own African context and as a means of a struggle against cultural and economic imperialism. For Dube, postcolonial criticism in biblical scholarship aims to challenge the context and

the contours of biblical interpretation and the existing notions and preconceptions of professional guilds and academies (1998:131). If we are able to bring our culture (African) into dialogue or conversation with the Bible culture and let them challenge each other, a better result will be achieved than positioning them against each other in a quest for domination. The cosmology that emerges in such a conversation will offer a space for those once colonized. Today it is inconceivable that anyone will deny that the impact of the Bible in our own lives as colonised peoples is irreversible. In fact, we do not want to walk without shoes, if indeed the Bible was used to introduce them to us, or regret the education that came along with the missionaries. What we need to do is to explore how to allow the culture of the coloniser and our own culture to interact and to move beyond the limitations of both cultures.

Postcolonialism is suspicious of the colonial imports including the biblical text, which it does not exclude from the critical analytical gaze to which other colonial texts are subjected (Sugirtharajah 1998:15). It differs from the liberationist tendency of regarding the Bible itself as the place where the message of liberation is to be found (cf. Pablo 1990:66). The postcolonial critics are keen to argue that the Bible arrived in the hands of the colonisers, who then used it as a tool to civilise the colonised. This leads us to another Majority World scholar who may also have been influenced by Said, Sugirtharajah (1998). He argues that if we turn our attention to the current state of biblical scholarship, we quickly become aware that this scholarship has been going through different phases, 'often described as pre-critical, critical and post-critical, sometimes as historical and narrative, or author centred, text-centred and reader centred' (1998:15-17). He sees these as phases of how biblical scholarship has been conceived by the West. He then proceeds to argue that those of us from the Majority World and who have been subjected to colonialism are now struggling to present biblical scholarship in our own context of postcolonial criticism while we term the rest of the biblical scholarship as colonial.

He further argues that a postcolonial theory is able to challenge the context, contours and normal procedures of biblical scholarship. It is our history of oppression and marginalisation under the rule of the colonial powers that more than anything else calls for a re-reading of the Bible in the light of our own context. Sugirtharajah (1998:15) sees postcolonialism, therefore, as a

discourse of resistance that tries to ‘write back’ and work against colonial assumptions and ideologies long established in cultural studies. Writing back or working against the past may not be of any help today, but how to move along with what was implanted and what we hold as that which ought to have been, is what is needed for today.

No matter how much we want to decolonise either the Bible or our languages, it will not be an easy task. Nevertheless it is a noble goal which any postcolonial critic can support, but I want to put forward a new argument: that in our efforts to preserve our cultures, sometimes we perpetuate a mixed culture (a hybrid culture that is produced by the mixing of different cultures) that is only a part of what we seek to challenge. If postcolonial criticism involves scrutinising and exposing colonial domination and power as they are embodied in both local languages and biblical texts and interpretations, looking for an alternative while overturning and dismantling colonial perspective (Sugirtharajah 1998:16), then we need to note how much we are entangled with them. In a sense, postcolonial critics find themselves in a paradoxical position of purporting to defend their cultures and rejecting colonialism while, in fact, they succeed in sneaking into their discourse a disproportionate volume of colonial products; these are what I call ‘backdoor inculturations’.

We may be preaching our cultures aiming to legitimize them, while practicing what we claim to be dismantling and overturning (colonialism). What do I mean here? Let us take a famous Kenyan writer, as an example. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981) in his postcolonial criticism of Western languages in his book *Writers in Politics*, argues that African writers in foreign languages have not produced African literature, but foreign literature. I contend that Ngugi himself has lent legitimacy to this deplorable state of affairs by strengthening the foreign languages through his extensive use of foreign-language derived phonetics which masquerades as vernacular. Ngugi (1981:64) argues that we cannot develop our literature and traditions through borrowed tongues and imitations, yet in his recent publication of a vernacular (Kikuyu) novel entitled *Murogi wa Kagogo (Crow of the Wizard)*, right from the beginning where he makes his dedication, Ngugi (2004) has words like ‘humwaka’ (homework), ‘bamiri’ (family), ‘Njanuari’ (January), and ‘miriniamu’ (millennium). One does not need to be a Kikuyu to realise that this is not Kikuyu language. In the

same way Ngugi rejects Christianity and the Bible while his novels are replete with biblical narrative and symbols (cf. Brown 1997: 30-36). This shows how as postcolonial critics we may fall into the trap of self-deception. If colonial objects (Bible, cars, clothes), institutions (democracy, church, school) or competencies (writing, maths, and chemistry) are there to stay, then we need to develop a way of dealing with them. In such a case postcolonial critics need to formulate a method of study that will allow both cultures to interact side by side to allow a new world to emerge. This will help in integrating what is affirming and removing colonial ideologies that are diminishing African traditional culture.

Probably going a step further in postcolonial criticism and being aware of West's (1997:322-342) argument that postcolonial criticism has yet to make its mark on African biblical studies, I need to argue that postcolonial criticism is made up of research agendas that have developed in reference to the end of colonialism in the Majority World. Such agendas are still diverse and no strict consensus about what constitutes the postcolonial criticism exists. I would, therefore, prefer to take a different approach in postcolonial biblical studies and demonstrate how many of the literary components and thought patterns of the Bible are illustratable with those of our context (African culture) without raging against it, even though it was used to legitimate domination.

In a context of postcolonial interpretation we have to appreciate that colonial oppression and marginalisation are gone (though this does not mean that colonialism as an ideology is gone). The new situation in which we find ourselves gives us a new context of exploration of cultural identity and of a desperate need for social reconstruction and development (Draper 2002:16). Raging against the Bible as a colonial text or western languages as oppressive, may not be of any help in overcoming our dilemma, not that we forget them (we should look critically at colonial interpretations of the Bible, since the Bible itself is open to various interpretations), since they form what today is the major concern of postcolonial critics. We need to realise, however, that postcolonial criticism is not only about fighting the past, but about making use of that past and letting it dialogue with our present to create new meaning. In fact Ngugi admitted in an interview with *Weekly Review* magazine (1978) that the power of the Bible is undeniable as he states, 'I have also drawn from the Bible in the sense that the Bible was for a long time the only literature available

to Kenyan people that has been available to them in their national languages' (1978:10).

Ngugi had earlier stated that 'the Bible paved the way for the sword' (1964:57). Though this Kenyan writer does not draw the parallel himself, he is clearly emulating the Kikuyu seers whom he describes in *Writers in Politics* as 'Mau Mau' freedom fighters who '...rejected the culture of the oppressor and created a popular oral literature [i.e. I added myths] embodying anti-exploitation values. They took Christian songs; they took even the Bible and gave these meanings and values in harmony with the aspirations of their struggle' (Ngugi 1981:27).

What I see as important in postcolonial criticism is the need to recognise our context and then use it for a positive reading of the Bible in order to create a counter world to domination, drawing on elements of Kikuyu culture which are also part of the context of the reader. These are two texts one written (Bible) and one oral (our culture), which we must read without disregarding either. To do so effectively, we need to 'distance' ourselves from both our cultures and the Bible in order to read them as two texts of similar importance. There is a need for interpreters of any text, whether oral or written, to keep a particular distance in order to suspend what they previously held as the real meaning to allow new understanding (Draper 2002:17) that may result from the dialoging of the two. In other words, postcolonial critics need to realise that what we call our world or our culture is not equally superior to the culture of colonial powers or, for that matter, to the culture of the Bible but we need to read them side by side in order to allow a new world to emerge.

To do so I would like to draw on the theory of Edward Said, the musical metaphor of counter point, which is seen as central in two major works of Said entitled *Culture & Imperialism, and Orientalism*. Said (1993:36) describes contrapuntalism as a connection or mutual consideration of otherwise disparate social practices, of culture and empire, of history and of the connections, not outside and beyond them, that is, we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others (1993:36).

If one follows Said's method of approach in interpreting experiences that are fundamentally relational, coherent but separate and comprehensible to particular traditions, this will lead to a counter point. The method is similar to that of comparative approach which may also be defined as inculturation in that it will also seek to work with materials that can create harmony with other different materials (cf. Upkong 2000:14). A counter point as in music is the result of two different rhythms being played together, but nevertheless ending up in creating a harmony. It will also be similar in that it takes note of a common context. Such a model will preserve what is unique about each culture, but identifying different themes and seeing how they can evoke possibilities of enriching each other. As long as it also preserves some sense of the human community and the actual contexts that contributed to the formation of such cultures. Therefore according to Said (1993:32-33) various traditions can be read and understood together since they belong to comparable fields of human experience. In that case we need to note that the Kikuyu myth of creation and John's visions by their very nature are means of re-awakening to the communities. They challenge and comfort in their objective form, meaning, value, goals, truth and reality. They are the products of prophetic creativity in the social order. As such, they are already legitimate, but they have to engage into a conversation as they play their own rhythms to create harmony. We, however, need to explain what we mean by a model before we formulate a contrapuntal model.

Within New Testament scholarship, the model of contrapuntal reading should be seen as one line of approach among others (e.g. Upkong). It is a profoundly ideological model. In New Testament studies the term 'model' is often used rather loosely as a synonym for words such as 'metaphor', 'analogy', 'image', 'symbol', or 'paradigm' (Elliot 1983:3). Models allow scholars to compare factors more easily and they stimulate the imagination so that an understanding of the particular issues is more easily arrived at. A model is used in order to interpret and try to make sense of some social reality; on the other hand, it is an approach that is interpretive to social factors of life in a particular way.

The contribution of models in general to our understanding of the New Testament is quite significant (Tidball 1983:14). Models of operations and reactions are basically models of interpretations which equate to the historical critical, literary and contextual approaches. A model is a tool that

moves to the level of explanation. According to Rohrbaugh (1996:8) models must be calculated to fit the level of abstraction appropriate to the data and adapted to regional and historical variations. A contrapuntal model looks upon cultural experiences from different origins with a central task of criticism at a level of inquiry that allows the two to interact.

Models which are constructed contextually tend to simplify reality. Many scholars object to the use of models on the grounds that they impose alien concepts on unsuspecting data and oversimplify it. Esler however argues that—

This objection is based on the mistaken notion that we can ever avoid employing models! Everyone uses models; for the most part, however, they remain at the level of unspoken, even unrecognized, assumptions or prejudgments which are based upon our own experience and which inevitably shape our interpretation of the texts. Sometimes an exegete's model comes to the surface (1994:12).

We would argue that by using a contrapuntal model as an interpretive act we stand a better chance not only of understanding what John says about the future in the Apocalypse, but also how our Kikuyu myth about the past can influence the way we interpret John's view of future and access its meaning for the Apocalypse community. The point to be underscored is that if interpretation of a text of any kind takes place, then some domain of reference will be used by the reader and this would be rooted in some model of society and social interaction as formulated by the reader.

Models are a means that enable the interpreter to move from his own context to that of the text. They are heuristic tools which investigate, organize and explain social data and its meaning (Rohrbaugh 1996:8-9), hence models can explore social phenomena in a way that gives us more insights regarding the particular community under research and they can test certain hypotheses which social theory has led us to expect. According to Richter (1984:61) the usefulness of models lies in their ability, for instance, to offer a systematic way of organizing information in order to focus attention on social structure and the dynamics of social process between apparently unrelated data in the same or different sources. A good model must always create a space for the pre-conceived ideas of the interpreter to be re-examined.

The use of models is, however, not without dangers. Models should not be seen as mere templates that can be placed over any or on all data. They must be shaped to suit the data. Models must also take note of regional and historical variations as Rohrbaugh (1996) states—

A model offers the interpretation of a text from either Testament tools that are adequate for setting out the social systems that inhabit the world or the context behind the text under study. The best a contemporary biblical scholar might offer Bible readers is a way to recapture/return to the domains of reference which derive from and are appropriate to the social world from which the biblical texts derive. All interpretation, it would seem, requires and ultimately rests on such models (1996:9).

Hence it is my argument here that the contrapuntal model ought to be applied in conjunction with other textual approaches to help build a profile of the community and the author under study. Nevertheless the researcher must avoid the risk of falling into the trap of what Bell (1992:46) calls ‘interpretive slippage’. In such a mistake the analyst’s argument becomes circular and the interpretive tool may even become part of the data one is trying to interpret. Being aware of this, we can then reformulate a model of contrapuntal reading.

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