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Asian Biblical Hermeneutics as Multicentric Dialogue Towards a Singaporean Way of Reading

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Asian Biblical Hermeneutics as Multicentric Dialogue:

Towards a Singaporean Way of Reading

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Abstract

In this thesis, I propose a way of reading the Bible in the context of Singapore which is my country of origin. My understanding of context draws in what decolonial thinkers, Anibal Quijano (2007) and Walter Mignolo (2012) have argued to be the modern/colonial world system and social epistemologist, Jose Medina's (2006) polyphonic contextualism. This allows me to better situate the contextual reader within current networks of knowledge production and argue for the goals of reading the Bible in Singapore to be transformative praxis and identity formation. With the understanding of Singapore as an epistemic terrain embedded in global and local networks of knowledge production, I outline the hermeneutical norms that control contextual reading of the Bible in chapter 2. In order to better aid the task of constructing this hermeneutic, I also survey scholarship on biblical hermeneutics in chapter 3 both in the West and Asia to distil important considerations and useful reading strategies. With these considerations in mind, I propose that reading the Bible in context requires at the metatheoretical level a negotiation between western, Asian and Singaporean standpoints in chapter 4. This is facilitated by a conscientisation framework that checks the posture of specialist readers in relation to nonspecialist readers in a specific context so as to ensure submerged voices are not silenced in favour of dominant epistemologies; and a conversation framework that facilitates understanding the Other that tries to avoid Orientalist and nativist/nationalist dangers. In chapter 5, I then test the proposed method through reading the stories of Daniel to see the discursive effects such a reading strategy has on issues I outline in the analysis of my context pertaining to praxis and identity. In my final chapter, I reflect on how the reading exercise impacts on my proposed understanding of Bible and Singapore. I show that it fundamentally shifts the understanding of the Bible to what Justin Ukpong (2002) argues to be a 'site of struggle' and an inclusive canon that is hospitable to the many voices, especially of the marginalised in my context of Singapore.

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Abbreviations

ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ISPCK:	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
ISEAS Publishing:	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing
JSOT:	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
KPI	Publishers: Kegan Paul International Publishers
MT:	Masoretic Text
NIAS Press:	Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press
NRSV:	New Revised Standard Version
NUS Press:	National University of Singapore Press
OG:	Old Greek
SBL:	Society of Biblical Literature
SPCK:	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SUNY Press:	State University of New York Press
UN:	United Nations

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Chapter 1

Multicentric Biblical Hermeneutics in a Contextual Frame

This is home truly, where I know I must be
Where my dreams wait for me, where that river always flows
This is home surely, as my senses tell me
This is where I won't be alone, for this is where I know it's home
Home, Chorus by Dick Lee, Sung by Kit Chan (1998)

When Home was released in 1998 as a song to celebrate Singapore's National Day, it resonated with a people undergoing one of the worst recessions in Asia. It was a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities associated with nation building after more than a century of British colonial rule. More than that, the song was not merely a panacea to tide over difficult times as it was subsequently remade in 2004 and brought back again in 2010. Indeed, it struck a deeper chord. Borrowing the title of the song, I would like to invoke a familiar Asian metaphor of 'home' in relation to biblical hermeneutics. Pui Lan Kwok (2005, 100-121) in her reading of Ruth points out a flowering of diverse approaches that has moved from its historical bases to its relevance to the contemporary world. This pluralisation of approaches is mainly motivated by diverse interests of scholars reflecting on their own social location and its inherent issues. The Bible thus has become more of a cultural and literary product used to inform, inspire and also trouble how one relates to the external reality that one is located in. The use of the metaphor, 'home' is also a deliberate engagement with current movements of liberation, feminist and postcolonial interventions into biblical scholarship to, in Audre Lorde's (1983) words, 'dismantle the master's house'. It is true that deconstruction of biblical texts and biblical scholarship for its gender, racial and class bias has been improving in its sophistication and more crucially its awareness of the need to collaborate – a point I discuss further in chapter 3 – but it seems to me that little is done by way of re-constructing meaning from biblical texts. It is in this light 'home' is important. Just as a contextual reading cannot begin unless certain structures of domination are dismantled, it would be woefully incomplete if there is nothing built in its place. The desire of many Christians in Asia ultimately is that we are able to *inhabit* our interpretations. We want to make them our home.

However, as common knowledge would tell us, building a home is no simple

matter. It is an intensive work involving the collaboration of different kinds of specialists (architects, engineers, builders and so on) *and* the people who live in it including our extended families and close friends in the community. Moreover, one cannot ignore the wider reality that this house is built in. While it is now commonly accepted that centres of Christianity are moving from the Global North to the Global South,¹ much of theology and biblical studies today still remain firmly rooted in the West. Current literature is still being dominated by western (male) names and with the aid of globalisation, they are being exported throughout the nonwestern world and even read in the local vernacular. What this means in terms of biblical hermeneutics is that western scholarship seems to think that their job is to *build* the house and that all nonspecialist readers have to do is just to *live* in them. Never mind that its rather simple form with its economy of detail towering to the skyline that expresses the clarity of the modern mind sits relatively unperturbed in the midst of the Jakarta slums bursting at their seams with constantly burgeoning number of make-shift houses (so long they are fire-proof, of course); or that it is fronted by the busy streets of Manila strewn with precariously filled jeepneys and motorcycles snaking in and out of a piling up traffic jam; or that it hauntingly resembles the Petronas Towers of Kuala Lumpur which bear the marks of globalisation of the free market. This is of course a caricature and reality is far more complex than I have put it. However this does not take away from the main point that as Asian Christians, we want to reclaim the right to not only build our own houses to live in but also to decide how we would like our houses to be built so that they do not look like they descended from the heavens and begrudgingly made their home among the dirt and the grime of the Orient. Much as this is the desire of many Christians, I have to add hastily (as I will argue for the rest of this thesis) that it is waning. It is in this brief sketch of reality that I place my research project to construct a Singaporean way of reading the Bible.

Context and Contextualism

I make no apologies that this study is an effort to understand what it means to read the Bible in the *reader's* context.² Context, in this sense, has received intermittent attention

1 "Global North" is usually taken to include five current United Nations regions comprising 53 countries: Eastern Europe (including Russia), Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Western Europe, and Northern America and "Global South" is defined as the remaining 16 current UN regions (185 countries): Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, Western Africa, Eastern Asia, South-central Asia, South-eastern Asia, Western Asia, Caribbean, Central America (including Mexico), South America, Australia/New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. This shift of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South has been documented by various scholars (see for instance, Walls 1996; Jenkins 2007; Hickman 2014).

2 This might give rise to some confusion as traditional historical critics would argue that they too are interested in 'contexts', by which they mean *historical* contexts. Unless stated otherwise, my use of the word 'context' would primarily take reference from the *contemporary* context.

in the academy for a period of time now. Most notably would be the landmark work of Robert Schreier (1985) who argues strongly for the need for proper study of nonwestern contexts in their own right as an integral part of the local theologising process. Thus, he proposed a semiotic approach that allows for an interaction between western Christian traditions and local cultures at the level of symbols. Stephen Bevans (2002) develops this into a typology of six models namely, the translation model, the anthropological model, the praxis model, the synthetic model, the transcendental model and the countercultural model that can be adapted depending on the needs of the local context. Although these two proposals deal considerably with the analysis of local cultural contexts, they have not fully explored the issues of dialogue. Angie Pears (2010) responds by arguing that it would seem that the ultimate task of contextual bible study is to make western exegetical products intelligible in nonwestern contexts. Of course as she points out, the West does allow for local cultures to challenge its own understandings of Christianity and the Bible, but often these challenges are first absorbed into various western contexts to be debated and resolved before relating them back. As I argue later, I wish to add that nonwestern readers of the Bible often find themselves compelled to be conversant in literature and language of the West that have already been circumscribed by norms developed from dominant intellectual traditions in its own sociohistorical location.³

In this light, Gerald West's *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (1999) represents a decisive break from Eurocentric understanding of context by engaging whom he sees as the 'ordinary reader'.⁴ What he raises is greater attention to the voices within a particular context and the need to engage with them. I explore his proposal in greater detail in chapter 4, but here I raise the concerns of several panelists who reflected on the state of contextual biblical studies in the opening session of the International Meeting of the Society Biblical Literature held in Seoul 2016. Of note, Athalya Brenner highlighted that even if one reads for liberation in a particular context, one has to be careful not to domesticate the text to one's political agenda or use it as a form of therapy. She called instead for a need to be attentive to how biblical texts 'illuminate' the lives of scholars and vice versa and how can one's contextual reading moves beyond its boundaries. Fernando Segovia raised the need to theorise 'context' especially at the level of epistemology. Thus it would seem what is needed is a more careful articulation of what

³ This does hauntingly reflect the dilemma of Daniel and his three friends being educated in the Babylonian Empire which I discuss in chapter 5.

⁴ In recent years, there has been a slow uptake of contextual bible study within Euro-American centres adapting what West (1999) has suggested here. See for example, Webster 2015.

‘context’ means and its relationship to *specialist* readers within networks of knowledge production. These are the main concerns of this section where I attempt not only to frame the task of this thesis in its larger background, but also contribute to building an understanding of ‘contextualism’.

I begin by adapting Kuan Hsing Chen’s proposal in his illuminating book, *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization* (2010), to think of Asia and more broadly the term ‘context’ as first and foremost a geocolonial, historical materialist category with boundaries policed by a sovereign nation-state. As I discuss further in chapter 4 in relation to problematic nationalist and nativist movements in Asia, I agree with him that it is more useful to think of contextual markers in this manner without committing to any essentialist ontology. In fact, as social epistemologist, José Medina (2006) reminds us, contexts are not hermetically sealed environments but rather in constant interaction with other contexts – past, present and imagined futures. Thus I propose that contextual bible study should be taken as reading the Bible in terms of knowledge production occurring in two inter-related spheres: an *inter*-contextual arena which decolonial⁵ thinkers call the modern-colonial world system and an *intra*-contextual space which I follow Medina’s (2006) understanding of polyphonic contextualism. In what follows, I first explore the inter-contextual relationships by thinking of Singapore as part of Asia in a postcolonial era. Then I discuss intra-contextual relationships between dominant and marginalised standpoints. In addition, this section also serves as a primer to certain terms I would be using throughout this thesis.

In order to better understand the inter-contextual relationships that govern reading of the Bible, it is important to remember that the Bible comes to many parts of Asia, not least Singapore, primarily as the *coloniser’s* text. As several postcolonial biblical scholars like Musa Dube (2000) and Rasiah Sugirtharajah (2001) have shown, the Bible served as a form of scaffolding and support for the colonisation of many nonwestern countries. David Bosch has argued in his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991) that this has been continued through North American neocolonial mission efforts. I discuss what it means to see the Bible as ‘text’ later but here I would like to focus on its mediation in relation to current politics of knowledge. In other words, in calling the Bible the coloniser’s text, I am gesturing towards the

⁵ As Gregory Banazak and Luis Ceja (2011) have outlined, postcolonial studies focuses mainly on western colonialisms which makes it largely a historical enterprise. Decolonial thought, which I explain later, is primarily concerned with present global systems of thought and its connections to modernity and colonialism. In other words, it is primarily an epistemic project. See Appendix 1 for further comparisons.

discursive influences that are embedded in its transmission. Owing to its entanglements with colonialism, reading the Bible is thus inevitably intertwined with what decolonial thinkers are calling the modern/colonial world system.

One of the central themes in decolonial thought, 'coloniality' was first introduced by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in the 1990s. By demonstrating that the arrival of colonial empires since the 1500s into nonwestern contexts resulted in the repression of local knowledge systems together with the seduction of non-white peoples into western rationality, he theorises that coloniality is the hidden side of modernity (Quijano 2007). Coloniality of power which he sees as control over the political and economic requires the engine of knowledge production. He then elaborates how coloniality presents itself as a universal totality that exerts control over the domains of political, economic, knowledge and being. Walter Mignolo (2012) adds that we need to consistently remind ourselves that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive like two sides of the same coin because modernity in presenting itself as a totality tends to hide its side of coloniality.

Quijano (2007) asserts that this claim to totality is premised on the belief of white male subjects that they can be free of intersubjectivity and devoid of attachment to the object of study which then legitimises their claim to produce truth about the object. I deal with this in chapter 3 in the study of the Bible together with the help of feminist standpoint theorists. What I highlight here is how western modernity, borrowing the title of Mignolo's (2012) book, transformed from local histories into global designs that resulted in epistemic violence and in some cases, genocide.⁶ This was reproduced through the entrenching of modern social institutions including the university (and theological institutions) in nonwestern contexts during the colonialisms of the 18th and 19th centuries. This is not to say that it dissolved with decolonisation in the 20th century but rather perpetuated in a different form which Mignolo (2011) identifies as colonial difference. Among many things, colonial difference is an epistemic hierarchy that esteems western knowledge and its systems as superior to nonwestern knowledge and its systems (see Mignolo 2011, 17-19). It is enabled by what Quijano (2007) analyses to be the colonial matrix of power where control of knowledge production is still tied to imperial centres in the West which retain global control of the economies of nonwestern countries as well as worldwide circulation of ideas of subjectivity, sexuality and gender. The foundations of this matrix as Mignolo (2011, 1-24) traces, are on the one hand, theology which was later

⁶ Quijano (2007) briefly reviews the penetrance of the modern/colonial world system and points out how systems of knowledge in Asia and the Middle East remained relatively more intact than those in Africa and South America where the latter was close to complete annihilation.

supplanted by secular philosophy that facilitated development of systems of classifying peoples and their knowledges and on the other, heteronormative patriarchy.⁷ In short, coloniality with the aid of colonialism installed the present-day modern/colonial world system which operates according to the colonial matrix of power.

This is not to say that the modern/colonial world system is homogenous and internally coherent. Mignolo (2012) often highlights that, much as there is a lot of debate between modernity and postmodernity, they are both part of this system insofar that there is an insistence on the primacy of these questions in *all* contexts. One such question within biblical studies in the West is the opposition between so-called author-centred (and text oriented) against reader-centred approaches. While I do explore this tension in chapter 3, I hope to reorient the terms of this conversation in chapter 4. Here I am emphasising that contextual reading needs to be cognisant of the inter-contextual frame of the modern/colonial world system. The implication therefore is that more attention ought to be paid to how relationships *between* different readers in different geopolitical locations, both specialist and nonspecialist, inform reading from an epistemological point of view.

I have inadvertently raised a term that would no doubt raise the eyebrows of many – ‘the West’. Again, this is not an ontological term, but rather following Stuart Hall (1992, 277), connotes particular local histories of Europe and North America that produced societies that are ‘developed, industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular and modern’ which arose ‘roughly during the sixteenth century, after the Middle Ages and the break-up of feudalism’. It is not my intention to deal with all that the West has produced but to focus on dominant trends of biblical interpretation within biblical studies. The key focus would be what is commonly known as traditional historical criticism (see chapter 3). As indicated above, the ‘West’ in this thesis signifies the ideologies hidden within intellectual traditions that disavow their situatedness in time and space to claim their processes of knowledge production as transcendent and therefore universally binding.

It is however not enough to think inter-contextually but also intra-contextually. This is because any single geopolitically defined nation-state is not a homogeneous space. Here I draw in Medina’s (2006) notion of polyphonic contextualism which defines context as a geopolitically defined space that contains heterogeneous, pluralistic networks of epistemic agents (and groupings) from different sociohistorical locations which are

⁷ See Carter (2008) and Jennings (2010) who have both outlined in their books the origins of racism within western theology and continental philosophy.

irreducibly diverse, inevitably relational and dynamic. Standpoints however are not all equal but are hierarchically organised according to what he calls, spaces of intelligibility and spaces of marginality. Medina (2006, 186-190) argues this through Wittgenstein's analogy of language games and ancient cities. He deploys Wittgenstein's language games as a way of understanding how linguistic performances are conditioned by one's interpretation of praxis in a certain environment while being governed by norms in the same context. These norms could be thought as rules of the game that one is participating in. He supplements this by looking at how ancient cities develop. Prominent urban spaces which often draw attention could be said to mirror dominant epistemic norms in that they did not emerge overnight but required a significant amount of time to sediment and concretise. These spaces are by no means fixed or permanent and continue to develop over time through various interactions. What is relevant to my purposes is that they often receive the most resources and would thus appear the most developed. For those of us who are city dwellers, we also know that cities have their minority ghettos, dark alleys and unsavoury corners that are in part designated and at the same time, neglected by their respective central governing bodies. Thus within a given context, there are those whose social identities receive particular salience because the discursive environment favours their prominence. In order to share in the privilege, one has to become well versed in their language and literature as well as their habits of thinking. They define the boundaries of what is intelligible. In contrast, those who are excluded would become part of the spaces of marginality. These include those who tether at the margins trying to survive like the poor and ethnic minorities, those who are forced underground to remain invisible like political dissidents and those who subsist in between, occupying important places within the spaces of intelligibility but never fully able to call it their 'home'. Thus in any single context, subjects negotiate their identities between marked spaces of intelligibility and marginality.

How does this relate to reading? Hans Georg Gadamer (2004) in proposing the idea of the 'fusion of horizons',⁸ argues that the reader supplies questions from his or her own interpretative horizon in interaction with the horizon of the text. As I explore in chapter 4, feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff (2006) expands on Gadamer's arguments by demonstrating that it is our social identities that exert important influence on the formation of our interpretative horizons. In the light of the above, whether a subject is able to draw on certain social identities to pose questions to the biblical text would depend on

⁸ I discuss this further in chapter 3, under the *Cultural-Hermeneutic-Postmodern* paradigm.

his or her relative situatedness to spaces of intelligibility and marginality. To add further to this dilemma, I wish to point out that spaces of intelligibility receive empowerment, not only from the localised elite, but also from the modern/colonial world system. This is not to say that they are entirely synonymous but that their mutual entanglements should not be overlooked. Furthermore, it could be said that only those whose social identities have moulded the space of intelligibility in which biblical interpretation occurs can afford to postpone engagement with the politics of knowledge or worse, pretend they do not exist altogether. More crucially, such an understanding of context in the intra-contextual dimension calls attention to spaces of marginality. Those who negotiate these spaces should not be thought of as passively awaiting extinction. Rather, as I also hope to prove in my thesis, they are generative and creative places that are resisting in ways which are not readily accessible or apparent to the dominant. They are actively translating their standpoints into creative cultural products such as visual art, oral and written narratives, songs and so on. While lacking in resources to circulate, these can surprisingly supply important questions and perspectives to biblical texts should one take the effort to explore.

The implication of the above discussion is that it is important to recognise that dominant modes of reading the Bible would naturally arise from privileged social identities. Since contexts of reading are not entirely the same, it is important that in order for a reading to be 'contextual', there is need to understand the *particular* networks of power that it is participating in. How contextualism as both inter-contextual and intra-contextual helps is to give me a heuristic lens to better locate the reader within current structures of knowledge production. However, before I get into the meat of this endeavour, there are other preliminaries that need to be set. The next I wish to consider are the goals of contextual reading in the light of this understanding of contextualism.

Biblical Scholar as Public Intellectual

If contextual reading requires the reader, which in this case I am considering a specific role that I am called to inhabit for this thesis – the biblical scholar, to be engaged with networks of knowledge production, then it calls for a deeper analysis of his or her role as a public intellectual. As elaborated by Antonio Gramsci (1971, 3-23), there are two main types of public intellectuals – the traditional intellectual and the organic intellectual. Traditional intellectuals are individuals that the system has appointed to perform intellectual tasks which are repeated from generation to generation such as teachers, priests and administrators. He thinks of them as those who reinforce the status

quo of current structures of hegemony because of their compliance with their socially determined roles. This is not to say that traditional intellectuals are not essential as every system still needs its teachers, lawyers, doctors and so on. Gramsci seems more concerned with those traditional intellectuals who are resigned to their roles and mostly perpetuate almost uncritically the system they maintain. Organic intellectuals on the other hand are directly connected to class interest and utilise their position to gain power and authority. Simply put, organic intellectuals are those who either create or contest social systems. Such intellectuals are not limited to politicians. It could also include the capitalist entrepreneur who 'creates along himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of new culture, of a new legal system etc' (Gramsci 1971, 5). Edward Said (1994) expands this to also include advertisers who create desire which in turn fuels a shift in economic and cultural systems. Thus organic intellectuals are those who engage in society in a bid to garner any form of public support from political office to going green. He then sums up Gramsci's idea of an intellectual as 'everyone who works in any field connect[ed] with the production or distribution of knowledge' (Said 1994, 9). In this light, he elaborates that in order to be an organic intellectual, there is need to bring in criticality.⁹

At bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus builder, *but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense*, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever so accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public (Said 1994, 23, emphasis mine).

His main concern (as is mine) is how intellectuals have represented themselves in their writing. In other words, whose interests do they represent when they write? Is it primarily the interest of a small, elite academic guild, or the capitalistic interests of the state, or the marginalized of wider society?

David Tracy outlines one relevant representation of the theologian in his book, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981, 3-46) that further elaborates the role of the biblical scholar and theologian as a public intellectual.¹⁰ To him, the theologian is located simultaneously in three publics. The first public is that of society which he argues to be further divided into the realm of technoeconomic structure, realm of polity and the realm of culture. He further warns that the unchecked expansion

⁹ This contrasts with Barton's (2007) position of being critical which he calls 'plain sense'. I explore this in chapter 3 as representing one of the key foundational elements in mainstream biblical interpretation.

¹⁰ I view his analysis here to be applicable to the biblical scholar because like the theologian, he or she is normally located in the same department of the university operating within shared commitments to secular academic ideals. This is not to mention when broadly construed, both build their respective disciplines on the main foundation of the biblical text.

of the realm of technoeconomic structure is infiltrating into the other two realms and is slowly, if not already, dominating them. The second public is the academy where all disciplines today are subject to scientific norms. Of course, some disciplines, more than others, continue to resist such impositions. Nevertheless the challenge of the intellectual in the academy today is maintaining a place in the university which means he or she has to negotiate the internal requirements while trying to be relevant to the publics beyond the university. It is a temptation to be completely sold to the university which he and others like Said (1994) call to resist. The third public which is particularly relevant to the public intellectual who works on the biblical text is the church. The church is to be understood not merely in its theological dimensions but also in its social, economic, cultural and political ones as well. Therefore, he argues that all theologians in one way or another are at least implicitly involved in all three publics and it is not possible to return to any form of naiveté about church traditions or positivistic reason. In other words, public intellectuals working on the Bible have to openly acknowledge their involvement in all three publics and thus show how their work interacts with these three domains.

Ultimately, to what end should a scholar engage with these three domains? Tracy (1981) calls theologians (and I include, biblical scholars) back to ‘transformative praxis’ as central to the task of the public intellectual. Here he aligns himself with the spirit of liberation theologies. He uses the word ‘praxis’ to be the main criterion of truth. In a later work, he further elaborates that praxis is a much needed disruption in the English language as it seems close to the word ‘practice’ but yet deviates from it in important and crucial ways (Tracy 1987, 10). Practice is often understood to be separate from theory. For those inclined towards theory like scholars, theory is derived in laboratory type settings where variables can be controlled and then imposed onto practical situations under the assumption that theory is a universalising concept. For those inclined towards practice like those working in the field such as pastors, non-government organization (NGO) workers and so on, theory is irrelevant. All that is needed is just practice and they labour under the illusion that their own interpretations are theory-free. Praxis, according to him, dissolves the clear boundaries between theory and practice to reaffirm their interdependency. Every theoretical effort involves practice and every practical endeavour is usually undergirded by some theory. Praxis is

theory’s own originating and self-correcting foundation, since all theory is dependent, minimally, on the authentic praxis of the theorist’s personally appropriated value of intellectual integrity and self-transcending commitment to the imperatives of critical rationality (Tracy 1981, 69).

Understanding it as praxis in terms of reading the Bible forces both the theologian and biblical scholar to contend with the modern(/colonial) world(-system) and recognise their interpretations in the light of their ethical and religious situations. Therefore truth has to be pursued in terms of transformation or what he sums up as ‘transformative praxis’. Tracy is of course not alone. Other scholars have reaffirmed this goal of biblical interpretation in similar ways. Paul Joyce (2014, 421-422, emphasis his) suggests, ‘if there are to be limits to biblical interpretation...they may need to be found in the *ethics* of reading’. Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, in their book, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (1989, 39), have argued that ‘the major preoccupation is not the quest for meaning of the text in itself but the direction which the Bible is suggesting to the people of God within specific circumstances in which they find themselves’. David Ford (2007, 33) has eloquently articulated the role of the university to which the scholar ought to be aligned with as ‘help[ing] society transcend itself in various ways, above all in its knowing, its perspective on itself and the world, and its quality of judgment’.

From an Asian perspective, Weiming Tu (2005) argues that intellectuals in Confucian traditions have mainly been scholar-officials. What this means is that they were intimately involved in economics, politics and culture. In other words, rather than being absorbed in becoming masters of a narrow field, they were generalists, conversant in all manners of what is now known as the arts and humanities from history and politics to fine arts and literature. Nevertheless he points out that this is common to many ancient cultures from Jewish rabbis, Greek philosophers, Christian priests and Islamic mullahs. Indeed it coincides well with the vision of the scholars located in the West mentioned above. The concern here, if I may adapt Tu’s (2005) proposal, is for transformative praxis in an inter-disciplinary space. The consistent question undergirding the task of the public intellectual as Philip Chia (2012) reflects on reading the Bible in Asia, is that of *relevance*. This is a theme I continually return to both in the conceptualisation of the method as well as in the reading of Daniel. What is emphasised here in Asian traditions such as Confucianism is the pragmatic nature of the intellectual’s task.

Further developing on Asian perspectives, Archie Lee (1993; 2008; 2014) has articulated an additional need that a biblical scholar working on the Bible and Asian contexts especially in the light of colonialism, needs to be attentive to – identity formation. I discuss further his approach in chapter 3 but here I focus on what I mentioned earlier regarding Christians in Asia wishing to make the Bible a part of their lives by taking cue

from Lee's concerns about identity. Chandra Mohanty (2000) sums up two dominant views of cultural identity – one that belongs to the arena of identity politics which often stresses its essentialist nature and the other more postmodern view of identity as socially constructed in conflicts. As I discuss further in relation to the Asian Values Discourse in chapter 4, both these positions have their inherent weaknesses and a third position needs to be sought. The relationship of social location(s) and identities is inevitably a complex one that intersects at many levels – class, gender, race, religion, sexuality, disability and so on. How these various identity markers interact is dependent on the given space that they are operating in. In other words, identities are both inherited from the social milieu we inhabit and formulated depending on the social conditions we are exposed to (see also Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006). Mohanty (2000) argues that these different elements arrange themselves in different ways to function as micro-theories to help us understand and operate in the world we live in. Recalling the earlier discussion about contextualism as heteroglossic space mired in international networks that mediate coloniality of power, I think of Singapore specifically as a geopolitical location primarily in the intersection of the Euro-American West, East, South and Southeast Asia. As I elaborate in chapter 4, this would yield the various identities that I bring along to read the Bible in this thesis: biblical scholars from the West, North American Christian fundamentalists, Confucius, Mahatma Gandhi, Emperor Aśoka and from Singapore itself, privileged Chinese Christians, Malay Muslims, political prisoners and the elderly. Following Mohanty (2000), I affirm the epistemic status of every one of these identities as constructed in the various literary mediums I find them. This means that each offers a theoretical frame to understand the Bible in the context of Singapore.

But what has this to do with identity formation? On the one hand, while identity politics, when understood as a form of essentialism, is problematic in claiming a factual basis, it is real insofar that people act upon it by organising themselves around them. In this light, I see myself as a Christian in Singapore being part of a larger discourse of what it means to be Christian emanating from the local church. As I explore in chapter 2, these discourses are often not only essentialising in nature by claiming a fossilised identity hidden within the Bible awaiting conscientious mining by Christian fundamentalists and historical critics alike, but also exclusivistic and potentially damaging to those who do not align themselves with their respective understandings. This is bearing in mind that such knowledge often reinforces the modern/colonial world system mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, this is the identity I have inherited from my colonial masters perpetuated

through the local church and academic institutions. On the other hand, I want to claim that this identity is in no way final and engage in a process of negotiation together with the biblical text. In this regard, Gayatri Spivak (2003, 91) has helpfully pointed out that one's understanding of texts has to move from 'identitarian monuments' to 'documents for reconstellation'. In chapter 4, I highlight how this could be done through enlisting standpoints from spaces of marginality within my context. I also demonstrate concretely what this means in chapter 5 in my reading of Daniel. At this point, I wish to just state that in view of the limitation of space (which I see necessary as well!), I constrain the identity formation I look at to categories of race, religion, gender and class.

Locating the reader in context understood in terms of its inter-contextual connections in the modern/colonial world system and intra-contextual labyrinth of spaces of intelligibility and marginality leads me to affirm that the role of the biblical scholar is that of an organic intellectual. Reading the Bible in Asia requires constant attention to its role in transformative praxis and identity formation. It is true that such a process recognises the Bible as inescapably mediated through structures of knowledge production. Yet it is still possible to say a few meaningful things about the biblical text itself or at the very least acknowledge that the Bible, in spite of its embeddedness in networks of power, is also an 'Other'. This would be the focus of the next section.

The Bible as Dangerous Other

Terry Eagleton gave a provocative lecture where he claimed that God is good for nothing; by inference, then his 'Word' is also good for nothing.¹¹ By 'nothing', Eagleton was pointing out how the Bible cannot be easily enlisted to serve the cause of the conservative republican right or the liberal democratic left. Indeed, it has become customary among biblical scholars to ask 'which Bible?' (citing Carroll [1991]) and 'whose Bible?' (citing Davies [2004]) with the explicit intention of keeping criticality as central to the hermeneutical quest of understanding the Bible. It is without a doubt that critical inquiry into the Bible has divested its chains to Christian tradition and allowed it to stand in its own right. It has admittedly to a large degree recovered the text's Otherness. The darker side of this somewhat romanticised tale is that the Bible both resists and creates tradition. Just as modern rationality sets out to free the Bible from ecclesial control, it installs itself – or better put, the institution of the university – as the new guardian or

¹¹ The Ignatian Centre at Santa Clara University invited Terry Eagleton in 2013 to give a lecture, 'Why is God for Christians Good for Nothing?' The lecture can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2QzPjDsnm0> (last accessed 29 May 2015).

what Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood (2011, 107-115) would call, 'civil servants of the biblical text'.¹² The academic guild priding itself on historical critical methods is in danger of becoming the very monstrosity that it once fended off. Minority scholarship, as I explore in chapter 3, has long decried the dominance of the historical enterprise that prided itself on its objective and interest-free approach. In that chapter, I also advance these arguments to show that the issue lies in different conceptions of 'objectivity'. There I also raise the danger of the Bible being moulded slowly into identity politics related to liberation, feminism and postcolonialism.

Without getting in too deep into a discussion I have elaborated in chapter 3, what then should be a logical starting point in understanding the text? Robert Carroll in his provocative book, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (1991), borrows from Franz Kafka's (1977, 15) reminder that the only kind of books we should be reading are those

that wound and stab us...affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into the forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.

One of the central arguments of his book is to recover the Bible as a dangerous wolf which has been made to don sheep's clothing throughout church history even up till the present moment. He emphasises that the Bible, by virtue of how it has been written, assembled and canonised, is not a naturally coherent text, at least by modern standards. In order to recover this, there is a need to respect the text's Otherness or as Carroll (1991, 64) puts it, recognise that it is 'alien thought in alien language from alien times'. The importance of the texts' Otherness boils down to its ability to transform. In order for the text to have such an effect, we need to rediscover the Bible as a 'dangerous thing' (Carroll 1991, 124). According to Carroll (1991), the alterity of the text is what constitutes its danger and it is that very danger – a sense of peril which induces anxiety – that is able to penetrate our consciousness and stimulate change. What is particularly striking is Kafka's (1977, 14) reason for the wounding of one's consciousness: 'But it's good when your conscience receives big wounds, because that makes it more sensitive to every twinge'. It is to awaken our sensitivities.

What does it mean that the text has been tamed or domesticated? Sigmund

¹² I prefer Moore and Sherwood's (2011) more nuanced portrayal of biblical scholarship to traditional historical critics like John Barton's (2007, 113) understanding that biblical criticism (which I see as traditional historical criticism despite his objections to such labelling) and literary criticism are 'servants of the text, not its masters'. By adding the word 'civil' here, it signals to me that not all servants are equal where some have become guardians of the text against other servants whom they perceive to be aspiring to be masters of the text (see chapter 3).

Freud (2003, 121-162) in one of his rare forays into the literary world wrote about the 'uncanny'. He suggested the familiar (*heimlich* which could also mean homely) becomes frightening or uncanny (*unheimlich*, which is a word derived from *heimlich*) by repressing its familiarity. In other words, it is like seeing the ghost of your long dead relative or walking down a familiar street but in the dead of the night when the street lamps have been mysteriously turned off. He goes further to argue that in the fictional world of literature, such uncanniness is more prone to be suspended. Thus in chapter 2, I look closer at the mechanisms by which both the church and the academy render the unfamiliar text familiar, thus robbing it of its potential to be uncanny.

So, if domestication is about making the text homely (or *heimlich*), then to resist domestication means to make the text uncanny (or in other words, *unheimlich*). This would follow that the obstacles impeding our ability to perceive surprise need to be identified and addressed. Nevertheless, much as we ought to prime ourselves, there are limits to theorising transformation because it is, by its very nature, unpredictable. Therefore as part of the proposal for a Singaporean hermeneutic in chapter 4, I plot out the route needed to disarm the defenses that prevent us from being aware of this dangerous text.

It is in tracing such obstacles that I return again to context. I will argue through my reading of Daniel in chapter 5 that spaces of intelligibility mandate what Maria Lugones (1994) has aptly called, the logic of purity which is tied to control and unity. This is not to say that biblical scholars want to 'control' the biblical text since it is often claimed that they are setting the text 'free' from ecclesial tradition and right now defending it against the claims of theory as embodied in postmodernism and poststructuralism (Moore and Sherwood 2011). As Moore and Sherwood (2011) astutely trace, western biblical scholarship has shrewdly navigated the changing literary landscape by making calculated moves to contain emerging theories within its own modernistic, objectivist frameworks while safeguarding the norms that train and produce the 'civil servants' necessary for the task of meticulous gatekeeping. To which I add my meagre contribution in the concluding chapter of this thesis by looking more closely at a prominent branch of traditional historical criticism – form criticism in relation to the stories of Daniel. The point here is that if biblical scholars wish to recover the uncanniness of the Bible, the seemingly natural instinct is to be more open to or at the very least be curious about different perspectives on the text since no single perspective can claim the right to arbitrate all others. Claiming governance in the name of objectivist ideology is in many ways also domesticating the

biblical text.

Of course I am not saying that the way forward in contextual reading of the Bible is to *ignore* the fact that the Bible is transmitted, written and redacted in a time different from ours. Carroll (1991) points out one of the chief reasons why the Bible is often misappropriated in the present context is because readers do not negotiate the time between the compilation of these ancient texts and the present age. There is a major failure to appreciate how the ancient and contemporary contexts relate to each other in terms of the Bible and how different traditions developed over the many centuries also influence the reading process. So I read his question, 'how can they [the books of the Bible] be read *as if* nothing had ever happened between their being written and where we are now?' to indicate that there is need to understand how ancient history relates to modern times rather than calling for a return to naïve historiographical methods that completely disregard the present (Carroll, 1991, 142, emphasis his). Tracy (1987, 70-71) echoes this by arguing that biblical hermeneutics also need contemporary historians who help us understand our present circumstances and future possibilities in the light of our different pasts. Therefore in chapter 5 before the reading of Daniel proper, I depend on the work of world historians particularly Michael Mann who have traced the common currents throughout world history to guide the process of understanding Daniel in the light of the context of Singapore. These historians also share the concern to uncover the lives of hidden peoples in the past and work against Eurocentric inclinations, to highlight how history can help us better understand the plight of the marginalised.

Here I would also like to raise Hugh Pyper's (2005) argument that this dangerous book is a 'scandalous text'. The very nature of 'dangerous offensiveness', as he describes it, is necessary for us to take the Bible seriously (Pyper 2005, 2). Part of the scandal, as he points out, has to do with it being 'selfish'. I read it as part of protecting its distinctiveness, the Bible would constantly resist and confound our attempts to assimilate it into our theoretical framings. This brings me back to contextualism where very often those with the greatest resources to do so are those who are formed by and produce spaces of intelligibility. What is of greater concern is that the power to domesticate the text or prescribe the boundaries of 'correct' interpretation cannot be divorced from the question of privilege. This is especially so if that privilege is tied to social identities located comfortably in spaces of intelligibility found in the metropolitan centres of the modern/colonial world system. Thus the disruption I submit should not completely rely on debates

on the *nature* of biblical texts as this often brackets out intersubjectivity in knowledge production, as highlighted by Quijano (2007). Rather it also needs to include discussions at the epistemological level. On whose intellectual histories, social positionalities and cultural values are claims and interpretations about the text formulated upon? More importantly, whose have been ostensibly left out?

This relates directly to what Medina (2012, 30-48) had identified as epistemic vices and virtues. Here I adapt them for the purposes of reading the Bible. He names three epistemic vices which are often nurtured in places of privilege: arrogance, laziness and close-mindedness. Epistemic arrogance is the result of having cognitive dominance and therefore it facilitates thinking in a certain way without paying heed to any form of resistance. It does not see the need to justify properly one's claims to a particular set of methods especially vis-à-vis minority ways of knowing. This is closely associated with epistemic laziness which is a lack of curiosity about social domains that are remote to oneself. There is an intentionality not to look behind the curtains so to speak and see the structures that have oppressed other modes of knowing in order to establish current dominant forms. Of course, Medina acknowledges that it is not humanly possible to be acquainted with everything. But what he is pointing to is how this intentionality becomes habitual and subsequently subconscious. This avoidance mechanism has its active side which is associated with epistemic close-mindedness. It is not humanly possible that we remain open-minded to everything in life. But there are certain phenomena, experience and perspectives that require additional effort to systematically *ignore* almost *all* the time. This is especially so if those perspectives have the potential to destabilise and disrupt the status quo and disturb privilege. With respect to the Bible, areas systematically closed off are those to do with feminist, minority, postcolonial, liberation, and I would like to add here, contextual perspectives to the text as attested by scholars who operate in these margins. According to Medina, it is more often than not the white male who enjoys such epistemic privilege in the current postcolonial age. Put differently, if we were to take seriously the claim of many mainstream historical critics that the biblical text is complex and difficult to understand, then it should stand to reason that it requires as many perspectives as possible to comprehend it. Epistemic vices are likely one of the main reasons why the democratisation of the domain of biblical interpretation still remains slow and excessively defensive of modern(/colonial) modes of knowing.

While one ought to be cautious of epistemic vices, on a more positive note, one

should also cultivate epistemic virtues. Medina (2012, 30-48) names them as humility, curiosity/diligence and open-mindedness. As opposed to privilege being the fertile soil in which vices grow, virtue tends to be nurtured in places of oppression. Epistemic humility is the acknowledgement of cognitive limits of one's own perspective. What it has to guard against is a form of self debasement that amounts to self-censorship. Rather it is a constant questioning of one's own position which reveals one's own blindspots. However identifying gaps in the lens one uses to understand the world is not enough and one has to motivate oneself towards epistemic curiosity and diligence. It is precisely because one recognises the limits of the perspectives one uses that one constantly seeks out alternatives especially those that come from oppressed, marginalised groups. This is all the more so as Medina points out, oppression submerges subaltern epistemologies. Thus, if one chooses to act against oppression and work towards liberation, then one has to be curious and diligently mine subaltern domains for their perspectives and epistemologies to be used to produce knowledge. Epistemic humility leading to epistemic curiosity cannot do without epistemic open-mindedness. Such open-mindedness is usually present in those who inhabit the dominant perspectives but still yearn to hold on to their own subalternised ones. It is because of the liminality of the position they occupy - a reluctant acceptance of dominant modes of knowing yet desiring for their voices to be heard - that they display increased sensitivity to the perspectives of others. They immediately recognise how sociohistorical locations shape epistemologies and creatively incorporate both dominant and submerged perspectives into what Medina (2012, 44) calls 'a kaleidoscopic consciousness'. Thinking again in the frame of biblical interpretation, as most biblical scholars begin in the place of the dominant historical criticism, we have to first practise epistemic humility in recognising the limits of historical modes of reading and then be propelled by epistemic curiosity to diligently look for alternative modes of reading especially by the marginalised while maintaining an open-mindedness that would incorporate the different voices into what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 51-84) calls, 'a republic of many voices'.

This is not to say just because one occupies a more privileged social location, it automatically means that one's reading practices would immediately be contaminated by epistemic vices. Rather the risk of developing these vices is considerably higher. Nor does it mean being in the position of the oppressed would immunise one to epistemic vices or naturally incline one to epistemic virtues. In Medina's (2012, 43) words, epistemic virtues are 'neither exclusive, nor universal, nor automatic features of oppressed groups'.

Furthermore, as Alison Wylie (2003) has argued, it is not a matter of transferring epistemic privilege from the oppressor to the oppressed because the oppressed are not immune to the vices associated with privilege. Rather we need to rehabilitate our vocabulary, as she avers, from epistemic privilege to epistemic advantage which means we pay extra attention to the epistemic standpoints of oppressed peoples without necessarily needing to completely agree with them. This is because as Elizabeth Anderson (2006) highlights, ultimately the complex problems in reality still require multiple perspectives even including those from current dominant, mainstream epistemologies. Thus she calls for more equity that requires participation from as many groupings of epistemic agents as possible rather than over-dependence on the perspectives that come from a single, particular dominant one. In terms of biblical interpretation, as Schüssler Fiorenza (1988) has eloquently put it, it is the decentering of traditional historical criticism rather than a displacement of it so as to create inhabitable spaces for other modes of reading to enter into the conversation.

What undergirds this awareness of epistemic vices and virtues is what Chen (2010) has argued to be reflexivity. This works against the predilection to detach ourselves from the reading process but instead compels us to engage with the reality that as knowledge producers, we are racialized, gendered subjects operating within networks of power. Therefore it is this form of robust reflexivity that constantly alerts us to our epistemic habits so as to correct epistemic vices and cultivate epistemic virtues, all the more since as biblical scholars we are handling a very dangerous text.

Towards a Singaporean Way of Reading

In the light of the above discussion, the theory of reading that I would be arguing in this thesis is that to read the Bible in the Singaporean context requires at the metatheoretical level a dialogue between different ways of knowing. Every theory of reading, be it the so-called disinterested, objective enterprise of historical criticism or an approach inclined towards emancipation like that of feminist criticism, is inevitably shaped by its sociohistorical location. This is what Mignolo (2012) calls, the locus of enunciation. Thus, any single locus of enunciation is liable to solipsism and thus hegemonic impulses, regardless of how disinterested or liberatory they claim to be. The issue remains: on what basis can such theories negotiate with one another? I wish to argue that this is to be found in the concept of contextualism I have discussed earlier where the reader is the intersecting point of inter-contextual and intra-contextual connections. The particular reader in question is myself, not as any reader but a biblical scholar in a postcolonial Asian

context of Singapore. As such, I have the responsibility as a public intellectual to gear reading the Bible towards transformative praxis and identity formation. Therefore, what I shall demonstrate is how identifying critical topoi within a context can organise, arbitrate and mediate between different perspectives so as to elucidate meanings of text in a way that ultimately serves the flourishing of all peoples in that space. This should be done without negating the otherness of the text. In fact, it is the diversity within the biblical text that facilitates what Medina (2012) calls ‘epistemic friction’ which is the contestation of different perspectives as shaped by their respective sociohistorical locations. This epistemic friction is what powers the democratisation of biblical interpretation through upholding diversity by maintaining the interaction of differing viewpoints in a dynamic fashion. Far from being detrimental to generating fresh insights, it is productive in imagining new ways of being and relating because the complex problems of the world requires a diverse pooling of resources of epistemically diverse agents more than the superiority of one single group of people from a select demographic and particular geopolitical location claiming unique access. Thus in order to transform the Bible from the coloniser’s text to one that is generative towards transformative praxis and identity formation, the reading of the Bible in contemporary postcolonial Asian contexts like that of Singapore has to be a dialogical process between diverse epistemic standpoints, especially of those that are marginalised. This form of contextual hermeneutics I am proposing for my home country, Singapore is what I would refer to as multicentric dialogue.

In order to do so, I chart out in chapter 2 the dominant discursive norms that control biblical interpretation in Singapore. Using Tracy’s (1981) portrait, I chart the inter-contextual and intra-contextual connections that permeate the three publics the biblical scholar is engaged in – academy, church and society. I argue that there are three important considerations that a contextual theory of reading needs to consider in its formulation – (un)problematic text, (un)problematic capitalism and (un)problematic secularism. Armed with these considerations, I do a survey of biblical hermeneutics in chapter 3 with the help of Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1999; 2009) paradigm criticism to leverage on the experiences of scholars before me both in the West and in Asia. I evaluate the usefulness of these reading approaches to my task and distil the key ideas that would inform its formulation.

In chapter 4, I plot the Singaporean hermeneutic that is needed to negotiate these obstacles by proposing a reading strategy consisting of two frameworks that work simultaneously with each other. The first is a conscientisation framework that checks

the posture of the reading. Here I map out a typology of four reading postures with the Singaporean nonspecialist Christian reader in mind. First, reading *without* encompasses those forms of readings done in the academy that is purely for the sake of the academic guild. It is often trapped in its own esoteric language and thus readers require fairly specialized training to access these writings adequately. Second, reading *for* strategies refer to those forms of reading that see nonspecialist readers as too poorly equipped to read the text properly and thus reads on behalf of them. Thus what is left for nonspecialist readers is to appropriate the meaning to their own contexts. Third, reading *with* approaches reflect the desire of liberation, feminist and postcolonial readers who want to read the text alongside marginalised communities of whom very often they see themselves as part of. However, such reading strategies are *limited* to the composition of the reading community. In the Singaporean context, the reading communities are often majority Chinese, affluent, English speaking and patriarchal. Hence as a corrective, I supplement a fourth reading posture which I call, reading *from*. It is here I work out the implications of contextualism on a reading strategy which enables me to determine what it means to engage the Other when reading the Bible contextually. Based on this typology, I argue that a Singaporean hermeneutic needs to be careful not to fall into modes of reading *without* and reading *for*, but instead be inspired by currently established forms of reading *with* and strain towards a reading *from*. The second is a conversation framework. Here I engage with the difficult questions of what it means to dialogue with contexts that are often geocolonially defined by the West as well as negotiating what Emmanuel Levinas posits as the exteriority of the Other in order to mobilise his or her standpoints to read biblical texts. Taking the above two frameworks as my theoretical anchors, I propose that ancient and modern contexts need to interact to distill the important questions that we need to bring before the text. This should still be informed by the text at hand. Having determined the parameters of the reading exercise, I bring together different loci of enunciation to the text. I argue that as Singapore is a meeting place of Asia and the West so the loci of enunciation brought to the text have to come from the West, Asia and the local context. These three loci of enunciation are then allowed to dialogue with one another to negotiate the kinds of meanings from the Bible that could help to inform transformative praxis and identity formation in the context of Singapore.

In chapter 5, I put the proposed hermeneutic to work on the stories of the book of Daniel. One of the main reasons why the stories of Daniel were chosen is that they are commonly taught in churches in Singapore. This is so much so that one of the few

commentaries produced locally is on the book of Daniel (see Wong 2006). Moreover the themes in the stories such as relating to authority, holding on to religious convictions and dealing with wealth and success resonate with modern day living in one of the most affluent cities in Asia. The first case study explores the topoi of ethnicity and identity in Daniel chapter 1. Here I read the text using standpoints garnered from the stories of two exiles in Asia – Confucius and diasporic Malay minorities in Singapore. The second case study looks at the complex relationship of religion, economics and politics in Daniel chapters 3 and 6. This reading is helped along with perspectives from two kinds of political prisoners – Mahatma Gandhi and political prisoners in Singapore. The final case study is of a more aesthetic nature as I probe the question of desire in the dreams and visions of kings in Daniel chapters 2, 4 and 5. I think about the difficult relationship between dreams and desires with two other conversational partners – Aśoka, one of the greatest Buddhist kings in history and Ma, a poorly educated, housewife of a typical Chinese household caught in the throes of industrialisation and modernisation in Singapore in the film, *Singapore Dreaming* (2006). I then draw these three conversations together by foregrounding myself as a specialist reader discursively formed in context to engage with (un)problematic secularism and capitalism raised in chapter 2 to demonstrate what transformative praxis and identity formation would look like through this multicentric dialogue.

In the concluding chapter, I return to the (un)problematic Bible as the object of desire among those who are from the academy and the church. I reflect on the objectivist enterprise of traditional historical criticism, particularly from critical studies of Daniel and conclude that rational detachment not only reinforces socially conservative readings of the Bible, but also potentially distracts us from deeper issues by prioritising the need to accurately address questions of dating, authorship, genre and source classification above all else. Rather, through epistemic friction with alternative perspectives especially that of marginalised communities, the issue of a ‘dangerous’ and ‘scandalous’ text is again brought to light and serves to reawaken our sensitivities once again. This leads me to reflect on the role of the Other in relation to the text and the specialist reader. I argue that this multicentric biblical hermeneutic reaffirms the proposal of epistemologists working from marginalised positionalities that the understanding of objectivity needs to be reconceived as an assemblage of multiple perspectives in dialogue with context rather than competitively seeking that single, transcendent standpoint to rule over all others. Furthermore, a pluralisation of approaches to the text in dynamic interaction also

challenges what Christian readers understand to be the 'authoritative' text. It echoes what Justin Ukpong (2002) has pointed out that the Bible is a 'site of struggle'. Thus rather than weaponising the Bible to serve the interests of one's interpreting community, be it in the academic guild or the church, which accounts for much of the issues of the (un)problematic Bible, reading biblical texts can be an exercise of negotiation in solidarity with the Other. In so doing, it gives pause to reconsider our (over-)confidence in our theories of reading or emancipatory strategies and honour the polyvocality of the Bible that also reflects the complexity of being in the contemporary world today.

Having scoped the boundaries of this thesis and the goals it is straining towards, it is time to turn to the next chapter where I explore how biblical interpretation is controlled in the nation-state of Singapore.

Chapter 2

The Bible in Between Academy, Church and Society: Challenges of Contextualising a Hermeneutic in Singapore

In the introductory chapter, I outlined the concept of contextualism I am using in conjunction with the biblical scholar as a public intellectual located in three publics: academy, church and society. For this chapter, I am interested in the dominant standpoints which determine the norms within which the Bible is read. I demonstrate how they more often than not present as challenges to a contextual reading that is reaching for transformative praxis and identity formation. Thus, I begin by locating myself as part of the Protestant church community of Singapore. While it is true that this thesis is written in a place located within the metropolitan West, I show later and throughout this thesis that the West, far from being an isolated entity that I work in, actually contributes some of the most important, external discursive influences that are acutely felt by many local reading communities. Using Tracy's (1981) social portrait of the theologian as outlined in chapter 1, I plot out the dominant standpoints operative in the publics of academy, church and society and their discursive influences on reading the Bible at an epistemological level. But first allow me to sketch briefly an overview of Singapore.

Brief Overview of the Singapore Context

The beginnings of Singapore's prominence could be traced to the time when the British East India Company first set foot on the island in 1819 so as to establish a port of call for their commercial operations. Initially the British did not have any interest in developing the local infrastructure until the late 19th century when according to Giok Ling Ooi (1991) the city demonstrated its economic worth in the region. In many ways, British colonial rule set up the foundations of education, healthcare, law and governance which are still largely intact even today.¹ Following the end of the Second World War, owing to the failure of the British to defend the city from Japanese invasion, the rise of Chinese nationalism with the Cold War and independence from colonial rule seen in many countries around the world among other reasons, restlessness in the local populace gave way to nationalist aspirations. This became increasingly salient when Singapore

¹ For a more detailed study of the history of Singapore, see the edited volume by Chew and Lee, *A History of Singapore* (1991). Relevant details of the history of Singapore will be taken up throughout this thesis.

gained self-government under the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1959. The nation-building efforts intensified and after its independence in 1965, many such measures took shape in the form of education, cultural and economic policies. The results of the work of the PAP today, which is still the current dominant political party, are well summed up by John Clammer (2011, 462):

a society that has taken the capitalist path, yet manages it according to socialist principles; one in which formal democracy exists within a highly authoritarian framework; a city state at the hub of Asian financial, commercial, and communication networks in which media is totally managed and censorship is rife.

With this general overview, let us now turn to the first public of the academy.

The Academy: Between Eurocentrism and Scientism

As it is well known, colonialism facilitated the arrival of Christianity into the region of Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. Thus it is not hard to imagine that many of the centres of theological education were set up by the West. Therefore, since one of the main concerns in contextualism is with the modern/colonial world system, I explore in this section how western biblical studies has universalised its presence in these theological institutions.

One of the dominant discursive forces in western biblical studies has been identified by Schüssler Fiorenza (1999) as 'scientism'. She developed this neologism as a way of describing any 'positivistic framework of much that passes for "science" inasmuch as this framework continues to legitimate 'kyriarchal oppressions'. She derives 'kyriarchy' from the Greek word, *kyrios* (which means 'lord') to describe 'comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination' that is 'evident in a variety of oppressions such as racism, poverty, heterosexism and colonialism' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, ix).

This is to deliberately distinguish it from 'scientific' which because of common usage has both positive and negative connotations. Generally, Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) takes the interpretative approaches in what she calls the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm to exemplify scientism which I discuss in the next chapter. There I further her proposal of scientism by using feminist standpoint theorists to argue that the manifestation of scientism in biblical studies can be traced to an ideological interpretation of objectivity. This understanding (intentionally?) fails to recognise that processes of knowledge production are inevitably contingent because of a misplaced belief in the possibility of producing

disembodied knowledge. Pertinent to my purposes here is the discursive effects of western claims to producing universally applicable knowledge on the broader context of Asia. On the one hand, Kwok (2005, 52-76) shows by placing western intellectual traditions relating to the Bible in an international frame that the universal applicability of their methods are globally asserted almost to the exclusion of local ways of interpretation.² On the other, not only western knowledge and epistemologies are imposed on Asian contexts, but also as Moonjang Lee (2009) argues, western concerns, priorities and debates are foisted on their peoples. As a result, many Asian communities are being brought into conversations that may not be of a priority in their own contexts or totally irrelevant altogether.³ Therefore, the issue that contextual reading faces with scientistic approaches is the Eurocentric tendency to impose western based theories of reading on nonwestern contexts.

Public of the Academy in Singapore

Such impositions could also be observed in the context of Singapore. Several of the prominent institutes of theological education in Singapore, such as Trinity Theological College, are affiliated to a larger organisation in Southeast Asia known as Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA). To the best of my knowledge, while there have been several commentaries on theological education in Southeast Asia including Singapore, there has not been much sustained reflection on theological education in the local context, not least in the arena of biblical interpretation.⁴ Nonetheless, I see the evaluations of theological education in Southeast Asia to be largely applicable to the Singaporean situation.

It is fair to say that most, if not all, centres of theological education in Southeast Asia continue to privilege western theologies and biblical studies derived through western methods in western contexts as the mainstay of the teaching curriculum (Hwa 1995; Choo

² Another telling example is Clines' (1998) review of participants and paper readers in the International Organisation for the Study of Old Testament (IOSOT) from 1953 to 1998 which notes that the proportion of non-European scholarship is too low to call itself international. See also Holter (2010).

³ See Samartha 1991, 1-12 who points out how difficult it is to break away from questions determined by western concerns about theology and safeguarding of Christianity when it comes to working through inter-religious relationships in Asia.

⁴ I explore some of the more prominent publications in the next chapter, namely Mark Chan's *Christology from Within and Ahead: Hermeneutics, Contingency and the Quest for Transcontextual Criteria in Christology* (2001), Johnson Lim's *Hebrew, Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Collected Works with New Essays and Sermons of Johnson T K Lim* (2010) and Yak Hwee Tan's *Re-Presenting The Johannine Community: A Postcolonial Perspective* (2008) where she applies postcolonial biblical criticism to understand the gospel of John. Suffice to say for now, other than Tan who tries to bring in the context of Singapore into her interpretative process, the other two authors are more cautious about incorporating or even discussing the socio-historical location of the scholar. As I explain in that chapter, it is hard to say that their intentions were to develop a contextualised methodology to reading the Bible as it appears to me to follow closer to the ethos of scientism and therefore more concerned with finding the *universally correct way* to read the Bible. Even if they were to represent attempts at contextualising a biblical hermeneutic, beyond these isolated works, there has not been any further discussions in this area.

2004; Huang 2009). Yung Hwa (1995) outlines the underpinnings of these educational approaches as narrow empiricism which privileges doubt, strict dualism in line with Greek philosophy and embrace of secularism which tends to ignore the supernatural. All these features resonate strongly with the scientistic bases discussed earlier. Furthermore, Lak Yeow Choo (2004) points out that debates that happened in western theology mainly continue to be re-staged in the Asian context which has taken the attention away from engaging with the real issues and concerns from the local context (see Hwa 1995 who also argues a similar point). In his opinion, this has resulted in Asian theological centres playing the constant game of catch-up as their engagements continue to lag behind important moments being unfolded in the Asian context. One such notable instance he raises is the Asian economic crisis in 1997. This is also evidenced in the distribution of faculty. Michael Poon (2010) demonstrates statistically that, with the possible exception of Indonesia, there is a tendency to allocate more staff to biblical studies and theology than history, missiology and religions which are more relevant to contextual concerns. Thus, there is a reproduction of western curriculum in many local theological centres in Southeast Asia which suggests such a strong endorsement of western scientistic methods to the extent that questions relevant to the context are often deferred for too long.

Not only is there an imposition of western based theories, but there is also an internalisation of its dominance on the part of Asian people. This is seen and reinforced through provincialisation of knowledge. Sugirtharajah (2003, 1-4) observes that much of the western guild is willing to tolerate the emergence of Asian based readings of the Bible and even production of theologies insofar that the knowledge is strictly only applicable to the context that it emerged from. Furthermore, it is not enough that the West deems contextual knowledge about the Bible as particular and therefore inferior to scientistic knowledge which sees itself as more universal. There are at least three local factors that contribute to further isolating or even discouraging contextual reading of the Bible in local theological institutions. First, many Asian Christians feel indebted to western training as most theologians, pastors and Christian educators are still trained in the West or western based methods. Thus it is little wonder that western based curriculum is prioritised (Hwa 1995). Theological institutions in the nonwestern world also contribute to the silencing of their own contextual hermeneutics in favour of trends of biblical hermeneutics in the West (Sugirtharajah 2003, 93-95). Second, most theological colleges or seminaries in Asia are independent of local universities and thus have no interaction with other more secular disciplines (Sugirtharajah 2003, 101).

Third, according to Hwa (1995, 5) segregation from the secular university has also created a dilemma which he calls the ‘tyranny of the laity’ – many academics have to operate according to local ecclesial agendas that would sometimes be ‘blind to their own weaknesses, spiritual and otherwise’ because they owe their financial support to these churches. While the first two do apply in the Singapore context, it is the third factor that is particularly salient. Poon (2014) points out that in the immediate post-war period, Singapore theological institutions were heavily involved in the ecumenical movement in the region which stressed the need for Christianity to engage with Asian contexts. However, since the 1950s, the influence of North American Christianity began to take root in Singapore which supplanted many of these efforts which I discuss this in the next section. Another important event which I also discuss later and in chapter 5 is the Marxist conspiracy in 1987 when according to Poon (2014), the government banned all involvement of local churches with the ecumenical movement. This facilitated the growth of socially conservative factions within the church who control funding to theological education. This resulted in distancing theological curriculum from contextual concerns.

This is not to say that there has not been some effort in contextualising the Bible to Singapore. Trinity Theological College, being one of the largest local theological institutes, houses the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (CSCA).⁵ This centre set up in 2006 publishes regularly about issues facing Christianity in contemporary Asia. For instance, it started the *Journal of Church and Society in Asia* which deals with a wide range of issues such as Christians in the public square, materialism and inter-faith issues (see for example, Poon 2013).

In sum, the reality which I am trying to paint here is how these factors, both local and international, come together to reinforce the hold of western based processes on local knowledge production about the Bible in Singapore according to its scientific assumptions. Therefore, the challenge is to decentre the West so as to create discursive space for local epistemologies and knowledge to develop. However, given the entanglements of the academy are not limited to the West, it is important to first survey the other two ‘publics’ – that of the church and society.

Church: Fundamentalism and its Excesses

Having explored the concerns over scientific methods in biblical scholarship, this

⁵ See <http://www.ttc.edu.sg/academics/centres/csc/> for further details (last accessed 31 Aug 2016).

section focuses on the church. Daniel Goh (2010) illustrates in his study of Christianity in Singapore that there are multiple levels of resonances between the growing fundamentalist movement within American Evangelicalism and the local church scene. Poon (2014) traces the increasing influence of North American Christianity in Singapore to the 1950s and attributes it to increasing efficiency of air-travel and the strategic geographical location to spread missions in the region. Taking cue from their observations, I explore the effects of this brand of fundamentalism on biblical interpretation in North America before drawing links to the local context.

I wish to clarify that the term ‘fundamentalist’ is not used here in a pejorative sense but rather as a descriptive tool. I agree with Kathleen Boone (1989, 1) who describes most Christian fundamentalists in North America as earnest seekers of the truth in their reading of the Bible and that their intentions is seldom purposefully malicious, however one may view the consequences. It is my experience in Singapore as well that many Christians who resonate and even embrace many of the features described below, no doubt want to lead honest and meaningful lives that they see pleasing to God. It is also likely that Christian fundamentalists do not lead lives that always follow their belief system or interpretations of the Bible. Nonetheless, the sociological dimensions of fundamentalism are beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather the central focus is on the way the Bible is read although I draw on social-scientific insights as and when necessary. In other words, I am not overly concerned about accounting for how the actions of fundamentalists in Singapore are consistent or inconsistent with their beliefs. Instead, I approach fundamentalism as a form of ideological *discourse* that influences and interferes with a contextual reading of the Bible. While I acknowledge the good intentions behind the fundamentalist movement especially in relation to contemporary society in Singapore, I also like to expose its excesses and even its potential points of irrelevance (or even irreverence!) to the Singaporean context.

Exploring Fundamentalism and its Effects on Biblical Interpretation

Needless to say, Christian fundamentalism is a broad-ranging phenomenon with varying expressions. Nevertheless, there have been considerable efforts in mapping the central characteristics of this fast-growing movement in the world. As highlighted earlier, North American Protestant fundamentalism is by far the most influential in churches in Singapore. Thus I limit the analysis mainly to the factors that affect such a contextual reading.

To begin, fundamentalism arose as a movement within the Protestant churches in North America when the churches started to face problems associated with urbanisation and secularisation. According to George Marsden (1991, 7-82), one main point of conflict could be seen in the social institution of education. Where once schools could teach about creation and every child knew the Ten Commandments, now they have been increasingly taken over by a scientifically based curriculum, not least, challenging creationism with evolutionism as proposed by Charles Darwin. Although the privatisation of religion was most markedly seen in education, it was also reflective of all aspects of public life in North America. This was coupled by increasing pluralism in many societies with high influx of foreign immigrants attracted by the successful modernisation of USA. Ever since the Civil War, many Protestants were losing confidence as they watched their society give up on its Christian values, undermine the basis of the Bible and become over-run by immigrants who espoused different value systems. Therefore the fundamentalist movement began to take root under the leadership of charismatic preachers such as Dwight L. Moody and emerged as a distinct form of Christianity that was seen to be organised in an exclusive manner with a strong evangelistic agenda.

Bearing in mind this brief overview of the fundamentalist movement, I attempt to sketch its contours with special attention to the features that influence biblical interpretation. One of the central tenets that fundamentalists heavily guard is the inerrancy of Scripture (Barr 1981, 40-89; Boone 1989, 23-38; Du Plessis 1991). Inerrancy essentially means that the Bible is without any form of error, be it historical or theological. This has been linked to the authorship of Scripture which fundamentalists see not as the product of flesh-and-blood writers such as Paul or Peter but rather the transcendent Author (with a capital 'A') who is God himself. In Boone's (1989, 23-38) review of literature by leading fundamentalists in America, she points out that the strict sense of inerrancy applies only to the original manuscripts which are mostly lost to us and therefore a more relaxed form of inerrancy pervades the interpretation of the Scriptures we have at hand. The vagaries of fundamentalist stand on inerrancy should not detain us.⁶ Rather the concern here is how it affects interpretation. In arguing for a more nuanced understanding of literalist reading by fundamentalists, James Barr (1981, 40-55) takes considerable effort to highlight a common misconception that fundamentalists privilege the plain reading of the text in noting how there is a tendency to vacillate between literal and non-literal interpretation. He points out that the main factor for deciding whether a reading is to be literal or not is

⁶ See also Barr 1981, 72-84 for a similar discussion.

the safeguarding of the inerrancy of Scripture. An often quoted example of such a reading is when there are differing accounts of what appears to be the same event in the Gospels. The common resolution that fundamentalists take is through a process of harmonisation (Barr 1981, 55-72). For example, the issue of chronology of whether the temple cleansing should have taken place in the beginning of Jesus' ministry (cf John 2:13-22) or towards the end of his ministry (cf Matt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-19; Lk 19:45-48) is resolved by stating that Jesus cleansed the temple twice. In sum, so long as the interpretation does not throw the accuracy of Scripture into doubt, it can be seen as an acceptable reading.

The claims of an inerrant document as expected of a divine author such as God himself serve to legitimise the contours of fundamentalist practice of reading. First most fundamentalists believe that the Bible follows a millenarian framework with the most prominently being dispensationalism.⁷ Together with inerrancy, this serves to foreground the second characteristic which is their other-worldly vision of salvation which assumes the final destruction of all known creation where only the souls of humans will survive. Of these, only those souls that have committed to the cause of Jesus Christ on earth converted through evangelism will be saved and all other souls are doomed to hell. The third characteristic is that although fundamentalists agree wholeheartedly that belief in the virgin birth, death and resurrection of Christ serve as prime criteria to be counted as a Christian, past experiences of organising church has shown them that this is insufficient to determine whether a person is a Christian from a human point of view. To most fundamentalists, the boundaries of membership in the people of God have to also be determined by the member's adherence to the inerrancy of Scripture, a premillennial view of reality and commitment to converting others through evangelism as the primary goal of Christian living (Ammerman 1991).

However, much as the fundamentalist communities would like to lead lives apart from the world they are part of other than their obligations to proselytise, it is not possible as many of them continue to be part of everyday living in the secular world. Therefore, it is not too surprising to see fundamentalist ventures into the public sphere advocating for values such as that of sanctity of life, centrality of the traditional family and education that still respects God. To Nancy Ammermann (1991, 45-47), this should be seen more as pragmatic participation out of necessity, lest the integrities of their communities become

⁷ One of the most vigorously debated issues in fundamentalism is the place of millennialism but it would seem that the most dominant strand is dispensationalism which was proposed by J. N. Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren and later taken up by C. I. Scofield from USA in *the Scofield Reference Bible* (Barr 1981; Boone 1989; Marsden 1991). See Scofield, 1896, 18-23 for the basic structure of dispensationalism. For further discussions on dispensationalist frameworks, see Barr 1981, 191-207; Boone 1989, 50-55, 79-81.

compromised by what is perceived as society's relativisation of moral values.

Therefore we find that the fundamentalist discourse can be said to be an absolutisation of Scripture that legitimises an other-worldly vision of salvation which supports aggressive proselytisation and safeguarding public moral values so as to protect the integrity of its communities in preparation for final judgement.

The Public of the Church in Singapore

Christianity was introduced to Singapore during the time of British colonial rule in 1819 by the Anglican Church which was the official church of the East India Company. The first missionaries who were also the first Congregationalists came as part of the London Missionary Society's Ultra Ganges Mission. Soon after, other denominations including Catholicism settled in Singapore (Goh 2005, 35-46). Western influence on local expressions of Christianity did not cease after decolonisation. In Protestant circles, North American Protestant Fundamentalism could be considered one of the most dominant influences in Singapore (Goh 2010; Chong 2015). That said, Christianity has been experiencing steady growth from 14.6% in 2000 to 18.3% in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011). A recent study conducted in 2013 by Terence Chong and Yew Foong Hui (2013, 44-60), showed that majority of church-going Protestants surveyed are Chinese at about 95.1% who are either from the emergent middle class that has achieved upward mobility or already privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

In a study done on Christianity and fundamentalism in Singapore, Goh (1999) points out that growth of fundamentalism in Singapore is of the Pentecostal variant.⁸ He argues that one main reason for its growth in Singapore is the increasing sense of alienation in a rapidly modernising society. The growing 'disenchantment' which Weber (1930) talks about that came through the establishment of capitalism, led many to seek a sense of transcendence within the Pentecostal church. The Bible in this synthesis takes central place in resolving many of these dilemmas involving self and its place in the world. Of course, Goh (1999) points out that one cannot ignore how rituals such as weekly Sunday worship services, charismatic leadership and social organisation also play important roles in mediating the text to the readers (see also Chong 2015). Thus, it

⁸ There are raging debates between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism both within the church and the academy (see for example, Splitter [1994] who builds a strong case that these two strands should be differentiated). Such conflict is also evident in the Singaporean context. However, several scholars who are specialists in Pentecostalism agree that Pentecostal reading practices in essence do not deviate from fundamentalist way of reading (Splitter, 1994; Anderson, 2013, 118-124). Since my concern is with the way the Bible is read, I shall not dwell on the doctrinal, theological and socio-political issues that attend the debates between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. Thus in this thesis, I address them together as far as possible.

would seem difficult to accurately determine how much of the pervading attitudes about Christians and society could be associated with the Bible but I do not think that it should deter us. In all likelihood, readings of the Bible both produce and are products of their environment. My focus rather, is highlighting the points of negotiation that contextual readings of the Bible have to contend with in the public of the church.

The central feature of inerrancy of Scripture noted earlier in fundamentalist interpretation could also be said to be pervasive in the Singaporean church context. For instance, City Harvest Church,⁹ one of the largest Pentecostal churches and Singapore Council of Christian Churches,¹⁰ a confederation of Bible Presbyterian churches explicitly state their position that the Bible is inerrant. The National Council of Churches Singapore, takes a more nuanced position that, the Bible is ‘the supreme standard of Christian faith and practice’.¹¹ Much of their views on inerrancy do not deviate from what has been earlier identified as the fundamentalist discourse about biblical interpretation. Chong and Hui (2013, 115-134) found that a majority of respondents display an overwhelming conviction that they have been commanded to evangelise people of different religions based on the mandate found in the Great Commission in the Bible. Christian communities also seem to believe that their values are distinct from other religious communities. This sense of difference is heightened by millennial expectations of the return of Christ and intensifies the need to save as many souls as they can (Chong 2015). Churches are generally morally conservative in relation to issues of sex and sexuality as well as supportive of a clear distinction of church and state which are not dissimilar to their fundamentalist counterparts in North America (Chong and Hui 2013, 84-114).

A further point has to be made with regard to participation of Christianity in the public square. Churches are mainly visible in public debates involving issues of homosexuality and casinos which suggests that Bible reading tends to be focused on personal morality.¹² Goh (1999) noted that in spite of these apparent differences with the state, the conservative orientation of the church are largely in line with the state.

9 <http://www.chc.org.sg/#!/mission-and-beliefs/> (last accessed 30 Jan 2016).

10 <http://www.sg-sccc.org/aboutus/statements/> (last accessed 30 Jan 2016).

11 <http://nccs.org.sg/about/constitution/> (last accessed 30 Jan 2016).

12 On the issue of homosexuality, Christians were involved in public debates on at least 2 occasions. In 2003, they opposed the government opening up top civil service jobs to homosexuals (see Tan and Lee 2007 for further details) and in 2009, a group of Christians allegedly took over the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) because their Christian convictions did not agree with the organisation’s position on homosexuality (see Chong 2011 for further details). For National Council of Churches Singapore’s (NCCS) statement on this issue, see <http://nccs.org.sg/2009/04/30/aware-30-april-2009/> (last accessed 30 Sep 2016).

With regards to the casinos, the government’s proposal to build two of them was met with opposition from some religious groups, especially Christians. See Tan 2010 for further details. For NCCS’s statement on this issue, see <http://nccs.org.sg/2010/12/04/casinos/> (last accessed 11 Oct 2016).

This should not be surprising. Like the North American situation, fundamentalist conservatism also sits naturally with the Chinese majority and upwardly mobile church which is usually patriarchal and would mainly act in the public square when the integrities of their communities are perceived to be threatened.

Thus what is emerging here is that the environment, regardless of how much of it is the product of certain ways of reading the Bible, conforms interpretations of the Bible to norms that are very similar to that of North American Protestant Fundamentalism. What concerns a contextual reading of the Bible is what feminist and postcolonial biblical critics (whom I discuss in the next chapter) have identified as the idealisation of text which obscures the embedded patriarchal and potentially colonial impulses. Furthermore, reading the Bible in the public of church unnecessarily restricts its application to mainly personal morality and focuses attention almost exclusively on evangelism. In other words, the Bible is rendered largely irrelevant to society other than portending its ultimate destruction. It is not difficult to see how this works against a contextual hermeneutic that is moving towards transformative praxis.

However, there is one distinct quality that separates Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal fundamentalisms which further complicates biblical interpretation in Singapore. It is the former's theology of success (Goh 1999). In following a literal interpretation of certain Bible passages (such as 2 Cor 8:9 and Gal 6:7-9), it is often propagated that one is able to achieve success or riches in this life if one donates to the church. The more one donates or 'sows', the more one is able to get back in return or 'reap' (Goh 1999, 103-104). Chong (2015) argues that this form of theology has an elective affinity to the highly capitalist, achievement-oriented society in Singapore which has significantly contributed to the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal church attendance.

In sum, fundamentalist discourse in the Singaporean context absolutises the Bible by subscribing to a belief in inerrancy. More crucially, because of its affinity with the homogenous makeup of most Christian communities in Singapore which espouse Chinese conservative, bourgeois patriarchal values, reading the Bible becomes an alienating exercise that on one hand, corrodes inter-religious and inter-cultural interaction by burdening it with the need to convert the Other, and on the other, cultivates apathy towards contemporary society by reducing it to mere concern about certain sets of moral values, particularly in relation to the traditional family. For certain significantly growing subsections of the Christian community, there is the looming danger of materialism

masquerading in the garb of religiosity found in its theology of success. That being said, it is also important to take into consideration that Singaporean Christians are seeking meaning in a rapidly modernising, capitalist society which is the focus of the next section.

Society: Friend or Foe?

As mentioned in chapter 1, Tracy (1981) thinks of the public of society in the contemporary world as an unchecked expansion of the technoeconomic realm into the realm of polity and of culture. While I agree to a large extent that it is true of Singapore,¹³ he has overlooked certain other aspects of society which are also relevant in determining the reading strategy. It is very likely in writing from a US context in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was still operating from a society that is pre-dominantly monocultural which still holds on to its Christian traditions albeit amidst secularising trends. In many cities in Asia, not least in Singapore, I raise at least two further characteristics of these societies in relation to reading the Bible: first, Asia is home to many religious communities with some having strong textual traditions that rival western Christianity such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism. This is not to mention that Christianity remains in many Asian countries including Singapore, a minority religion in spite of the great gains that certain sections of the West seem to celebrate. Second, being a postcolonial nation state in the midst of Muslim majority countries, Singapore has resorted to secularism as an ideology to arbitrate among the religions (Chua 2003). This is, of course, not unfamiliar to many western contexts where the church and state relations are strained with decreasing social significance of religion. The decisive difference lies in the fact that Christianities in many Asian countries do not enjoy the privilege of being part of a long tradition but are relative newcomers. Moreover, Christianity had often accompanied colonial ventures thereby earning itself a significant degree of notoriety especially among more traditional, religious communities. Therefore in surveying the challenges of reading the Bible in Singapore, one needs to consider three main issues: capitalist transformation of Asian societies, ideology of secularism as a vital source for managing religions and commonly held perception of Christianity as the white man's religion in a multicultural, multiscriptural environment.

¹³ The absorption of the arts into the technoeconomic realm has been traced by several scholars. For instance, Chua (2008) demonstrates through Singapore's treatment of East Asian pop culture that the state is more interested in importing and consuming rather than developing and producing its own culture. Wong (2012) shows how the theatre scene was gradually domesticated into the economic interests of its rich patrons such as the main banks in Singapore and multinational corporations. Hill and Lian (1995, 236-241) outlines more broadly how the state is slowly taking over the arts sector for the purposes of economic gain.

Neocolonialism – The Call to Read in Solidarity with the Marginalised

Neocolonialism was first developed as a concept by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president after the nation's independence from British rule, in his book, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965). He defined the essence of neocolonialism to be

the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from the outside (Nkrumah 1965, ix).

Robert Young (2001, 44-70) points out that one of the most significant contributions of Nkrumah is to establish that colonialism is not over but has mutated into a new form. This has been instrumental in postcolonial studies especially in analysing present world systems. It has also facilitated exploration into issues of dependency and internal recolonisation. However many of these theories still tend to reduce the analysis to its material dimensions. Therefore one of the more significant recent developments that Young highlights is seeing neocolonialism as a *cultural* discourse (see also Cox 2002). Vincent Tucker (1996) points out that in thinking about how to transform current economies, one should be careful not to fall into the fallacy common to many Marxist analyses which over-determine the material dimensions and consequently bracket out culture altogether. According to him, the power of global capitalism lies in its power to shape social imagination using cultural icons and symbols. This is significant for two reasons. First, the Bible, as I show in chapter 5, is a cultural product that participates mainly in the ideological network of power. Second, the deepest impact of neocolonialism in Singapore is ideological in nature. It is this latter reason that I explore here.

The incorporation of the cultural discourse of global capitalism into the founding ideology of Singapore has been argued by many scholars who point out that the nation building project is fundamentally built on the ideology of economic pragmatism.¹⁴ The official state narrative is built on an acute sense of vulnerability based on geographical and historical factors. Geographically, Singapore is keenly aware that it is the only non-Islamic state surrounded by Islamic states (Chua 2010). Historically, the riots of the 1950s and 1960s¹⁵ and the alleged Marxist Conspiracy of the 1980s¹⁶ are often used

¹⁴ See Chua (1995) who has done a thorough study tracing the development of this ideology and how it has been embedded into state machinery. See also Tamney 1992; Hill and Lian 1995, 62-66, 188-219; Chua 2010.

¹⁵ There are several conflicts that dominate the national narrative. First, there was the dispute over Maria-Hertogh, a girl of Eurasian descent, between her adopted Muslim family and her Eurasian birth parents which led to serious rioting in December 1950 that claimed 18 lives and left 173 injured (Clutterback 1984, as cited in Tong, 2007, 232). Second, there was a series of riots between the Chinese and Malays in 1964 over the rights of the indigenous Malays in Malaysia and Singapore that claimed the lives of 22 with 454 injured (Clutterback 1984, 321, as cited in Tong, 2007, 234).

¹⁶ Twenty two were arrested under the Internal Security Act for allegedly plotting a Marxist Conspiracy against the government in 1987 and were never brought to trial. See chapter 5 where I explored this in greater detail.

to prove that the state is prone to social instability (Chua 1995, 11-12, 30-31; Hill and Lian 1995, 62-66, 206-207). Having no recourse to a common history or culture, the government shrewdly chose economic development as the primary foundation of the nationalist discourse. This discourse that weds political and social stability with economic development is promulgated as key to survival in a rapidly modernising and globalising world so as to justify tight state control. As a result of privileging economic development, all other sectors of society be it political, cultural or religious are subordinated to this imperative. As Gramsci points out, hegemony cannot be based on coercion alone but requires consensus building. In Singapore, consensus is built chiefly through the education system supplemented by nationalist projects.¹⁷

Like many capitalist societies, Singapore, too, faces issues with an increasing income gap exacerbated by rising costs of living and over-crowding. Jacqueline Loh (2011), who was the previous director of a local think-tank, Lien Centre for Social Innovation, which researches local economic trends, raised concern over the worrying trend of increasing Gini coefficient¹⁸ in Singapore with insufficient safety net measures. She comments that Singapore is one of the world's fastest growing economies, having bested United States in 2010 in terms of economic output, but also has one of the highest income disparities in the world. The same centre released another research report in 2013 that showed that income disparity has not shown any signs of abating and hence argued for an official poverty line so as to give the issue greater transparency (Donaldson et al 2013). In essence, the remarkable economic growth of Singapore while creating wealth for some, is trapping many others in poverty and worsening their conditions. Thus any contextual reading of the Bible in Singapore has to contend with this reality if it hopes to participate in transformative praxis.

Secularisation – Negotiating Muscular Secularism

The second issue in the public of society is that of secularism. According to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act passed in 1990, which legislates the management of religion in Singapore, Singapore is nothing less than 'a secular state' (White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1989, 1). Although acknowledging that the

¹⁷ See Barr and Skirbis (2008) who have done a comprehensive qualitative analysis of how systems of education intertwine with elitism and state ideology. Also see Hill and Lian (1995, 196-241) who traces how ideology was initially communicated through religious education which was later abandoned for more secular civil and moral education as well as focusing efforts in regulating civil society through various nationalist projects and administrative changes.

¹⁸ Gini coefficient, named after the Italian statistician, Corrado Gini, is an economic measure of income disparity in a country on a scale of 0 to 1 where the higher the number, the greater the gap.

freedom of religion is a constitutionally protected right,¹⁹ it nevertheless asserted that religion has to be 'kept rigorously separate from politics'. In fact, religion has no role in politics even if it helps to promote the common good. The fear is that if anyone were to get involved in politics in the name of religion, it would have a domino effect of encouraging other religious groups to participate and therefore it would only be a matter of time before 'radical social action' takes place (White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1989, 1). This was reiterated again in the National Day Speech in 2009 by prime minister Lee Hsien Loong. In order to maintain harmony in society, he said that 'all groups must exercise tolerance and restraint, religion must stay separate from politics, the government must remain secular and must preserve the common space that all Singaporeans share'.²⁰ Kumar Ramakrishna (2010), a local political scientist, argues the need to embrace what he calls 'muscular secularism'. He mainly cites the escape of Singapore's allegedly most wanted terrorist, Mas Selamat Kastari in 2008²¹ and the affair of Christians seemingly taking over a local women's rights group called Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in 2009²² as proof that 'religious fundamentalism [is] a serious existential threat to the social fabric of the nation' and is therefore a 'national security issue of utmost importance' (Ramakrishna 2010, 2). In his mind, Singapore needs to continue to uphold 'muscular secularism' which he sees as heavily qualifying the freedom in the Constitution with 'restrictive legislation circumscribing freedom of expression and association as provided for under such laws as the Sedition and Internal Security Act' (Ramakrishna 2010, 14). Thus how can biblical interpretation negotiate in such an environment that militantly divides what is secular and what is religious?

One possible way out is to distinguish carefully between secularism and secularisation. According to Harvey Cox (2013, 22-26), secularism is a form of *ideology* that could be traced to the French revolution in 1789 which set in motion the dissolution of the previous alliance of church and state. At the very heart of secularism is the separation of religion from politics. Benign as it may sound on the surface, Talal Asad (2003, 5, emphasis his) warns us that secularism is itself similar to religion in developing

19 This can be found in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 15.

20 See <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/highlights-pm-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-rally-speech-2009> (last accessed 30 Sep 2016).

21 Mas Selamat Kastari who was convicted for being involved in a Jemaah Islamiah cell in Singapore, escaped detention on 27 Feb 2008 which resulted in a year long manhunt where he was finally apprehended in Skudai, Malaysia (see Ramakrishna 2010 for further details).

22 In the 2009 elections of AWARE, 9 out of 12 executive committee positions went to new members during the 2009 elections. The media reported that it turned out that 6 out of the 9 new members were from the same church, Church of Our Saviour and implied that the reason for the takeover was their dissatisfaction with the organization's position with respect to homosexuality and the need to enforce a morality based on Christian convictions. See Chong 2011 for further details.

its own concepts of ethics and politics which constructs a '*political medium* (representation of citizenship) [that] redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion'.

Secularisation is a term to denote the process by which secularism was implemented. The reason why a separate term is coined is to make room for the fact that the execution of any single ideology has unintended consequences. It is these unintended consequences that lead theologians like Harvey Cox and David Ford to argue that it is profitable to treat these two terms separately. What they both emphasise in their own ways is that it has allowed for the democratisation of public spaces that were previously dominated by Christianity. Cox (2013, 26-45) points out if one reads the narratives of creation, exodus and commandments at Sinai as debunking the myth that nature is at the behest of capricious spirits or could be manipulated through magic, there is positive resonance with what the Enlightenment did to religion. In a similar way, the Exodus account depicts a God who cannot be controlled by any religious institution or imperial empire which then delegitimises any claim to political power through religion. The Laws at Sinai represent a mature polity willing to abandon their precritical illusion of transcendent values and adopt a written law that can be continually debated and adjusted. In his view, these narratives are cognisant of the dangers when the empire uses religion for its own ends. In this light, he argues that secularisation potentially reflects the Bible insofar that it maintains critical distance between religion and the world that allows for productive dialogue for change. In addition, Ford (2007, 47-50) demonstrates that the historical forces beginning with the Enlightenment that produce secularisation also paved the way for the creation of civil society which has been an overall positive force for the common good. Moreover, it seems to me that he shares Cox's positive evaluation when he highlights that this has ushered in a new age where deadly conflict is no longer the only option to resolve differences among religions as he observes that the churches in Europe are more engaged in conversation and cooperation with other religious traditions.

Secularism, when seen in its pure ideological form, seems more like a hardened, rigid worldview that militantly maintains the divide between religion and politics through privatising and silencing religion. Ford (2007, 51-52) elaborates that one key failure of secularism is that it replaced the religious quest for meaning and purpose with the pursuit of money and arms. Therefore, it has not only facilitated the flourishing of communist, fascist and capitalist regimes but also provoked violent retaliations from religious factions.

He reminds us that September 11 was also a product of economic globalisation, imposition of western liberal democracy and foreign military occupation of Third world countries by Western capitalist nations, especially North America. In sum, what this means for a contextual reading is that I need to pursue the gains of secularisation while dissociating its secularist ideological roots without returning to a premodern, medieval state where church and empire were problematically entangled.

Multiculturalism – Listening to Others

The third issue of concern is the location of Christianity within the multicultural environment of Singapore. Western missionaries entering into Asia often found themselves vacillating between acknowledging the validity of other religious and cultural traditions and re-asserting the superiority of Christianity (Kwan 2014, 75-91). Stanley Samartha (1990) identifies the roots of their dilemma to be on the one hand, the fear of syncretism that might compromise the doctrinal purity of the Christian faith and on the other, the need to safeguard the authority of Christianity based on a rigid monotheistic understanding of religion. More often than not, missionaries erred on the side of being conservative and built the legitimacy of the Bible on the denigration of all other scriptural texts as false and sometimes dangerous. This was done through various ways such as upholding the reformation understanding of *Sola Scriptura* (Lee 2008) or appealing to the awakened historical consciousness within biblical studies that enabled western missionaries to conclude further how other religious texts are built on superstition and false belief (Sugirtharajah 2001, 70-73). Moreover, S. Wesley Ariarajah's (1985) reflection on the state of inter-religious relations pointed out that the church and its mission is perceived as a threat by a majority of people in Asia. No matter how much Christians think of it as an extension of God's love, it is still seen as violently replacing the faith of others. As he poignantly quotes a person of another faith, 'Two thousand years of Christian love...is enough to make anyone nervous!' (Ariarajah 1985, 70).

According to the 2010 population census, 18.3% of the resident population in Singapore is Christian, 44.2% Buddhists and Taoists, 14.7% Muslims, 5.1% Hindus and 17% not professing to follow any religion (Singapore Department of Statistics 2011). As highlighted earlier, Christianity has been experiencing constant growth. In this multicultural and multi-religious context, in addition to the suspicions towards religion as noted in the political discourse in the previous sections, there have been several issues in society at large that point to a more general apprehension of Christianity.

One example of this is a commonly practised, highly respected ritual of ancestral worship among those who practise Chinese religion in Singapore. As Chee Kiong Tong (2007, 77-156) points out, Christianity in Singapore is largely associated with British colonial rule and the language of English which has come to dominate all other native languages. Many Christian churches and para-church organisations are generally sceptical of other religious traditions. Intense proselytisation in the 1980s and 1990s created much anxiety among the other more indigenous religious traditions as they see many of their children convert to a religious tradition that is inimical to their own. In the particular case of ancestral worship, practices are commonly reduced in the Christian imagination to a form of worshipping other gods because of the rituals involved such as the use of incense and the setting up of the altar. Ignoring the complexity of such practices that implicate personal values like filial piety and social values like building community cohesion, the practices are couched in purely religious terms and refuted on the basis of the Bible's prohibition of idolatry. This is not the place to evaluate the validity of various biblical interpretations as this has been well discussed elsewhere in similar contexts (see Yeo 1994; Lo 2003) but the intention here is to point out that this is illustrative of the use of the Bible in an aggressive manner vis-a-vis other religious traditions.

This is also reflected in the media. Christianity has been placed in a negative light on numerous occasions in the last few years. Just to name a few, in addition to the AWARE saga mentioned earlier, there were reports of the first trial held under the Seditious Act which sentenced a Christian couple to prison for distributing evangelistic tracts to Muslims (*The Straits Times*, 29 May 2009) and the involvement of a prominent senior pastor with the Internal Security Department for posting YouTube videos which showed him making insensitive remarks about other religions (*The Straits Times*, 9 Feb 2009). The interpretations of the Bible in these two instances followed the fundamentalist leanings highlighted earlier. A local law professor, Li Ann Thio (2010) pointed out that the disproportionate show of force on the part of the state demonstrated its low tolerance towards the actions of local churches in relating to other religions. I would like to further comment that it is not purely the state that is suspicious of the actions of Christians. There was clearly a lack of intervention on the part of civil society which attests to its quiet endorsement of the state's actions.

In short, these two examples point to the portrayal of Christianity as an aggressive force and threat to other religions and cultures which is very much alive in the popular

imagination of Singaporeans. Therefore the challenge is whether it is possible for the Bible which is the main source of authority and inspiration for everyday Christians to be read in such a way to bring about reconciliation.

Bringing the Three Publics Together

In short, this brief survey has shown how in the public of society, reading the Bible is faced with the challenge of economic inequalities, suppression of religious voices by secularist discourses and the suspicions of other religious/cultural communities. In the public of the church, it is faced with fundamentalist challenges of inerrancy and dispensational leanings that often read the Bible with what Barr (1981, 85-90) calls 'maximal conservatism'. And in the familiar setting of the academy, it needs to contend with the hegemony of scientific based approaches. In this section, I bring the three publics in closer conversation with one another so as to give proper articulation to the questions that need to be wrestled with both in developing the methodology as well as in the reading itself (See Figure 1).

A recurrent theme that runs through each of the publics in the Singaporean context is definitely the West. From the academy, there is scientific

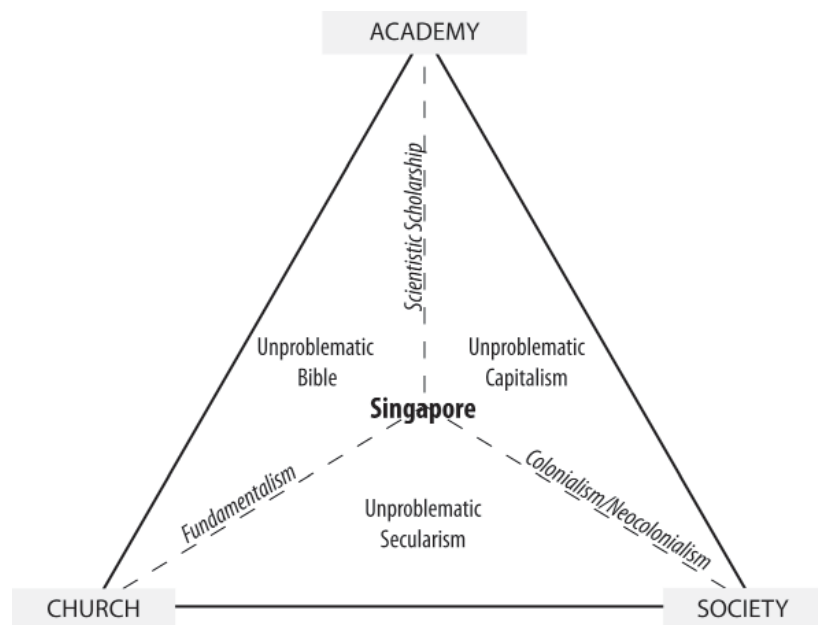


Figure 1: Challenges that Constructing a Singaporean Hermeneutic Faces

scholarship founded on the principles of empiricism and positivism which legitimates its hegemonic hold on meaning of the Bible even across geographical boundaries. This comes in direct competition with the church and the ever-expanding reach of Protestant Fundamentalism especially from the USA which upholds its view of inerrancy of the Bible that forms the basis for its dualistic view of reality where the church's main responsibility is to search for souls to rescue from the evil world. Both these publics operate in the background of western societies which are now largely controlled by capitalist ideology

that has also infiltrated many nonwestern contexts through the vehicle of globalisation.

As these powerful influences enter the Singaporean context, they synergise with various local movements in a postcolonial nation building project to create several important challenges for a contextual reading. As the following would make clear, I have chosen to signify these issues as (un)problematic as they are very often obscured by our privilege as biblical scholars.

First, there is the challenge of what I consider to be the (un)problematic Bible. By this, I mean that the Bible does not pose a threat to the *intentions* of those who see themselves as its guardians or 'civil servants'. While the questions posed by traditional biblical scholarship and Protestant fundamentalist movements diverge significantly, both still build their very authority on their respective understandings of what the biblical text is. Both parties lay claim to knowledge production about the Bible not only in the West albeit competitively, but also globally. In so doing, they make it difficult for readers outside their respective geopolitical locations to pose new questions about the text, much less raise issues about its ethical ambivalences. Furthermore, it is not only those of the West, but also local academics and priests trained in the West who contribute to reproducing these structures that hinder proper engagement of biblical texts with other sacred texts, indigenous cultures and local concerns of capitalism, secularism and multiculturalism. This is often facilitated by insisting on the primacy of either historical questions generated by western academic guilds or fundamentalist agendas of conversion. The end-result is that Bible reading as contextual becomes increasingly arduous as one has to negotiate the difficult terrain of academic and ecclesial territorialism.

The second challenge is (un)problematic capitalism. Economic pragmatism has been integrated into the technocratic state's ideology and pervades all aspects of life in Singapore society. This reality remains largely unchallenged through reading the Bible from the other two publics of academy and church. Biblical scholarship committed to the objectivist ideology of scientism tends to make it difficult to relate the Bible directly to contemporary issues facing Singapore in the Asian context. Church soaked in fundamentalist doctrines would preferentially subscribe to a quietist mode of religion in accordance to a dispensationalist outlook and thus separate itself from the global realities of economic injustices. It also does not help that the theology of success embraced by certain growing sections of Christianity contributes to entrenching capitalist values. Moreover, the main stakeholders in society with vested interests to maintain the status

quo tend to come from the Chinese conservative majority from privileged backgrounds. And as if things are not already difficult, the dominant demographic in the church happens to overlap with those who constitute the main beneficiaries of a capitalist system in Singapore.

Both the above challenges are closely related to the third challenge of (un)problematic secularism. As Walter Brueggemann (2005, 6-15) traces, the ascendancy of traditional historical criticism coincided with the Enlightenment and its understanding of reason. Many western societies were undergoing secularisation with declining influence of the church and the rise of scientific methods in many fields of work and study. My concern is how it coincides with the very same forces that gave birth to the modern nation state. Thus in the public of academy and society in Singapore, there is synergistic consolidation of secularism as an ideology where now only the secularised space is an acceptable ground of public interaction. The church, on the other hand, now marginalised from the public square responded with its own fundamentalist discourse which ironically endorsed a retreat with a highly selective engagement with contemporary society. At the same time in Singapore, secularist ideology dictated that religious participation in the public square was often regarded with a high index of suspicion. Suspicion of Christianity in particular is not limited to the state but other religious and ethnic communities as well. This is of course not helped by fundamentalist discourse that often uses the Bible to justify that the the only way Christianity is able to co-exist peacefully is through converting the other to be like oneself. Therefore we find that these mutually reinforcing discourses compel the reading of the Bible to comply with secularist ideology, that is, to keep religion and in the case of Christianity, the Bible completely separate from politics.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the transformations of each public also possess positive elements. In terms of scientific scholarship in the academy, as Lee (2009) observes, even the most trenchant nonwestern critics of western theology still continue to cite western sources in their work. He shows that it is not only difficult to ignore the knowledge accumulated through this mode of inquiry but more importantly also that it is not desirable and even redundant to re-invent the wheel. Furthermore, it has been helpful in illumining processes of knowledge production especially the influence of ancient empires and internal religious strife for power.²³ The fundamentalist discourses in the realm of the church serve as powerful reminders that the Bible is shared by many everyday Christians who seek meaning in a disenchanted world. And secularisation of

²³ I further elaborate on this in chapter 3.

civil society has opened up fresh new opportunities for interactions among people of different religions and different cultures, especially in the area of working for the common good.

Therefore based on the challenges listed I propose that there are two important tasks that formulating a contextual hermeneutic needs to address in the Singaporean context. First, it has to re-problematise the Bible by *decentering* scientistic approaches in order to create discursive space for engaged readings and *denaturalising* fundamentalist views of inerrancy of Scripture with its dispensational moorings. Second, it has to re-problematise capitalism and secularism by addressing issues of economic injustice, religious suppression and tensions between Christianity and other religious and ethnic communities in Singapore.

To sum up, this review has shown that a Singaporean reading of the Bible has to meet three challenges of (un)problematic Bible, (un)problematic capitalism and (un)problematic secularism that have segregated the three publics of academy, church and society. Such dichotomisation of space not only contributes different sets of problems from each of the publics but also acts synergistically to militate against the goals of identity formation and transformative praxis. It is also important to note my personal entanglements in the challenges I have identified. After all, as I elaborate in chapter 4, I belong to the emerging middle class in Singapore. Moreover my training both as a medical professional in Singapore and as a biblical scholar in the West place me firmly within the centre of scientism and its influences. This is not to mention that part of my privilege is contingent on supporting secularism in all publics of the academy, church and society both in the West and in Singapore. Thus, contextual interpretation has to include uncovering and disrupting the privilege(s) of the privileged reader. In fact, if one were to be honest, in order to produce knowledge that is truly objective, such privileges cannot be elided over with a scientific sleight of hand. That said, I am getting ahead of myself. There remains the need to review the landscape of biblical hermeneutics which I do in the next chapter beginning in the Metropolitan West to its peripheries in the West and Asia, bearing in mind the contextual challenges raised here. This is in order to evaluate the different reading approaches for useful strategies that could aid in synthesising a contextual biblical hermeneutic.

Chapter 3

Journey Back from the West: Biblical Hermeneutics and an Asian Turn

Having plotted the main challenges that synthesising a contextual hermeneutic needs to take into consideration, I embark in this chapter on a journey back from the West. I begin at what Sugirtharajah (2012, 39) terms ‘the high noon of modern colonialism’ referring to traditional historical criticism that is one of the most notable achievements of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century. The main aim is to see how current reading approaches engage the three (un)problematics identified in the Singapore context to distil important considerations and useful strategies. However in order to better engage with present reading strategies from a contextualist perspective, there is need, as feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code (1993) has put it, to ‘tak[e] subjectivity into account’. In order to do so, what is required is a (re-)examination of the ‘geography of the epistemic terrain’ (Code 1993, 39). Thus, I have structured the following survey of biblical hermeneutics primarily according to its place in the epistemic terrain so as to better understand the relationship between socio-historical location and the methodologies generated. In the light of the above, I focus on paradigm criticism which has mapped biblical hermeneutics according to family resemblances and shared interests. However as the following would show, one important issue with paradigm criticism in relation to a Singaporean hermeneutic is a relative neglect of Asian hermeneutics. Thus, I cross over from the West to enter into Asia and outline the various movements in biblical hermeneutics there before concluding at my country of origin, Singapore. As I negotiate both the difficult and treacherous bends and survey the majestic mountains and picturesque landscapes along the way, I hope to distil from the experiences of hermeneuts who have gone before me the important lessons that a neophyte construction of a contextual hermeneutic needs to pay attention to, learn from and develop. With this brief itinerary in mind, I begin with the heart of the West.

Reading the Bible in the West: Metropolitan Centres and Peripheries

In trying to understand how biblical hermeneutics interact with one another, Segovia and Schüssler Fiorenza have both argued in their own ways for paradigm

criticism. Segovia (1995a, 6) defines paradigm as an ‘umbrella model of interpretation’ which has a ‘certain sharing of values and practices, of theory and criticism’. As he quickly points out, it does not mean that practices within a single paradigm are almost identical to one another but rather that there are distinct presuppositions and common influences that bring them together. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 53) understands it to be ‘an intellectual and social space and scholarly home’ where it is not only the sharing of common values but also ethos and interests that has a distinct socio-political dimension. In other words, by grouping biblical hermeneutics according to the social location of the readers proposing them, it aims to see an interpretation in its broadest context where theory and subjectivity interact rather than the restricted view of theory as pure abstraction.

Paradigm criticism also goes beyond analysing the relationship between reader and hermeneutics to foregrounding the hierarchy of knowledge that maintains certain biblical hermeneutics as dominant such as traditional historical criticism (Segovia 2012). In other words, paradigm criticism seeks to understand what makes certain modes of readings dominant as opposed to others. Furthermore, by provincialising dominant epistemologies into a paradigm, it creates space for other submerged subjectivities to articulate their hermeneutics. That said, as Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) points out paradigms are not mutually exclusive categories that function independently of one another. In fact, she goes further to say that it is possible to think of paradigms synchronically so as to allow interaction to occur that is generative especially in the area of liberation and ethics. This is in spite of that there are obvious conflicts and contradictions between different paradigms.

In short, paradigm criticism brings together different approaches based on certain core characteristics, reveal different sociological dimensions that seem to give certain reading strategies privilege while silencing others and, creates space for relatively submerged voices to articulate their hermeneutics.

Paradigm Criticism Reconceived

Schüssler Fiorenza (1999; 2009) developed paradigm criticism which comprises four paradigms. Her model expands and develops that proposed by Segovia.¹ In the

¹ Segovia (2000a) proposed four main paradigms in biblical interpretation. The first paradigm is historical criticism where the text is seen as the means to reconstructing the historical context and meaning resides either in the world behind the text or the author who wrote it or both. The second paradigm is literary criticism where the text is now the medium. The main premise is that the text is seen as an artistically constructed whole which holds meaning rather than the historical context. The third paradigm is cultural criticism which understands the text as both a medium and a means. Instead of drawing on the historical context to determine the reader and audience or bringing out the implied reader and audience in literary approaches, it relies on ideological critique using Neo-Marxism or contemporary social-scientific approaches in sociology and anthropology. Where the first three paradigms have remained stable, the fourth

interest of space, I have chosen to mainly focus on Schüssler Fiorenza's model as it takes into consideration the other public of the church which Segovia has excluded. For each paradigm, bearing in mind the analysis of the Singapore context in chapter 2, I evaluate its relevance to contextual interpretation in Asia in terms of its key contributions and limitations. This is before I evaluate the usefulness of paradigm criticism as a whole to synthesising a contextual methodology.

*Religious-The*logical-Scriptural Paradigm*

This paradigm was originally named the *doctrinal-fundamentalist* paradigm (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 31-56) before it was revised to *religious-the*logical-scriptural* paradigm (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009, 62-67).² The main reason for this expansion is not only to move away from a dualistic understanding of the church and academy which she calls 'dual-domain', but also to acknowledge contributions by religious communities to the hermeneutical process. Thus, the paradigm is broadened to cover hermeneutical approaches that find their origins in the pre-modern period before historical critical methods took root.

In the premodern era, questions brought to the text are rooted in the belief that the Bible is sacred scripture and therefore authoritative not only for religio-cultural dimensions of life, but also all of life itself. This paradigm houses Jewish interpretations which she sums up as *PaRDeS* – *Pesbat* which is the plain reading of the text; *Remez* which is the allegorical reading of the text; *Derush* which is *Midrashic* interpretation or legal hermeneutics that draws together different texts and; *Sod* which is a mystical, spiritual reading of the text (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009, 64). Werner Jeanrond (1991, 15-17) adds that the purposes of Jewish interpretations are mainly twofold: first, it is to move beyond a literal reading to formulating theological frameworks and second, it is to determine the rules that govern the boundaries of their religious communities. There is also medieval hermeneutics which José Croatto (1987, 4) sums up to be a fourfold sense of the Bible: the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the eschatological (see Jeanrond 1991, 18-43; Thiselton 1992, 142-178 for a more comprehensive survey). It should not be forgotten that one modern manifestation of this paradigm is North American Protestant

paradigm began as 'cultural studies' (Segovia 1995b) before being refined further to mean 'postcolonial studies and diasporic studies' (Segovia 2000b) and 'intercultural criticism' (Segovia 2000c). In the final analysis, such interpretative approaches are meant to be dialogical in nature with the bias towards liberation of the marginalised and oppressed groups in any single context. It emphasises the need for disclosure of the social location of the reader as part of the reading strategy. The other key concern is critical evaluation of the imperial-colonial formations of texts themselves.

² Here I follow Schüssler Fiorenza's (2009) naming of the paradigm which includes the deliberate misspelling of 'the*logical' which follows her designation of G*d. She explains in her earlier work that such designations follows Jewish customs that breaks up the word to signify our inability to fully explain the divine (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999).

Fundamentalism which has been covered in the previous chapter.

From a contextualist perspective, it does seem that the main concern of *religious-the*logical-scriptural* paradigm is making the text central and relevant to religious communities. However, as Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) continually stresses, whether it was the pre-modern, modern or postmodern period, this was and continues to be the domain of learned, predominantly male religious specialists. Therefore, there is the constant spectre of patriarchy when the Bible is read through this paradigm.

Furthermore, I highlighted in the first chapter that the primary mediation of the Bible to Asia is colonialism. Thus Jewish modes of reading the text are largely not evident in the Singaporean context. This also applies to pre-modern western hermeneutics. As highlighted in chapter 2, it would be more appropriate to mainly engage with North American Protestant Fundamentalist approaches in the church. More importantly, as I allude to in the final section on Singaporean reading strategies, an insistence to align contextual interpretation with western intellectual traditions tends to over-ride local contextual considerations by compelling nonwestern peoples to prioritise western questions over their own.

In sum, the important point that this paradigm raises is the need to relate the Bible to its reading communities outside the academy. Other than North American Protestant Fundamentalism, the rest of the reading strategies, while undoubtedly would yield interesting results, are too distantly located in terms of social location or historical traditions from Singapore and therefore deprioritised in this thesis.

Critical-Scientific-Modern Paradigm

The common feature that defines practitioners who are part of the second paradigm, the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm is the shared assumption that an accurate interpretation is one that subscribes to the positivistic ethos of detached objectivity. In other words, the ideal reader is one who is neutral, disinterested and value-free. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 67-71) reworks the list of approaches found in *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective* (Aichele et al 1995) and includes in this paradigm structuralist and narratological criticism in addition to historical critical tools such as archaeology, textual analysis and translation, philology, source, form and redaction criticism.³ As I

³ There have been many attempts to trace the contours of biblical interpretation especially in the modern period. See for instance, Frei (1974) for a detailed account of development of biblical interpretation with special focus on the 18th and 19th century; Barton (1996) who maps out in accessible language the various modes of historical critical inquiry into the Old Testament; Segovia (2000a, 3-54) who plots the theoretical developments; Brueggemann (2005, 1-115) for a condensed history of biblical interpretation; Collins (2005) who traces the development of the

have pointed out in the previous chapter, the key concern here is the objectivist ideology that undergirds this paradigm (more than any other) which Schüssler Fiorenza has in no uncertain terms called out as *kyriarchal* and Eurocentric. Thus I engage her critique of what she sees as malestream biblical interpretation with the defense of John Barton in his text, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (2007). Whereas I see Schüssler Fiorenza mainly argues in terms of tracing concrete developments in biblical studies through sociological and historical analyses, I attempt here to contribute a decolonial perspective by looking at epistemic interactions with the help of feminist standpoint theorists and social epistemologists.

Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 68-69) demonstrates how professionalisation of the discipline that led to the privileging of ‘scientific, professional, elite male ethos’ is reflected in how the discipline is structured in terms of its professional associations such as Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). These establishments determine not only the preferred topics of study but also what counts as academic prose. Moore and Sherwood (2011, 10) highlights how the European Association of Biblical Studies tends to ignore non-traditionalist forms of criticism. They also point out that USA based associations adopt what they call ‘the ethos of enable-and-ignore’, which absolves those in the dominant paradigm to work through ideological and critical differences (Moore and Sherwood 2011, 90-91). There also appears to be a subtle hierarchy of groups within SBL where the identity-neutral ones (such as Pauline epistles, Gospels and so on) are regarded as more important than (or at least far outnumbering) those that are marked (for instance, feminist, postcolonial, Asian-American/Asian and so on). In response to this, Barton (2007) while acknowledging the need for the Bible to be relevant to the contemporary world, still defends the need to be ‘objective’. I explore this later to show by ‘objective’ he is reinforcing what Schüssler Fiorenza has observed to be a structuring of the academy in support of the white male ethos. What these various observations point to is how this paradigm is dominant at least in the public of the academy.

I begin with what I consider to be Barton’s (2007) ‘apologia’ for the work of those within this paradigm. In order to balance the need to maintain objectivity and that of engaging the Bible with concerns of the reader, he proposes that there should be two stages in critical reading – first, perceiving the meaning of text and then second,

discipline since the development of historical critical methods from the Enlightenment to its point of dominance and now to a more pluralistic discipline that incorporates feminist, Jewish, Catholic and ethnic minorities which he seems to suggest is analogous to Babel; Sheehan (2005) for a broader history of German and English biblical scholarship which implicates nation building.

evaluating and applying it. The first stage which he thinks of as biblical criticism⁴ contains three main features:

- (a) attention to semantics, to the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, chapters, whole books; (b) awareness of genre; and (c) bracketing out of questions of truth (Barton 2007, 58).

The fundamental assumption here seems to be the need for objectivity which he argues to be detachment from one's subjective bias that potentially contaminates the reading with one's ideological inclinations. He further elaborates that 'bracketing out questions of truth' requires the reader to resist evaluating whether the text is true before discerning what the text means. In his view, this can only be achieved through a historical reconstruction of the semantic system which the text is situated in. This forms the basis of what he calls 'literary competence' that is the recognition of literary genre and semantic significances of words in their historical context. To this end, he finds source, form and to a limited extent redaction criticism to be most suited for the task. However, he concedes the methods as they stand currently are still flawed. Therefore, further refinement is still needed to ensure the neutral ground these methods try to create remains interest-free.

What is crucial here for my purpose is that Barton (2007, 31-68) does *not* see traditional historical criticism as a *theory* of reading per se.⁵ It is an inductive process that begins with historical manuscripts and works through issues of historical linguistics to determine who the author or authors are as well as their intentions for writing what they wrote. According to him, source critics such as Wellhausen did not use any 'set of procedures' to arrive at what is popularly known as the documentary hypothesis but rather it was born out of '*noticing* certain things in the text that others have overlooked or had explained away too quickly' (Barton 2007, 63, emphasis his). With form criticism, he posits that it is 'a matter of literary perception' and 'asking certain sorts of questions that did not occur to most people before the late nineteenth century' (Barton 2007, 64). Thus to him, it is more of training the 'intuition' and 'imagination' rather than rigidly applying a set of methods. As I show later, his idea of literary competence requires diligence to direct one's attention to 'questions of language, historical context and authorship' that forms the very foundation of the empathy one ought to have for the biblical texts (Barton

⁴ Barton (2007) argues that what he is proposing should be rightfully called 'biblical criticism' rather than traditional historical criticism or other similar labels. In this thesis, I resist this and continue to name it as such. This is because on the one hand, it creates confusion among the different hermeneutical approaches to the text. On the other hand, by implying that it is 'biblical', it runs the risk of seeing all other ways of reading which have not chosen to unabashedly call themselves 'biblical' as either supplementary and optional or worse, un-biblical or non-biblical. It is this subtle elitism that this thesis seeks to subvert.

⁵ See also Barton's (1996, 104-139) discussion on structuralism where he alleges one of the key problems is the use of a 'theory of reading' which already limits what the reader is able to understand about the text. This is then contrasted to historical critical methods which do not possess a 'theory of reading' in the manner that structuralism has that allows the reader to appreciate more fully the possibilities of the text.

2007, 67). How I understand what Barton is proposing here is that traditional historical criticism is not a 'method' or 'procedure' but rather developing the ability to read biblical documents *as* they present themselves. It is as it were, allowing the text to speak and the biblical critic sits at its feet to listen.

To put it more sharply, the central element of Barton's (2007, 69-116) thesis is what he calls 'plain sense' which is:

a semantic or linguistic and a literary operation first and foremost, only indirectly concerned with the original, the intended, the historical, or the literal meaning (Barton 2007, 101).

He uses this key idea of 'plain sense' to clarify what traditional historical criticism sets out to achieve. According to him, one common misconception is that traditional historical critics are practicing 'final form' exegesis which prioritises reconstituting the original sources that comprise the biblical text. In fact, it is generally accepted that such a task is impossible. Rather source criticism explains discrepancies in the text by sorting out different sources based on linguistic differences. Furthermore, while authorial intention is regarded as important, it recognises that text does not have one author but rather authors and their interpreting communities. That is why source and form criticism become important in categorising different parts of text into their respective author(s). In terms of history, the main task is not to reconstruct the world behind the text but rather to compare historical documents so as to reconstitute the language system – semantics, semiotics and syntactics. In terms of literal meaning, traditional historical critics determine whether words should be taken as they are, or as a metaphor or as an allegory depending on the literary context such as its genre. This is in contrast to pre-critical interpretation that tended to dogmatically insist on one particular approach such as fundamentalists (see chapter 2). Put differently, plain sense, if I understood correctly, is insofar original that it recognises a text as constituted through the use of several sources; insofar intentional that the text reflects the intentions of more than one author or interpreting community; insofar historical that it allows access to the historical linguistics that determine the text and; insofar literal that it is elucidated through the use of source and form analysis.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, traditional historical criticism has been criticised above all for its scientism. But many scholars who favour a scientific posture towards the discipline often argue that what they are doing is not 'science'. Barton (2007) has come out strongly against these claims by dealing with objectivity and positivism separately. He thinks that those who accuse mainstream biblical critics of objectivist

ideology are mistaken in assuming that it is done in a rigid, dogmatic manner. To him, it is more of 'reasonable objectivity' which he sees as 'a refusal simply to read one's own ideas into the text or to have no sense of detachment from it even for the purposes of study' (Barton 2007, 49). That said, rational detachment is limited to the first stage of exegesis before questions relating to truth can be brought in the second stage of application. While he does not deny that many readings by supposedly historical critics are embedded with vested interests under the pretence of objectivity, he still advocates that the solution for this is to be 'more objective, not less' (Barton 2007, 49). In terms of positivism, Barton (2007, 52) argues based on Wellhausen that historical critics are at best 'thinly positivistic'. While it is true that the discipline cannot escape dealing with facts as they present themselves, they are still concerned with how history points to the abstract, the conceptual.

There has been much progress made in understanding 'science' in feminist and postcolonial studies. As Barton (2007, 54-55) himself suspects, the line that divides the sciences and the humanities is not as thick as it is initially believed to be. Here I enjoin the work of feminist standpoint theorists to better articulate the central issue with scientism. According to feminist standpoint theorist, Sandra Harding (2004), the subject of knowing in the academy (who is very often white and male) normally claims the possibility of radical detachment in the production of knowledge. This legitimises all knowledge produced as universal thus rendering them immune to inquiries into its sociohistorical bases. Harding (2004) then argues that it is undergirded by the fundamental assumption in the self-understanding of mainstream scientism that the subject can be culturally and historically disembodied. He and the object of study are dichotomous entities where the former is dynamic and empowered with rationality to describe and explain and, the latter is locked in a specific space and time. In essence, the (white male) subject of knowing is trans-historical, immune to the effects of gender, class and race and internally consistent and coherent. Thus what is emerging here is that the white male subject's conception of objectivity is nothing more than an abstract claim that is not, according to his standards, proven. Harding (2004) polemically terms this as 'weak objectivity'. In contrast, she proposes 'strong objectivity' which is the result of negotiating and assembling different standpoints together with careful attention to the influence of their sociohistorical locations. I discuss this further in the synthesis of the method in chapter 4. Suffice to say here, methodologies that do not engage one's social location as part of the process but instead create epistemologies that inculcate ignorance to the discursive effects of one's positionality and scholarship are at best weakly objective.

Thus the central issue, as I see it, is the fantasy of the transcendent reader who is free from all encumbrances in line with the Aristotelian ideal of the propertied Greek male. Audre Lorde (1984, 116) describes this in the contemporary context as the mythical norm - 'white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure'. Such a subject is capable of seeing things *as* they are. To be fair, it is called a fantasy because no scholar who subscribes to scientism would dare claim that he or she has fully actualised it. Yet they continue to nourish this dream by constantly refining methodologies towards that goal. However what makes those who subscribe to this view so confident? Donna Haraway (2004) argues that it is the gaze. The white man is able to 'leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere' (Haraway 2004, 86). Such a gaze, she emphasises,

mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while [itself] escaping representation (Haraway 2004, 86).

In other words, what forms the foundation of the white male version of objectivity which legitimises its universal claim is the ability to *see* the world in a culturally neutral and disembodied way. If I were to further problematise the white male gaze, it enables him to take ownership of common ground and therefore decide its rules of engagement and place safeguards to its access.

The consequences of weak objectivity that is enabled through the white male gaze are ideological in nature. In contrasting cognitive values with contextual values, Helen Longino (1996) argues that inquiries that privilege rational detachment deprioritise two important values that are of significance to contextual hermeneutics. First, it refutes the belief in social application which is the insistence on the pragmatics of knowledge and its need to be attentive to its social, economic, cultural and political implications. Second, it does not engage in diffusion of power which emphasises that knowledge production ought to be geared towards empowering nonspecialists and democratising space for conversation.

Let us then return to Barton's (2007) claim that traditional historical critical methods allow one to read the 'plain sense' free of theory. It seems to me that the authority that traditional historical criticism claims in biblical interpretation is predicated on the ability to see the text for what it is because the tools enable the reader to be disinterested, value-free and neutral. This is further supported by how he dismisses criticism from marginal standpoints that traditional historical criticism mainly benefits financially able,

western male subjects. He writes, 'the terms in which the disagreement is set up preclude any possibility of dialogue and allow only capitulation (and serves you right, such writers might argue)' (Barton 2007, 49). This suggests to me that he understands class, gender and race as inherently biological categories rather than socially constructed ones within hierarchies of privilege. It also seems to be more reflective of a low level of reflexivity as one would expect of this ethos of objectivity or what Harding (2004) has established as 'weak objectivity'. Furthermore, Barton (2007) responds to scholars like Schüssler Fiorenza largely on abstract terms by arguing for a separation of objectivity from positivism and does not seem to engage with the politics of knowledge which they have raised. This possible failure to call to question the social bases that make possible such epistemological claims to neutrality with an insistence of keeping the conversation largely within the abstract not only again demonstrates 'weak objectivity', but also the perception of the white male gaze as all understanding. In other words, what I see here is an insistence on detachment without paying due attention to the conditions of its possibility. Part of those conditions are concretised into a two-stage reading where the prior stage creates a hermetically enclosed environment that immunises the historical critic against the questions of his positionality within the politics of knowledge production. By insisting on such a specialised idea of criticality, traditional historical critics make it difficult to exercise belief in social application and almost impossible to diffuse the power that they have accrued. It has to be emphasised here that the concern here is not so much the *act* of rational detachment, however momentary or tentative it may be, but its *ideal(ogy)* of objectivity.

Thus if I may be allowed to further refine Schüssler Fiorenza's (2009) idea of *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm, it needs to be thought in terms of its ideology of objectivism. To me, the main features that typify scholars in this paradigm are first, the unquestioned place of *neutrality* in seeking meaning from the text. It deserves the highest priority or unquestioned supremacy. Second, reflexivity is *not* valued since, more often than not, reading of biblical texts is performed by a reader who completely obfuscates himself. This is not to mention that reader based bias such as gender, class, race, sexuality, disability and so on can be assumed to be removed without need to address them so long as the reader claims superficially that questions of truth are bracketed out. It needs to be mentioned here that this feature is also present in the next paradigm that I discuss but it does not retain as high a premium as it has here. Third, it appears that these theories of reading see social application and diffusion of power either at best as secondary to the

main reading process or worst, contaminants to an otherwise sterilised reading strategy. Recalling my argument in chapter 1 that the claim to be able to produce disembodied knowledge potentially undergirds coloniality of power, this continued striving towards neutrality, if it is not already an expression of this system, does not contradict or problematise it in any significant way. To sum up, it is my opinion that it is not so much whether critical approaches in this paradigm strictly fulfil the stereotypical scientific ideas of objectivity and positivism. Rather it is its central belief that it is possible and in fact, desirable to produce knowledge in a discursively neutral space that defines a reading strategy to be 'scientistic' and thus opening it to criticism for what Schüssler Fiorenza identifies as Eurocentric and *kyriarchal* inclinations.

That said, I endeavour to hold the arguments from both sides in tension. In the construction of the hermeneutic in chapter 4, I reserve a space for critics from this paradigm to enunciate their interpretations in the manner that they perceive themselves to be doing. At the same time, arguments against their self-presumed neutrality enable me to bring in standpoints that have invested their subjectivities into their epistemological frames of understanding to interrogate those who assume that they have not done so. In chapter 5, I examine the readings of traditional historical critics of Daniel to show that their conclusions are also reflective of their own social locations rather than *purely* a result of 'plain sense'. There I also engage with Barton's (2007) assertion that literary competence requires the 'awareness of genre' through an evaluation of form critical approaches to the stories of Daniel. That being so, I am also cautious that just because it becomes an invested interpretation, it need not necessarily negate the value of what they have to bring to the text.

In spite of the glaring need to re-engage one's sociohistorical location, it is still important to acknowledge the contributions of this paradigm. What is particularly attractive about Barton's (2007) proposal is the need to think of reading in terms of intuition, imagination and sensibilities rather than obsessing with method or what Moore and Sherwood (2011, 31-41) call, 'methodolatry'. Most crucially to contextual hermeneutics, it has enabled and produced translations of the Bible that readers can access through their own vernacular. As the lingua franca of Singapore is English, there is an abundance of translations available for use. Although the values that undergird this paradigm need to be re-evaluated, the central motivation remains significant, that is, the need to detect ideological distortion. Such a need is also shared by some who are part of

the next paradigm.

Cultural-Hermeneutic-Postmodern Paradigm

The third paradigm, *cultural-hermeneutic-postmodern* paradigm,⁶ emphasises the relationship of the Bible to its readers. In contrast to the previous paradigms, the aim is not so much to formulate doctrines or elucidate historical ‘facts’ and literary structures but rather ‘to *understand* and if need be *deconstruct* sacred texts and their function in the life of peoples’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009, 77, emphasis hers). Here signs of engaging with context begin to emerge. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 71-78) highlights four key characteristics that determine the contours of this paradigm.

First, it is not possible to escape the *historicity* of hermeneutics. On the one hand, this acknowledges that the Bible is produced in a historical context. On the other, it emphasises that interpretation of this ancient document happens in a historical context as well. Second, hermeneutics is mediated through *linguisticity*. Language is not a neutral medium by which the text and its meanings are communicated. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) illustrates this by pointing out that feminist analyses have shown the predilection of both biblical and modern languages to create a world that favours men over women. Furthermore, this underscores the rhetoricity of language. Language cannot communicate without exercising discursive influence. This reinforces my earlier point in chapter 1 on spaces of intelligibility by undergirding that such spaces are linguistically constructed.

Third, particular to religious texts like the Bible, *tradition* plays an important role because all readers are part of at least one tradition. Here Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) highlights that the perception of tradition would normally follow Gadamer (2004) who sees it in its positive sense of ‘belonging’. Finally, considering the historicity, linguisticity and traditional aspects of text and readers,⁷ Gadamer (2004) proposes the ‘fusion of horizons’. Gadamer (2004, 302) defines his idea of horizon as ‘the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’. This vision is historically contingent because he argues that the readers are inescapably historical beings.

6 Here Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 71-72) follows the list of approaches covered in *The Postmodern Bible: the Bible and Culture Collective* (1995) written by George Aichele et al and places poststructuralist, ideological, rhetorical, psychoanalytic feminist and womanist criticism under this paradigm. Her main disagreement is that structuralist and narratological criticism belong more to the second paradigm and are therefore not ‘postmodern’. She also notes that this excludes readings coming from outside the West such as Latin/Latino, Asian and African readings.

7 Here it is important to note that Gadamer (2004) argues that the authorial intent is unnecessarily reductionistic to the text. In his view, based on contemporary experiences of writing, it is very likely the author has raised questions beyond what he could possibly answer in his writing. These questions are conditioned by situations that often go beyond what the author expects or really understands. Hence it is unlikely that the author has full control about what he or she writes about and therefore determining his or her intent of writing would usually end up constraining the true meaning(s) of the text.

However, the horizon of the reader is a dynamic one and continually shifts as it meets the horizon of the other. There is no way to get around the horizon of the reader to perceive the horizon of the text. Instead a fusion of horizons occurs when each horizon negotiates with the other to produce relevant meaning from the text.

The attractiveness of Gadamer's (2004) proposal is that it recognises that the reader is always involved in the reading and is hospitable to his or her contributions. However, there are several concerns. I explore feminist concerns that this does not help to discern patriarchal tendencies in the next section. The other concern comes from within theological hermeneutics where there is agreement that readerly concerns ought to be an integral part of reading but it is apprehensive that such an approach may result in ideological distortion. In response, it advocates a resolution that seems to bring in the previous two paradigms as a form of corrective.

In his book, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, Jeanrond (1991) argues for *relative adequacy* of the reader which moves in a similar direction of historical linguistics in the second paradigm. While Jeanrond (1991) does not deny the positive contribution of the reader, he grounds the validity of an interpretation in the ability of the reader to determine critically the underlying semiotic system using both intra-linguistic codes from the text and extra-linguistic markers from its historical context, and use this system to decode the text. By 'critically', he means: to assess for distortions of the text by the reader. The optimal conditions for this, he argues, is:

a community of interpreters whose intellectual competence and public performance *has not been manipulated by a totalitarian regime* [that then] normally provides at least a wider public context for properly critical and self-critical reading (Jeanrond 1991, 118, emphasis mine).

Instead of rebuilding the language system through source and form analysis, he argues for looking at the text in its final form through a study of semiotics. Furthermore, in order to adequately map out the semiotic system, it is an interdisciplinary endeavour that requires the partnership of both biblical scholars and theologians. Where Jeanrond (1991) is a lot more general in his criteria, Anthony Thiselton (1992, 558-620) concludes his magisterial survey of biblical hermeneutics arguing for a *trans-contextual* criteria that require readings of the Bible to align with the trajectory that originates from the history of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible to the 'universal horizon of eschatological promise'. In other words, his proposed methodology requires that valid interpretations are those that can fit into western Christian traditions including modern turns in biblical hermeneutics beginning with Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

Even though Jeanrond (1991) is more generous about which communities of readers qualify as adequately critical, it appears to me from the point of view of Asia that there is hardly any postcolonial nation building which is not marked by authoritarian rule.⁸ Therefore, many subaltern theologies like the Minjung and the Dalit (which I explore later) that were developed mainly in totalitarian environments would find it difficult to meet the requirements he had set. However, it does not mean that biblical interpretation done in a milieu that is not explicitly totalitarian is necessarily more adequate than the ones done in contexts that are. Sugirtharajah (2012, 185) points out that many of the agendas today in the western academy are determined by global capitalistic priorities and biblical studies is no exception. This then raises further questions: What counts as a 'totalitarian regime'? In the light of earlier discussions on neocolonialism in chapter 2, would global capitalism count as such? Needless to say, as implied in the use of the word 'transcontextual', Thiselton's (1992) proposal is far more Eurocentric in prioritising western intellectual traditions as the *sine qua non* for biblical interpretation in any part of the world.

While their intention to foreground ideological distortion as a key concern for biblical interpretation is duly noted, they nevertheless follow a similar spirit of objectivity exemplified by traditional historical criticism - the desire to read the Bible from a neutral space *outside* the reader. Where the previous paradigm holds that space to be the scientific place occupied by the all-seeing white male gaze, here theological hermeneuts foreground instead western Christian communities governed either by liberal democracy or upholding western Christian traditions. As pointed out earlier, Christian traditions remain under the domain of the white male subject. Furthermore, there seems to be a hint of (subconscious?) colonial difference in such claims as it valorises again western hermeneutical experiences. If that were so, then their proposals run the risk of reconsolidating the modern/colonial world system.

In sum, this paradigm raises awareness of the historicity of text and readers, recovers sensitivity to its aesthetic dimensions and re-engages with the politics of language. However it does not address concerns with ideological distortion. Theological hermeneutics has attempted to intervene by gesturing towards certain aspects of the previous two paradigms by relocating to spaces outside the reader that are either free

⁸ Some well-known examples would be China and Vietnam where religion is strictly monitored. However, it is not just communist states but also many states of India which face the issue of Hindu nationalism and Muslim-majority nations of Malaysia and Indonesia which are particularly guarded against Christianity. One would also wonder if the Bible is implicated as well, as most of the Bible was written under imperial empires.

of political interference or in line with western Christian traditions. This is inadequate as it again sidesteps the need to take subjectivity into account. Such an engagement can be found in the next paradigm which focuses its attention on identity markers of class, gender and race, and their entanglements with oppression.

Emancipatory-Radical Democratic Paradigm

As mentioned earlier, Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 78-81) is apprehensive of the previous paradigm because over-emphasis on continuity could possibly lead to reinforcing *kyriarchal* structures as it precludes any form of hermeneutic of suspicion towards the text and its interpreters. Rather than returning to the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm like traditional historical critics or creating a new symbiosis between the first two paradigms like theological hermeneuts, she proposes a fourth paradigm which is primarily concerned with exposing the relations of power in reading practices of the church and the academy. In particular, reading practices that create a *kyriarchal* order often in turn support their own interpretations in mutually beneficial ways to the exclusion of other reading approaches that take seriously the experiences of marginalisation. Hermeneutics within this paradigm are concerned with ethical, rhetorical, cultural, and emancipatory dimensions of texts and therefore see them primarily in its rhetoricity guided by ethics and liberation. This is achieved by interrogating current bases that legitimise kyriarchal orders of knowledge and denaturalising discourses that influence reading practices through enacting an 'ethical-political-emancipatory' turn mainly using feminist, postcolonial and liberation based theories. The basic premise of this paradigm is that readers of the Bible are meant to be "public", "transformative" subject[s] who can 'communicate with a variegated public and seeks to achieve personal, social, and religious transformation for justice and well-being' (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009, 81). In the following, I explore three of the most prominent to date: liberation, feminist and postcolonial criticism.

Politics of Class, Gender and Race

One of the most significant movements within the Global South that deeply impacted the way academics in the Global North look at hermeneutics is liberation hermeneutics. At its heart, Pablo Andinach and Alejandro Botta (2009) in their introduction to liberation hermeneutics argue that it does not follow the usual western academic discourse of beginning in the realm of philosophy and morals but rather in the lived reality of everyday life of Christians in oppressed circumstances. In particular, it was compelled by real experiences of oppression of Latin American peoples. That said, as

Thiselton (2009, 255-260) points out, there are also other influences, namely Karl Marx and the Second Vatican Council. Broadly speaking, liberation hermeneutics can be briefly sketched as follows: Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his landmark work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (1974) argues for poverty to be conceptualised as structural sin and that the Bible has a preferential option for the poor. He sees reading the Bible as an exercise in conscientising (borrowing Paulo Freire's [1996] proposal) the reader to the situation of the poor. Juan Luis Segundo in his book, *The Liberation of Theology* (1976) adds that all readings of the Bible are inescapably shaped by the ideologies of their context. Therefore, he conceives a 'hermeneutic circle' that requires an ideological critique of present realities to expose the biases of interpreters of the Bible so as to reformulate new questions that can generate meaning for praxis (Segundo 1976, 7-34). José Severino Croatto (1981) picks up on these themes to formulate a formal articulation of liberation hermeneutics that places the Exodus narrative as the hermeneutical key to understanding the meaning of the Bible for liberation theology. In short, liberation hermeneutics seeks to read the Bible with the poor and their circumstances as the main point of reference through the lens of the Exodus. At the same time it interrogates readings for their oppressive bias emanating from their social location in hope to inform a praxis that brings about structural change and societal transformation.

What is positive about liberation hermeneutics is the re-orientation of historical critical tools to determine the connections between the socio-political world that produced the text and the contemporary context. Taken in tandem with its emphasis on the subaltern, it opens up how the text can speak afresh both to its ancient and present day audience about the poor and marginalised.

Thus, it is not difficult to see how liberation theology has been an inspiration to other emancipatory movements. One prominent stream that it contributed to is feminist hermeneutics. In a landmark work of this movement within biblical studies, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983), Schüssler Fiorenza identifies the basic pre-understanding that governs liberation theology as the platform to build a feminist hermeneutic. This is the challenge that there is no value neutral, disinterested and objective approach to the Bible but rather that any reading of the Bible either contributes to or resists oppression. Thus she proposes a feminist hermeneutic to expose the biases that a scholar brings to the interpretation of the Bible. Looking at the Bible from the perspective of gender, she argues that the Bible is itself an androcentric text

which lends itself to easy assimilation into patriarchal discourses both in the academy and the church. That said, she also acknowledges that the Bible is an ambivalent document with many hidden stories of feminist struggles and contributions to the Christian movement. Therefore she proposes that in order to re-member the stories of these women embedded in the Bible, one has to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion by placing the texts in relation to other texts, its socio-political milieu that produced it as well as its reception down the centuries so as to detect patriarchal impulses sewn into its textual fabric. This is followed by a hermeneutic of retrieval that tries to disentangle these patriarchal threads while sewing on the histories of women that have been omitted. Though the primary entrypoint is the analytical category of gender, it is ideally done in relation to race and class.

Another stream that came out of liberation theology is postcolonial criticism. Inspired by the writings of Edward Said as well as to significant measure his experience with liberation theology, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah developed reading strategies to expose colonial discourses within the biblical text and its subsequent interpretations through the ages.⁹ As one of the original intentions that Sugirtharajah (1998, 3) had in constructing postcolonial criticism was to 'construct a possible mode of biblical interpretation for Asia', I have chosen to take a minor detour to explore his proposals more deeply.

Contours of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

In order to understand how postcolonial theories can relate to biblical hermeneutics, Segovia (2005) provides a succinct yet comprehensive overview addressing key questions of meaning and scope. In terms of meaning, the primary force of postcolonial studies is in raising the consciousness of imperial-colonial formations that has been present throughout history including the present time. Here the key terms in postcolonial studies, imperialism and colonialism need to be seen as spatial metaphors where the former refers to the originating centres and the latter to the receiving peripheries. Thus they ought to be studied in relation yet distinct from each other. While postcolonial studies began in the area of cultural production, he points out that there are encouraging trends of broadening its understanding by bringing along Marxist traditions that have explored the socio-political implications of colonialism. Ultimately what undergirds postcolonial studies is

⁹ This is not to belittle other significant contributors such as Michael Prior's, *The Bible and Colonialism* (1997) and the edited volume by Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire* (1997). Both were also significantly influenced by liberation theology. Therefore, postcolonial biblical criticism shares similar roots (and thus, similar concerns) as those of liberation critics in reading the text. Another significant contribution around the same period is the edited Semeia volume by Laura Donaldson (1996, 1) on Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading which focused on 'imperialism, neo-colonialism and Eurocentricism' and how these are 'embodied in literary and theological forms'. However since my overall goal is to reach a Singaporean reading, I have chosen to constrain my focus mainly on Sugirtharajah's work.

the question of geopolitical relationship. More specifically, what constitutes the centre and the peripheries and how do they relate to one another in terms of cultural, economic and political power? In answering these questions, he cautions against reducing the centre to a purely dominating force and the peripheries to only resistance, active or passive.

In terms of scope, Segovia (2005) highlights the tendency to restrict postcolonial studies to the eighteenth to twentieth centuries which seems to suggest a kind of exceptionalism associated with colonialism. He argues against this by pointing out that imperial formations have been a constant feature of human history ever since the first empires were born. Therefore, even though it is named postcolonial, what is being studied are formations of power that are not unique to the West or the colonial period. This would mean further work is needed in understanding the transhistorical and transcultural application of postcolonial studies. Furthermore, he points out that within postcolonial studies by restricting its parameters of enquiry to western/modern forms of colonialism, there is a tendency to overlook the role of religion in areas such as literature and economics.

One of the central features of postcolonial biblical studies is the application of colonial discourse analysis to unveil processes of domination and oppression at work in the production of the text, the actual text itself and the reception of the text especially in the last 400 years since the beginning of the colonial enterprise (Segovia 2005; Sugirtharajah 2012, 94-118). Colonial discourse analysis, according to Ashcroft et al (2007, 36-38), is one of the cornerstones of postcolonial theory. It draws mainly on Said's (2003, 3) *Orientalism* which basically sees orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'. Here the Orient is synonymous with the colonised. This representation of the Orient is carried in asymmetrical power structures where the coloniser often dictates what constitutes truth and reality. In this synthesis, the coloniser constructs the colonised in binary fashion as his inferior Other. Furthermore, colonial discourse theory takes into consideration Homi Bhabha's (1994) problematising of the binary relationship of the colonised to the coloniser through concepts of hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry. To further define the contours of postcolonial biblical criticism, I explore two key strategies that Sugirtharajah (2012) points out: rhetoric of representation and contrapuntal reading.

In order to better delineate colonial discourse within biblical texts, postcolonial critics, rather than being concerned about authorial intent or the compositional history of the text, focus instead on the historical materialist conditions that produced it (Segovia

2005; Sugirtharajah 2012, 161-171). Where liberation critics freely use the rhetorical posture of the text in condemning different forms of oppression, postcolonial critics are more cautious and pay closer attention to the representation of subaltern voices in the text and how the narrative itself is oppressive to them. In fact, it is also attuned to how the enemies of Israel are portrayed. One notable example is the Canaanites (Donaldson 1996; Prior 1997, 16-46). Not only do postcolonial readers refrain from idealising the text, they also do not intend to rescue it. Instead they are willing to embrace the Bible as 'a contested and ambiguous book' (Sugirtharajah 2012, 172). However the rhetoric of representation is not limited to texts but also to readers, including those who see themselves as neutral and objective. It is cautious not to privilege western readings over nonwestern readings but rather subject all readings to colonial discourse analysis. Thus, postcolonial criticism deconstructs both texts and readers for their propensity to reproduce colonial discourse that objectifies the Other for the consumption of (western) imperial centres.

The other reading strategy proposed by Sugirtharajah (2003, 16; see also Sugirtharajah 2012, 22, 143-152) is contrapuntal reading where 'texts from metropolitan centres and peripheries are studied simultaneously'. In this light he sees the Bible and associated literature emanating from traditional western historical critical methods as the centre and the many cultures of the Global South as well as minority scholarship both in and out of the West as the peripheries. Thus contrapuntal reading is situated within the politics of biblical studies and calls for reading mainstream texts with neglected texts so as to recalibrate the imbalances and fill in the silences.

In summary, postcolonial biblical critics read the Bible, both its production and reception, in terms of its entanglements in unequal relationships of power set up by imperial-colonial discourses in both ancient and modern contexts. This is mainly facilitated by two main strategies of rhetoric of representation and contrapuntal reading. Above all, while postcolonial critics embrace the emancipatory potential of the text, they are not naïve to its potential to subjugate the Other.

What is common to all three approaches is the goal of subverting present hierarchies of power with a particular sensitivity to different interpreting communities and their relationships to the Other along the lines of gender, class and race. They not only acknowledge that the Bible is an authoritative text with power to free the oppressed and subvert the powerful, but also make full use of its potential to become sensitised to marginalisation and suffering. Unlike their scientific and postmodern counterparts, they

pay careful attention to the gaps and silences in texts. At times, they would go so far to regard them to be more important in the production of meaning than what is written. Therefore, they unite in their hermeneutic of suspicion with heightened sensitivities to the movement of power both within the Bible and the systems of thought that have sought to use the Bible, be it in the church, society and even the academy.

That said, this paradigm has certain limitations. First, there is a tendency to idealise the Bible which is problematic given my initial claim that the Bible comes to Asia as the coloniser's text (see chapter 1). This propensity varies according to the degree that the Bible is regarded as a patriarchal and/or colonial text. Thus it appears to be most pronounced in liberation hermeneutics. Sugirtharajah (2001, 239-241) highlights a dominant narrative in liberation hermeneutics is what he calls the 'Jesus Christ Saga' that valorises Jesus of the Gospels in solidarity with the poor and acts in the name of God on their behalf. Such reification of Jesus as the centrepiece of the Bible unconsciously installs the notion that the Bible itself is incapable of error.

Second, due to an almost exclusive focus on either class, gender or the geopolitics of race, there is risk of running into narrow identity politics. Schüssler Fiorenza (2008) finds that postcolonial studies and liberation hermeneutics continue to debate in the absence of critical feminist hermeneutics and points out the difficult impasse was already negotiated by feminist criticism. However feminist criticism is also not exempt from dangers of being self-absorbed. In developing a postcolonial feminist theology, Kwok (2005, 64-66) argues that intersectionality is lacking in many feminist circles. She points out that white feminist discourse tends to over-emphasise gender at the expense of all other marginalities largely because this reflects their own social locations as socially and economically privileged. Horsley (2003) points out that postcolonial criticism is too focused on colonial discourse theory that it becomes overly rigid in identifying colonisers and colonised in texts and their reception. The irony is that while it may succeed in delineating the binary relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, it tends to end up inverting the hierarchy rather than undermining it altogether. Thus within this paradigm, it is a highly contested space where different identity hermeneutics often compete with one another to be the central determinant.

Third, there are suggestions of colonality of power at work in this paradigm. Furthering the earlier point by Kwok (2005), feminist criticism is still dominated by white, financially secure women. Postcolonial criticism, even if it is about deconstructing

power, concentrates mostly on western colonialisms and looks at the colonised only in relation to western colonisation. It, too, has not escaped focusing almost exclusively on the West. Liberation hermeneutics, as it were the eldest brother of the three, is showing signs of being domesticated into the West. According to Sugirtharajah (2001, 239-243), this is evident in how the 'salvation in history' model which undergirds liberation hermeneutics demonstrates elective affinity with western colonial discourse of progress. This model conceptualises a God who acts in an interventionist way in the affairs of the world. Thus missionaries and colonialists alike could easily absorb this narrative as part of their approach to replace existing cultures and histories with their own. Sugirtharajah (2001, 243) argues that the heart of the problem is the colonial like attempt to be the representation of all who are poor which then transforms 'a theology of liberation by the poor' to 'a liberation theology of the poor'. This can be seen in two discernible trajectories in liberation hermeneutics. Prior to September 11, Sugirtharajah (2001, 243) observes that mainstream scholarship where liberation hermeneutics can now be found would transform the goal of liberation theology from social change to pastoral concern, thus creating an 'apolitical and personal empowerment, shirking the once crucial questions of social and economic inequality'. After September 11, another noticeable trend is emerging where liberation is now taken up by neo-colonialist ventures into the Global South to mean ideas of liberty and freedom associated with the free market. Thus it is inevitable that the USA and its allies would see themselves as liberators of the new world which justifies dubious incursions such as the Iraqi War or the Afghan occupation. In other words, liberation theology may have taken over the triumphalism of the colonial age and through its Christian exclusivism become the new terror to multi-religious and multi-cultural societies (Sugirtharajah 2008, 12). In short, there is a tendency within this paradigm to reify western notions of progress such as human rights and democracy as universal and thus overlook other key questions of identity which I explore in the Asian frame.

Before I propose how an Asian turn can help to adapt paradigm criticism to the Singaporean context, an evaluation of paradigm criticism as a whole in relation to the aims of this thesis is needed.

A Contextualist Take on Paradigm Criticism

Looking broadly at paradigm criticism, it would seem reinforcing of colonial difference is not limited to the final paradigm stated earlier. Hermeneutics developed in

the West are still privileged with relatively little exploration of how nonwestern contexts are developing their ways of reading. Perhaps it is not their intention to map hermeneutics on a global scale but this point is hardly made explicit in both their proposals. The primary social location of the West is not made salient, much less problematised in paradigm criticism. Furthermore, the choice of religions considered to be interlocutors in reading the Bible also clearly shows western-centricity. Discussions would only stray as far as the other monotheistic religions especially Judaism, largely neglecting other major world religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism, much less dealing with issues of multiculturalism.

As mentioned earlier, it seems to me that the 'Other' is seldom explored beyond the generic categories of class, race and gender. It is also clear that in evaluating the other paradigms, the discussion tends to be abstract without paying enough attention to the discursive effects of each paradigm on nonspecialist readers even within western contexts. In other words, paradigm criticism while trying to bridge the gap between the academy and the church focuses on discussions between religious specialists and academics but somehow left out the majority of everyday religious practitioners who read and use the Bible. Thus the concern is often centred on objectivity and subjectivity, and cleanly delineated categories of emancipation with little emphasis on intersectionality.

Not only has it left out everyday religionists but also neglected the sphere of life that majority religionists spend most of their time in – society. As I show in the context of Singapore in the previous chapter, secularism and multiculturalism pose significant problems to a contextual reading of the Bible. In a highly globalised world, it is not hard to imagine that secularist ideologies are also important issues in many contexts, including that of the West. Perhaps again working from a North American context, where the politicisation of the religious voice is better tolerated, this has not been an important concern in their formulations. That said, while there is almost no engagement with secularism and multiculturalism, there is a reasonable interaction with issues of gender and capitalism especially in the *emancipatory-radical democratic* paradigm.

Nonetheless, what is heartening is that paradigm criticism exposes how elite Western-educated clergymen, biblical scholars and theologians have mostly acted in the interests of western culture and capitalism by declaring either their derived doctrinal frameworks or scientifically constructed knowledge as universal. Of which, the only form of disputation that is deemed acceptable is within their rules of engagement. In the

case of the Bible, questions tend to revolve around the reification of Scripture either as transcendent, universal truth and principles (based on western formulation) to be obeyed or a rich storehouse of historical facts and scientific/literary data to be mined. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009, 81) then rightly points out that both enterprises – fundamentalist understanding of the Bible as purely oriented to the salvation of souls and scientific ‘malestream’ biblical scholarship – are intimately associated with colonialism. Therefore in order to decolonise and democratise the space within biblical studies, she puts forward her vision of a ‘republic of many voices’ which in my view resonates with any contextual reading of the Bible where it is a

space for people to dialogue, debate, argue, and collaborate with each other, to seek not only to understand the diverse voices of biblical texts but also to explore, assess and evaluate them in terms of their impact on contemporary publics and religious communities (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009, 83).

In the light of this, I propose an Asian turn to paradigm criticism that continues the work of postcolonial criticism as a way to open the space for Asian hermeneutics. As we finally depart from the shores of the hallowed West, I review in the next section the different manifestations of Asian biblical hermeneutics in order to outline an Asian turn that would help navigate the relatively uncharted waters towards a Singaporean reading strategy.

An Asian Turn: From Identity Politics to Identity Formation

The Bible has been in Asia for many centuries yet it could be said that only in the last century we see a maturing body of work in biblical hermeneutics that takes its context seriously. These forms of hermeneutics, which I think of as contextual hermeneutics, use different contexts of readers as their main heuristic lens. Though it does not exclude historical critical or literary tools, its primary agenda is to first exegete the context of the reader to derive pertinent questions to be brought to the text. In this section, I survey the work of biblical hermeneutics in South, East and Southeast Asia¹⁰ to determine the possible features that characterise an Asian turn. The choice of these regions is guided by a recent study by Georg Evers (2014) who shows that the dominant influences on Southeast Asian Christianity come mainly from movements in Eastern and Southern

¹⁰ Here I follow what the United Nations Convention has identified as Southern Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), Eastern Asia (China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Macao Special Administrative Region, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia and Republic of Korea); and; South-Eastern Asia (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam) (For further information, see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm#asia> [last accessed 2 Jan 2016]). For ease of reference, I further abbreviate them to South, East and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, from henceforth, Asia in this thesis refers mainly to these regions.

Asia. Even Islam in Southeast Asia, despite being mainly brought by traders from Arabia, Persia, and India only a few decades after the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, integrated with the dominant Hindu and Buddhist influences in the region.¹¹

In mapping the hermeneutical trends in Asia, Sugirtharajah (2013) describes four different kinds of readings of the Bible: reading in multireligious contexts, readings of marginal communities, postcolonial and diasporic criticism. Since the concern is to synthesise a reading strategy in the *context* of Singapore which is in Asia, I have chosen to leave out diasporic hermeneutics. This does not mean that I exclude work by Asian scholars who work explicitly on the Bible in Asian contexts outside of Asia. In my view, some of the better work is the result of critical distance created between the critic and Asia itself. As I discussed postcolonial criticism in an earlier section, I would only revisit it when I sum up the Asian turn. Keeping Sugirtharajah's (2013) typology in mind, I remap and adapt the remaining hermeneutics into their respective geopolitical regions of South, East and Southeast Asia while supplementing with what I consider to be relevant to the thesis. As this is a study in contextual hermeneutics, I want to maintain the relationship of context to hermeneutics to better reflect contextual considerations. Furthermore, as Southeast Asia has yet to show discernible trends of hermeneutics in the manner like South and East Asia, it would be submerged in a survey that is organised along the lines of how biblical texts are read. The overall aim here is *not* to exhaustively survey Asian biblical hermeneutics but rather show its gains and limitations based on the best possible sampling of methods. Clearly my choices of hermeneutics for each region is not neutral but rather it is persuaded by first, the salience in literature produced in English and second, its potential to contribute to a contextual hermeneutic based on the analysis of Singapore given in chapter 2. With respect to the latter, I favour collectivities within each region where Christianity is a minority religion and hermeneutics that explicitly point towards transformative praxis or identity formation or preferably both. That said, one exception I made is to highlight Asian womanist readings as an independent category. This is because I wish to highlight that patriarchy is not solely an issue of the West but rather a global one. Thus, I begin by surveying South, East and Southeast Asia, then looking more carefully at Asian womanist readings before summing up this Asian Turn and its implications to paradigm criticism discussed earlier. Apart from the possible interventions an Asian Turn would have on paradigm criticism, I also suggest several limitations of this Asian turn itself.

¹¹ That said, Evers (2014) does note a recent rise in influence from Wahabite Saudi Islam.

South Asia: Resistance and Reconciliation

George Soares-Prahbu (1991, 75) asserts that the social reality of India that biblical hermeneutics need to grapple with is 'massive poverty', 'pluriform religiosity' and 'its oppressive, all-pervasive caste system'. Even though it is generally accepted that the apostle Thomas came to India at around 52 CE, permeation of these contextual issues only began after the Reformation in Europe (Premnath 2006). Devadasan Premnath (2006) attributes it to the fact that the Bible was translated into local languages mainly after the Reformation placed emphasis on the accessibility of the Bible to nonspecialist readers and the advent of the printing press. Only then did nonspecialist readers (which include nonwestern readers at that time) gain access to the contents of the Bible. Furthermore, early Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, were open to indigenising the Bible and its interpretation through borrowing of local cultural resources and rigorous translation work (much to the chagrin of their superiors back in Europe). Early contextual work with the Bible included interpreting the Bible through Hinduistic lens such as understanding Christ through the concept of *avatar* and the re-interpretation of 'gnosis' in John as the personal relationship of *bhakti* which incorporates love as a component of knowing as opposed to Greco-Roman understanding of disinterested, objective knowledge.

However, availability of the Bible in the vernacular and openness of early Christian missionaries were insufficient for the development of Indian hermeneutics. Within the West, growing emphasis on evangelism and conversion hindered their missionaries from engaging in creative articulation of the Bible (Premnath 2006). David Joy (2014, 14-17) demonstrates how the hermeneutics of missionaries with the help of biblical commentators established the supremacy of Christianity over other religions and sowed discord between Indian Christians and other Indians, thus consolidating further western hold over biblical interpretation. The decisive catalyst that facilitated the growth of Indian hermeneutics was the independence of India from British colonial rule (Premnath 2006). It is important to note that while early missions work in India largely focused on the dominant caste, the growing faction within the church today belongs to the lowest caste, the Dalits. According to Monica Melanchthon (2005) they now comprise over 90% of church membership. In terms of reading the Bible, Premnath (2006) identifies four kinds of Indian hermeneutics: liberation, ecological, religiocultural and artistic. In the interest of space, only two approaches are highlighted for discussion, namely a form of liberation

reading known as Dalit hermeneutics and religiocultural approaches.

One of the most distinctive forms of Indian hermeneutics is Dalit hermeneutics. Peniel Rajkumar (2010, 3-5) points out that European understanding of caste commonly conflates two Indian conceptions of how society is ordered – *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* is a *vedas* (Hindu Scriptures) derived term to denote functional categories within a social hierarchy of occupations. As such, society is stratified according to four *varnas*: the Brahmins (priest and teacher), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vashiyas (traders) and Shudras (menial servants). *Jati*, on the other hand, is a spatial category that refers mainly to origins associated with the region where one is born. In the intersection of these two conceptions, the Dalit, which is a self-referential¹² term, falls out of the fourfold *varna* system but is found at the margins of *jati* which is more operative in the social imagination of everyday living. As a result, the Dalits have become victims of economic deprivation due to extreme marginalisation.¹³ Significantly in the past, the church in India largely led by theologians and pastors belonging to more privileged backgrounds failed to address the pervasive issue of caste in their use of the Bible and may have been perceived by the Dalits to be contributors to their situation.¹⁴ Therefore, Aloysiu Pieris (2004, 265) points out that unsurprisingly the Dalits insist that ‘it is the Dalitness of the Christians rather than the Christianness of the Dalits that constitutes their identity, and consequently also the basis of their Christianness’. Here I would like to add that their Dalitness is also the basis of their hermeneutics. What is particularly instructive from the Dalit experience here is that even locally-run churches can be blind to the socially marginalised in their own contexts and interpret the Bible without due consideration to challenge accepted norms of society.

In terms of biblical hermeneutics, like that of postcolonial criticism seen earlier, Dalit hermeneutics do continue to employ historical critical and literary approaches. What constitutes the over-riding criteria in terms of selecting historical material and literary

12 According to Nevala (2008) the term ‘Dalit’, first coined by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1826-1890) is associated with aspirations of liberation. Of great importance, the Dalit leader of the anti-caste movement B. R. Ambedkar who saw through the lifting of the status of untouchability from the constitution was famously known for the use of ‘Dalit’ to represent hope and dignity. Thus, to her, Dalit is a term of resistance towards the well-entrenched caste system in India.

13 For further details on the *Dalits* such as the how the term originated as a form of resistance to the prevalent labels such as ‘untouchables’ and even ‘harijan’ which was given by Gandhi and how the caste system is organised to disenfranchise them, see Rajkumar 2010, 5-15; Melanchthon 2012, 50-52.

14 Sugirtharajah (2001, 229-233) paints a more vivid picture of how the Bible was complicit with western missionaries who privilege entry into Indian societies through the upper caste. This is because when the Bible entered India, it found stiff competition from Hindu scriptures or the Vedas which already had a long textual tradition, perhaps dating even further back than the Bible itself. So the western missionaries managed to gain the respect of the Brahmins who finally acknowledged that the Bible also holds many distinct resonances to the Hindu Scriptures and accepted the possible complementarity between Brahminical texts and the Bible. However the end result of this collaboration was further alienation of the Dalits as the Brahminical texts were one of the key anchors that kept the Dalits as permanent outcasts. See also Massey 1994 who has given a similar historical account and Devasahayam (1994, 43-44) who gives numerous examples of discrimination against Dalits within churches.

features of the text for interpretation is undeniably the socio-historical location of Dalits. The Bible is therefore read through the lens of Dalit experience of ritual uncleanness, extreme marginalisation (or 'untouchability') and poverty (Melanchthon 2012). Thus, Dalits are sensitised to experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation in the text. One example Melanchthon (2005) points out is how Dalit reading would focus on difficulties that the woman in John 4 faces in drawing water from wells belonging to the rich who are like the dominant caste. Another example is Devasahayam's (1992, 32-36) reading of the demon possessed man in Decapolis as an outcast Dalit (cf Lk 8:26-39). Furthermore, their interactions with local Brahmins and upper caste Christians have taught them that the Bible should not be read within rigid frameworks of creed and doctrines (Raja 1999). This is because the dominant caste tends to read Scripture to their favour which then consolidates the subaltern status of Dalits. Similar to their postcolonial counterparts, the Bible is thought of as a human document troubled by slavery and patriarchy which allows it to be challenged (Melanchthon 2005). Following liberation hermeneutics, the reading of the Bible is ultimately pointed towards the liberation of Dalits from the matrix of oppression. As Jesurathnam (2002) demonstrates in his reading of Psalms of lament (such as Ps 22; 44; 109), Dalits think of God as genderless which is a symbol of impartiality and deep concern for justice and equality. Therefore, they are able, together with the petitioner, to call God to account and appeals for vengeance upon those who grieved them. In short, Dalit hermeneutics brings in the multifaceted experience of caste oppression in close dialogue with the biblical text in order to realise goals of resistance and liberation through determining meaning and action in a system that overtly disenfranchises them.

The second distinctive form that is highlighted for consideration is religio-cultural readings. The inception of Christianity into India, even considering from the time of Thomas' entry, is by all measures late. In other words, Christianity entered at a time when the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism were already well established and developed. Even though Christianity may possibly have been open to other religions in the pre-colonial era, it is seldom disputed that Christianity entered as a contender in the religious market especially during the period of British colonialism. Proceeding from a position of power, the Christian church of that time often denigrated other religions in India as irrational and deceptive, or worse the products of the devil himself (Samartha 1994). In the post-independence period, several Indian scholars have come forward to propose that a renewed openness to other religious traditions needs to be established. In the area of biblical hermeneutics, Samartha (1994) calls for a more relational posture that is irenic to

other religious traditions.

One clear show of a conciliatory gesture is through Pieris' (2003) 'symbiotic' reading. He cautions against two pitfalls in inter-religious hermeneutics – the first he calls extra-textual confrontation which is either so eager for reconciliation that the different historical background of both religious texts are disregarded or, so adversarial in reducing other religious texts to be mere echoes and poor reflections of the biblical text. The second, he terms inclusive approaches which manifest mainly in liturgical appropriations. These practices are either syncretistic where he sees the original meaning of both religious texts are distorted in order for them to co-exist together or synthetic where you could no longer distinguish the contributions of either texts in the liturgy. Instead, he proposes a 'symbiotic' reading which brings two religious texts alongside one another for mutual illumination. He argues that without such a venture, hidden meanings in each text will not be revealed. This could be achieved by first, gaining new insights into one's religious text through reading another and second, reinforcing important aspects of each religion through positive resonances between both religious texts.

East Asia: False Starts and Troubled Beginnings

In this section I move from South to East Asia. In the interest of space, I focus my attention mainly on two areas – China and Korea. The initial encounter with Christianity in China can be traced back to the early seventh century when a Nestorian missionary, Alopen, reached Chang'an and started a church which lasted almost two centuries. Thereafter, Christian entry into China went relatively unnoticed with the exception of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci who managed to impress the Emperor in the 16th century. First signs of trouble began with controversy over ancestral worship (what is known as Rites Controversy) that eventually led to the ban of Christianity in the 18th century by Emperor Kangshi of the Qing dynasty. Then, there was a reluctant re-opening to western influx under unfavourable circumstances of the unfair treaties during the Opium wars of the 19th century which led to the Boxer Rebellion that witnessed the killing of Christian clergymen, both Protestant and Roman Catholic at the turn of the 20th century (Tang 2004; Yieh 2006). There was some improvement when China temporarily adopted democracy in 1911 under Sun Yat-Sen before becoming a communist state in 1949. The state then adopted highly restrictive measures in the control of religion and closed her doors to the external world including Christianity. However, after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), there appears to be increasing openness to the external world

which allows the development of contextual Christian thought including the area of biblical hermeneutics, which is in Choan Seng Song's (2006) assessment, long overdue.

The above sketch has many similarities to the situation in India when it comes to Christianity and other religious traditions. In fact, in the Chinese situation as compared to that of India, Christianity is perceived with a higher level of foreignness given that its inception was 6 centuries later as well as the experience of regular and systematic interference from the government. In response, Chinese scholar Archie Lee (1993; 2008; 2014) has proposed 'cross-textual hermeneutics' to facilitate conversation with other religious traditions living in the same context. To him, the main issue is that biblical texts are read as a singular text using western based theories and then applied to contexts. This is a failure to understand contexts as

a conglomeration of texts in the conventional sense of written documents, as well as in the more elusive socio-scientific notion of historical events, peoples' movements, daily experiences and human actions in community as being 'social text' (Lee 2008, 190).

As a result, Asian contextual considerations are largely bracketed out of the hermeneutical process. He names two significant realities – first, the multi-scriptural, multi-religious and multicultural environment of Asia and second, the socio-political realities of economic poverty and political oppression. In response, he proposes that local texts (which he calls text A) are read together with the Bible (which he calls text B). To him, text A should refrain from privileging sacred texts, even those that originate from Asia, because ultimately this reading is meant for Christian communities in Asia, many of whom are illiterate or have relatively low exposure to the high culture of world religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. Instead, it should broaden its search to include 'social texts'. To demonstrate the versatility of his approach, he has read the Bible with wide range of social texts such as circulating folktales like Chinese creation myths with narratives in Genesis (Lee 1994), the poems of Chinese women grieving their sons who fell to the Massacre of Tiananmen Square with Lamentations (Lee 2005) and the handing over of Hong Kong from British colonial governance to mainland Chinese rule with Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah (Lee 1999). He justifies such choices of text on the basis of experiences of the interpreting community which is broadly construed here as Chinese churches in East Asia.

It may seem Lee's (1993; 2008; 2014) proposal of cross-textual hermeneutics bears remarkable resemblance to Pieris' (2003) symbiotic reading. However, the former differs in at least two ways. First, while inter-religious hermeneutics like symbiotic

reading of Pieris is focused on reconciliation, Lee's (2008, 197) concern is for 'renewed configuration of identity of Asian Christians in a wider community' that rejects 'a static authentic identity recovered from the past or simply constructed from a narrowly defined localized site' because almost everyone in this globalised world has 'dual, triple or multiple identities'. He speaks in the light of situations like the growing underground church in China where many Christians hold on to two 'traditions' – their Asian heritage and their newly acquired Christian identity. So he is offering a method that would help Chinese Christians negotiate their hybrid identities that are being formed in the midst of conflict, past and present. Second, as Sugirtharajah (2013, 197) points out, approaches like that of Pieris tends to be restricted to religious texts for comparison in inter-religious encounters but since Lee's concern is for the identity of the Christian, the comparative 'texts' include more than religious texts but more crucially 'social texts' that have had significantly more influence in forming the Christian's identity prior to conversion. Nevertheless both approaches still tend to see biblical texts used as coherent and complete rather than problematic texts in the process of formation as perceived by postcolonial critics (Sugirtharajah 2013, 197).

Another form of dialogical reading that is prominent in Chinese contexts is engaging with Chinese religious traditions such as those of Confucianism and Daoism. One of the most common is engagement with the ideas of Yin and Yang as found in the *Tao Te Ching* (see Yeo 1998, 9-24; Kim 2001). Kwan (2014, 92-123) has also shown how prominent Christian Chinese leaders, Wu Yaozong (1893-1979), Wu Leichuan (1870-1944) and Zhao Zichen (1888-1979) tended to interact with Confucian texts to produce theologies that troubled western separation of transcendence from immanence and refocused theology on character formation. There is much resonance with their writings in the work of more contemporary, influential leaders like Wang Mingdao (1900-1991) and Watchman Nee (1903-1972) who although they did not explicitly articulate a biblical hermeneutic, were nevertheless advocating a normative way of reading the Bible (Yieh 2006). However their interactions with Chinese religious traditions tended to be less explicit and fraught with tension as they thought of conversion as including cutting oneself from one's past. Yieh (2006, 25) has shown how both while subscribing to a dualistic view of the world used the text to expound a spiritual reading that incorporated a combination of 'Calvinist anthropology, mystical spirituality and Chinese moral tradition of *chenxin*, *chenyi*, and *xiushen* (train the heart to be sincere, keep the mind upright, and cultivate the character)'. Thus within the Chinese context, we find varying engagements with Chinese

religions that resulted in reading strategies that both embraced and rejected them.

Crossing the border over to Korea, Edmund Tang (2014) highlights that the beginnings of Christianity there were less troubled. The first Christian community was the result of contact between Korean literati and western missionaries in China in 1784. Inspired by Christian scriptures, they became Christians and returned to Korea to set up their own Christian community. It was only when that community was established that they started receiving western missionaries in Korea. However, in due course, they were persecuted and oppressed by the Confucian state. In spite of this, Korean Christianity tends to see itself as part of the national narrative rather than a western imposition because of how it started. This is not to say that biblical interpretation in Korea has always prioritised being contextual. Choen (2006) highlighted that much of biblical interpretation up until the 1960s was more reflective of debates from Euro-American scholarship rather than indigenous concerns. One such prominent debate he highlights was between the continued insistence on Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the view that it is a composite work as posited by historical critical methods.

It was after the Korean War (1950-1953) with rapid industrialisation and establishment of a capitalist based society under a military regime that catalysed formation of an indigenous theology from the masses or in Korean, *minjung*. According to Tang (2004), discontent reached its peak in the 1970s and there were active protests against the oppression of the government which forced President Park Chung-Hee to declare martial law in order to maintain social order. The dominant national ideology then was built on the twin pillars of national security and economic growth. Paul Chung (2007) traces the origins of *minjung* theology to the seminal work of Ahn Byung-Mu and Suh Nam-Dong in the academy and Rev Dr. Kim Chai Choon and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea with specific concerns of attending to the immediate contextual needs. Tang (2004) reminds us that *minjung* is not a term used in the strictest Marxist sense as it often connotes more than a socio-economic concept and incorporates the historical and cultural dimensions of a people. It is also important to note that in spite of its huge following during the 1970s and its contribution to constructing a contextual way of reading the Bible, it no longer enjoys the same place of privilege in many theological centres and churches today especially since much of Korean Christianity mainly comprises middle to upper class Christians (Tang 2004). Notwithstanding the inability of *minjung* theology to adapt to changing circumstances in Korea, I still explore this biblical hermeneutic for

its potential contributions to the present task, not only in its success but also in its lack of sustainability. Thus, I turn to one of the chief architects of minjung theology, Ahn Byung Mu and look at his reading of 'the crowd' in the gospel of Mark.

Ahn (2006, 87) begins with the main contention that much of New Testament scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s tends to downplay or ignore the socioeconomic character of the crowds that constantly follow Jesus, 'preferring to concentrate on "the theology" of the author'. Using traditional historical methods, he highlights that Mark's use of ὄχλος to refer to the crowds is different from Luke's designation of λαός. To him, ὄχλος greatly resembles the minjung in that they had 'neither an established position in society nor were they members of an identifiable economic class' (Ahn 2006, 91). He contrasts this to Luke's use which is mainly those who repent and become the new people of God. So he includes anyone who has been baptised such as the priests and ruling classes in order to emphasise the extreme marginalisation which parallels that of the minjung. He characterises the ὄχλος in Mark as an eclectic mix of tax-collectors, sinners and the sick who are united through their common plight of being 'alienated, dispossessed and powerless', 'feared by the unjust and powerful' but yet cannot be seen 'as a class which has a power base' (Ahn 2006, 100). It is hard to miss how these features parallel that of the suffering of the minjung. This then forms the main hermeneutical key that leads him to conclude that the ὄχλος like minjung is a relational term which only exists because there are oppressive authorities. After establishing Mark's specific concern for the ὄχλος, he draws out Jesus' solidarity with the crowds in his ministry, his death and coming Kingdom. Without the ὄχλος he argues, it is not possible to understand Jesus. Thus by closely relating the ὄχλος with the minjung, he claims Jesus' messiahship to be an expression of his identification with the suffering of the latter. Hence it is clear that Ahn's (2006) hermeneutic uses his own personal knowledge of the minjung as an interpretative lens to read the gospel which then shows the role of the crowds in generating meaning for disenfranchised people who share similar fates as the minjung.

As mentioned earlier, the minjung congregations in Korea today are shrinking as the church becomes more affluent. Tang (2004) points out that minjung theology's decline taking root in Korean churches today is in large part an over-emphasis on dismantling global capitalism without developing an ecclesiology and spirituality that would support identity formation. Furthermore, it seems to me that this is also the pitfall of an over-reliance on the experience of the church community to read the Bible because shifting

socio-economic demographics within the church was able to displace relatively easily the concerns for the marginalised in society. Since the church in Singapore as I show in chapter 2 is similar in many ways to the current Korean church, this is particularly instructive for the synthesis of a contextual reading strategy.

Southeast Asia: Still in the making?

Having surveyed both South and East Asia, let us turn our attention to Southeast Asia. Chia (2006a) in his survey of biblical interpretation in Southeast Asia devotes most of his review to identifying key features of the region with no illustration of a reading that takes the context as the main interpretative lens. Chia himself, though he was educated in Malaysia and Singapore, was writing this essay from Hongkong where he still currently lectures. According to him, with the exception of Thailand, the rest of the nation states that comprise ASEAN have experienced colonial rules in varying degrees. Christianity entered this region as a relatively new player mainly during the colonial era and its impact has been most significantly felt among the middle to upper class of society, especially the English speaking. With the possible exception of Philippines, it is still considered a minority religion in Southeast Asia. In his analysis, he identifies several important difficulties in the quest for a contextual hermeneutic. One main characteristic of people in this region is passivity. Biblical interpretation has often been seen as the arena of the west which is not helped by the common perception that it belongs to foreigners from a different context. Furthermore, conversion requires a complete abandonment of one's local cultural identity and practices. As a result, readers have to radically alienate their own cultural, social, political and economic contexts and circumstances in order to interpret the Bible. Therefore, it is little wonder that contextual readings are relatively sparse.

Despite this seemingly bleak portrayal, there are a few scholars who are attempting to relate biblical interpretation to the context of Southeast Asia. The works of two scholars are raised in this chapter for consideration – Yeo Khiok-Kng and Tan Yak Hwee. Perhaps one of the main hesitations in locating these scholars in the area of Southeast Asia is that they are not permanently stationed there. Yeo currently teaches in Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois whereas Tan, at the time of this writing, is in Cambridge University. Nevertheless, both have spent significant time in Southeast Asia before. Yeo's proposal will be considered here but Tan, since she positions herself as a Singaporean reader, will be reviewed in a later section evaluating biblical hermeneutics in Singapore.

In his book, *What has Jerusalem to do with Beijing?: Biblical Interpretation from a*

Chinese Perspective (1998, 1-24), Yeo's main approach closely follows literary-rhetorical criticism. In his appropriation of the passage of Galatians 3:1-20 to the pluralistic context of Malaysia, he first locates the rhetorical force of the epistle towards calling the implied audience of the text which was the church in Galatia not to impose on Gentiles the Jewish requirements of circumcision and food laws (Yeo 1998, 25-47). He also points out that Paul has not become anti-Semitic but rather his concern is with respecting the Other who is the Gentile. It is in his cross-cultural move that constitutes the distinguishing mark of his interpretation. He describes the multi-cultural and religiously diverse climate of Malaysia to be in favour of the Malays. The constitution defines their ethnicity in connection to Islam and privileges them as the superior race. He then shows that the Christ symbol is applicable to the Malaysian context to create an egalitarian society which is not biased towards any particular group, insofar that the symbol is a signifier for inclusiveness as argued by Paul in Galatians 3. It is naïve, he concedes, to advocate that Christ can be the unifying factor for Malaysia given its pluralistic context and argues instead that this is more applicable to the Christian church in her relations to the other religions in Malaysia. He then calls to question whether the church has indeed been hospitable to different religious traditions or rather like the zealous Judaizers of Paul's time who vilify other pagan religions and impose their own traditions on them. This chapter, together with another chapter where he relates gender equality present in the rhetoric of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 to the Malaysian vision of creating an industrialised nation by 2020, were the only two chapters that engaged with the context of a Southeast Asian nation (Yeo 1998, 262-308). The rest of his book is more focused on the Chinese audience in the wider Asian context, though arguably it does not exclude the Chinese from Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding the seemingly under-representation of Southeast Asia in his book, it can be said that this demonstrates how contextual reading in Southeast Asia also takes the theme of Christianity among other religions seriously.

A Rejoinder: Asian Womanist Readings

Compared to Southeast Asian interpretive endeavours, Asian womanists approaches run a greater danger of being submerged in the sea of Asian (male) hermeneutics. As Kwok (1995, 27) correctly points out, Asian womanist critics suffer multiple marginalities where they are regarded as 'an Other to western biblical scholarship, to white feminist theological discourse and to male-dominated theological scholarship in Asia'. Therefore, in approaching the biblical text, she argues that Asian womanist scholars

need to be more vigilant not only to who is being silenced in the worlds behind, in and before the text but also how they have been silenced. Kwok (1993) also highlights that Asian womanist scholarship tends to focus on women who are of a pagan background and often go unnamed in the biblical text as opposed to their white feminist counterparts who look mainly at prominent women in the Bible such as Deborah, Sarah and Mary. Therefore to illustrate the hermeneutical concerns of Asian womanist readings, I focus on the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-31.

Like white feminist scholarship, Asian womanist readers are wary of the patriarchal tendencies of the text (see Kwok 2000). However they go further to intersect it with colonial agendas. It is commonly pointed out in womanist scholarship that the Markan text of the Syrophoenician woman forms one of the key bases for the christianising of the nonwestern world. According to Kwok (1995, 78), the metaphor of the dog has been domesticated by many US missions to exemplify the Gentile woman as the perfect example of conversion – ‘subservient, obedient, loyal as a “devoted dog”’. This is then complemented by a picture of Jesus whom Aruna Gnanadason (2001, 172) argues to be portrayed here as ‘a gentle savior, passive subject’. She points out the deeper scandal is that such a depiction eclipses the reality that the Jesus here is one who alienates Gentiles from their cultures. Thus many Asian womanist readers are sensitive to how patriarchal and colonial inclinations synergise to orientalise peoples of the Global South, especially women.¹⁵

Thus as a form of retrieval, Asian womanist readers use their experiences based on their marginalised social locations to read the text. On the part of the woman, there is a quest to regain her agency in the story. Reading from a Dalit woman’s perspective, Surekha Nelavala (2006) argues that just as Dalit woman would often pretend to accept verbal abuses laid on her so as to achieve the larger goal of surviving in her environment, the Syrophoenician woman was playing smart by reluctantly accepting the insult of being called a dog so as to win the favour of healing her demon-possessed daughter. In a similar vein, I read Hisako Kinukawa (1994, 51-65) as drawing on the experiences of marginalised women in Japanese society when she focuses on the desperate situation the woman is in. She argues that the reason why as a last resort, she chose to ‘neglect social custom’ and boldly approached Jesus despite her inferior status as a woman and non-Jew was because of her commitment to caring for her daughter (Kinukawa 1994, 59). Kwok

¹⁵ See also Dube (2000, 147-153) who argues similarly that the redacted version of this story in Matthew 15:21-28 was also used to support Christian mission.

(1995, 82) cautions against settling the woman definitively into any interpretation and would rather hold on to the apparent opacity of her actions. The incomprehensibility of the narrative should instead lead one to behold ‘the other within the other’, thus serving as a reminder of the contingency of whatever one’s conclusions may be (Kwok 1995, 82). There are also visible efforts to rehabilitate the image of Jesus in the text. Nelavala (2006) argues that wit and cunning is not enough for the oppressor to do what the oppressed wants. The oppressor himself has to change. Therefore in her view, the Syrophoenician woman transformed Jesus’ mission and vision ‘to the broad inclusivist nature from the narrow exclusivist nature, and the concept of “chosen-ness” was transformed to fairness’ (Nelavala 2006, 69). Therefore, using their experiences of multiple marginalities, Asian womanist interpreters attempt to recover the agency of the woman, especially those who are pagan and unnamed while trying to redeem the androcentric image of Jesus.

Paradigm Criticism and an Asian Turn

To sum up the above discussion, an Asian turn demands that reading the Bible has to be relevant and contend with the complex realities in Asia without privileging any single facet at the expense of the whole. Much as Asia is home to the largest diversity of cultures and religions, it is also all too familiar with the problems of poverty and oppression. In resisting both external forces of western paternalism and neocolonialistic impositions and internal colonisation by authoritarian and often corrupt regimes, one still has to be careful not to transform the Bible into a purely political tool of identity politics while conceiving its role in identity formation that engages not only with the problems of the ‘many poor’ but also celebrates the potential of interacting with the ‘many religions’.¹⁶

So what does an Asian Turn present to the four paradigms as suggested by Schüssler Fiorenza (1999; 2009)? To the *religious-the*logical-scriptural* paradigm, it echoes the initial concerns I raised. Western pre-modern Christian traditions are distant from many Christian communities in Asia. In all three regions, the West has in various ways hindered the development of contextual hermeneutics which mainly saw significant gains in the period of decolonisation. I also found that there is relative absence of pre-modern modes of reading in Asian hermeneutics that have liberation as their central concern. This is perhaps made more explicit in the suspicions that Dalits have towards western ecclesial authorities. Put differently, there seems to be a preference to use Asian resources

¹⁶ Paul Knitter in his foreword to Aloysius Pieris’ book, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988, xi, emphasis his) sums up the two main questions that Pieris’ thesis deals with as ‘the question of the *many poor* and the question of the *many religions*’.

instead. Thus an Asian turn corroborates this Singaporean's claim that the paradigm is useful insofar in deconstructing current western religious interference with contextual reading such as North American Protestant Fundamentalism. Beyond that, pre-modern exegetical approaches would remain a secondary priority.

To the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm, western interests are not restricted to the earlier paradigm but are also implicated here as well. The explicit use of the readers' experiences of oppression, inter-religious conflict and socioeconomic injustices (literally!) bleed into their contextual hermeneutics. This runs blatantly against the central tenet of this paradigm that the ideal reader is detached (at least in the initial stage of exegesis). In this sense, an Asian turn joins the growing chorus of western ideological criticisms and third world hermeneutics to declare its 'bankruptcy' (to borrow Wink's [1973] description). It could also be seen that all readings of the Bible are inevitably 'an eisegesis' in order to generate meaning for the context (see Croatto 1987). Yet an Asian turn does not deny the contributions of historical tools in reconstructing biblical texts and thus instead of displacing historical criticism altogether, it joins with the call of paradigm criticism to create a 'republic of many voices'.

To the *cultural-hermeneutic-postmodern* paradigm, Asian hermeneutics are receptive to the idea that texts are interpreted within specific historical moments of readers themselves. Furthermore, some have used the literary-rhetorical nature of language to address issues in their own contexts like Yeo (1994) in his Malaysian context. Some Asian readers have pushed the boundaries of what Gadamer (2004) may not have thought possible by incorporating Asian traditions as part of their hermeneutical paradigm as it is seen in South and East Asian contexts. So it could be said, that an Asian turn embraces and moves this paradigm closer to their own places of 'belonging'.

To the *emancipatory-radical-democratic* paradigm, an Asian Turn thinks of the subaltern as whole communities with faces and histories rather than identity politics along the axes of race, class and gender. No doubt this paradigm imparts a theoretical clarity that follows disciplinary boundaries set by the university, there is need to recover the face of the other before it is lost amidst the mad exchange of abstract terms and name dropping. Moreover, this paradigm tends to idealise the Bible though we do see a definite (albeit not always consistent) departure on the part of feminist and postcolonial criticism. More disconcerting to the reader who embraces an Asian turn is how questions to the text often revolves around Christianity (sometimes with concession to the other

monotheistic religions) without involving other 'social texts' of everyday Asian Christians or ways of thinking foreign to western soil.

With respect to all four paradigms, there is the recurrent theme of Eurocentrism. Notwithstanding the varied manifestations, there is competition between western ways of knowing the text and Asian reading strategies which I explore further in the next chapter. For now, what this Asian turn reveals is that contextual readings have the additional barrier of the hierarchies of knowledge that privilege western intellectual traditions and developments.

This is not to say that this Asian turn is complete as in my view it is still not possible to outline an Asian biblical paradigm. I see that there are still crucial gaps that need to be filled. First, current Asian frames of reading usually take place within Christian communities that are largely homogeneous, even those belonging to marginalised strata of society. Even though there is a cry to the West to behold the truly other 'other' (referring here to Asian Christians), many Asian readings take hold of the other that still retains a significant degree of familiarity. For instance, Pieris' (2003) symbiotic reading mainly engages Buddhism which is a major religion in his home country, Sri Lanka or Lee's (1993; 2008; 2014) cross textual readings tend to take from stories that circulate and are familiar to Christian Chinese communities. While the importance of reading with religions and communities that are relatively marginal should not be denied, any community is capable of replicating colonial elitism so long that it over-emphasises its own experiences of marginality at the expense of other collectivities within the same context. The Dalits remind us that mainstream churches in India continue to function with little heed to their plight and the minjung are increasingly ignored as the church is becoming richer. The common thread between them is that using the experiences of local Asian churches to read the Bible would often elide over the potential contributions from the marginalised because they are under-represented.

Second, Asian biblical scholars tend to over-assert that Asia still holds on to religion vis-à-vis the West that has largely forsaken it. Though in great measure it is true, we must not overlook the fact that many nation states are modernised and slowly absorbing secularist ideas into governance. Singapore is not alone in declaring itself as a secular state. There are other significant examples such as China and Vietnam.

Third, while Asian biblical scholarship should continue the good fight against socio-economic and religio-cultural oppressions through its reading of the Bible, it has

to be equally concerned for recovering subaltern ways of thinking. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4 particularly in the section exploring what it means to dialogue with an(-)Other.

Fourth, in its fervour to express solidarity with the marginalised, it may have overstated the similarities of the oppressed in the Bible to those in their own contemporary contexts and thus construct dialogical readings that primarily operate along the lines of similarities with a relative neglect to communicate across differences. It is indeed rare to find Asian readings of the Bible that resist, subvert or question the text as reprehensible elements are usually overlooked. In other words, the (un)problematic Bible remains unaddressed in many Asian hermeneutical approaches. The notable exception is womanist readings, which following feminist and postcolonial criticism, engage with difficult portions of the Bible with honesty and transparency. Thus, there is need to foreground and directly address the issue of the (un)problematic Bible.

In summary, an Asian turn comprises a (literal?) turn to come 'face' to 'face' with the people of Asia. It expresses solidarity with their plights while respecting their perspectives and maintaining a pragmatic slant so that biblical interpretation does not devolve into an objectifying exercise. Yet at the same time, it has to grapple more with the issues of multiculturalism, secularism and subaltern epistemologies. In the last section I explore Singaporean contributions to the area of biblical hermeneutics in the light of what has transpired before summing up how this chapter would contribute to building a Singaporean hermeneutic.

Does a 'Singaporean' Reading Exist?

To the best of my knowledge, most local work in theology and biblical studies revolves around practical theology but discussion on biblical hermeneutics or relating to indigenous epistemologies are sporadic at best. Here I engage the work of three scholars, Mark Chan, Johnson Lim and Yak Hwee Tan who have proposed how the Bible should be read though only one is done explicitly from the social location of Singapore. That said, it is clear that all three had Singapore in mind when they wrote about biblical hermeneutics.

Mark Chan, who lectures at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, in his book, *Christology from Within and Ahead: Hermeneutics, Contingency, and the Quest for Transcontextual Criteria in Christology* (2001), looks at developing Christology

that transcends one's particularity so as to achieve a universally valid reading frame to understand the Bible. He situates his work as a contribution to a debate between the objectivism of truth associated with concepts of timelessness and universalism and the historical contingency of truth which emphasises its contextual nature. He proposes that the quest for a transcontextual Christology begins from the context of the reader at the point of biblical hermeneutics. Against the dichotomy of the transcendental and the historical which he formulates as 'from above' and 'from below', he instead proposes that one's construal of Christology is both 'from within' and 'from ahead'. By 'from within', he refers to the tradition, history and personal experience of the interpreter and by 'from ahead', he means the eschatological horizon. Tradition in his view refers to what has been passed down from one Christian community to another and therefore locates the resources to read the text in what the interpreting community has inherited. Though he acknowledges that every tradition has its continuities and discontinuities and is open to the aesthetics and praxis of religious practice in informing interpretation of the text, he nevertheless argues that there is a 'retrospectively discernible trajectory' within western Christian tradition of Christologies (Chan 2001, 117). Furthermore, it is not enough that present interpretation is guided by the trajectory of the past but it also needs to take into account the future of eschatological fulfilment. Here he reflects on the historicity of the resurrection of Christ and how it points to the age to come invading the present age. He then applies this to Paul and shows how in both Paul's insights and hermeneutics started from within his Jewish tradition and melded with his conviction that Christ of the age to come has invaded the present age to produce his Christology.

His highly theoretical proposal is innovative in negotiating the difficult debate between the modern, scientific notion of objective truth and the postmodern objection that no inquiry can escape one's contingency. Positively, he sees the Bible as the foundation for Christology which is a point many Asian Christians can relate to. Furthermore, he opens a space for local traditions to participate in the hermeneutical process by placing them in a diachronic trajectory towards the eschatology in Christ. That said, it is in locating a productive place for the Asian Christian that seems to be in need of further development. Though Chan (2001, 144) readily critiques the socio-historical location of Christian tradition and even calls for 'dialogical confrontation' that reveals the 'radical contingency of one's own ideas' and 'the situatedness of the interpreter', there is no clear foregrounding of his own social location and how it influences his own interpretation. This inconsistency seems to me to hauntingly echo objectivist predilections of masking the reader so as

to transcendentalise his or her methods mentioned earlier under the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm. In attempting to construct a 'transcontextual' biblical hermeneutics, there are further Eurocentric signs where his main analysis almost exclusively privileges western biblical hermeneutics in spite his acknowledgement of contextual Christologies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. By failing to properly engage beyond the geopolitical boundaries of the West, this transcontextual hermeneutic ironically eclipses discussions on hierarchies of knowledge and the entanglements of western Christian development with colonialism. This is all the more worrying because such continuity with western Christian traditions is not problematised for its tendency to smooth over the differences and distinctiveness of many Asian cultures and failure to address issues of patriarchy and class divide in his thesis. In short, a transcontextual biblical hermeneutic formulated mainly (if not only) on the premise of western Christian intellectual traditions would find it difficult to meet the demands of a contextual reading strategy that is working towards transformative praxis and identity formation.

Johnson Lim, who was the previous research director for Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary (Singapore Branch), argues in *Hebrew, Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Collected Works with New Essays and Sermons of Johnson T. K. Lim* (2010, 131-248), for a text-centred approach as opposed to author-oriented or reader-response models. His strategy can be summed up as a synchronic reading of the text that suspends the hermeneutic of suspicion in order to hold up the text as revelation which is primarily concerned with the theological understanding of God and his relation to religious practices. He is, on the one hand, critical of historical critical methods in terms of its obsession with source analysis. On the other, he sees the empowering of the reader as an 'idoltrous position' because readers are now legitimated to 'create the text in their own image' (Lim 2010, 231). Perhaps what could sum up his position is his interpretation of the story of Philip helping an Ethiopian eunuch to read Isaiah (Acts 8:26-40; Lim 2010, 211-218). He argues that the narrative demonstrates the need to be diligent and humble in reading the text but more importantly that Jesus Christ is the ultimate hermeneutical key in unlocking the meaning of the passage. In my view, Lim's (2010) reading is better seen from his social location as a Christian minister with concerns for religious practices of his members informed by a confessional scepticism of modernistic techniques and decentring of authority by postmodernity which forms the basis for his choice of literary tools. The greatest difficulty in applying his proposal to my thesis is that he seems to reproduce the patriarchal dangers of the *religious-the*logical-scriptural* paradigm mentioned earlier. Furthermore, by reifying

the Bible as revelation and marginalising both historical critical and readerly concerns, it seems hauntingly close to what I have discussed about fundamentalist understanding of inerrancy in the previous chapter.

What perhaps sets Yak Hwee Tan's book, *Re-presenting the Johannine Community: A Postcolonial Perspective* (2008) apart from the above two is her being explicit about her social location. She describes herself as a first generation Chinese Christian brought up in Confucian traditions and schooled in the Presbyterian institution within secular, capitalist Singapore. In her thesis she argues that the contribution of empire in how John constructs the community through his gospel has been largely bracketed out in scholarship and thus she wants to explore how the Johannine Farewell discourse (John 13-17) is 'an example of a resistance community' that is 'called to resist' the Imperial Roman Empire (Tan 2008, 13). In order to do so, she adopts a combination of two textual approaches – namely literary-rhetorical and postcolonial criticism. The former is achieved through identifying and exploring how different literary devices, namely metaphor, riddles, misunderstandings and irony, function as keys to understanding the perception of the receiving community by the author/narrator. In terms of the latter, she looks particularly at the representation of the receiving community in terms of binary discourse of power within the Christian community and the effects of empire on the text as well as the interrogating past interpretations of the text.

Hence, she found from a literary rhetorical point of view that the narrative paints Jesus as the all-knowing subject vis-à-vis the disciples, namely Peter, Thomas, Philip and Judas as hopelessly slow, and ignorant. This is to bring about their dependence on the Holy Spirit for guidance through emphasising their weaknesses and reinforce hostility towards the world via a two pronged approach of establishing the world's antagonism towards Christians and Jesus' prayer to God to preserve his people as one. From a postcolonial perspective, she argues that the community is peripheral to Jesus and how this negative portrayal is important for engagement with the 'world' which in the case of the Johannine community is the Roman Empire. Therefore, by othering the community in a colonial fashion, Jesus feminises the Christian community by emphasising their ignorance and need for dependence on him. This is all the more so in the midst of the hostile world of the Roman Empire.

While her reading is attractive in portraying the Johannine community as resistance to dominant culture, it does not contest the legitimacy of the farewell discourse

in its demonisation of the world though she readily acknowledges that it has fueled colonial destruction of cultures in many colonised countries. In evaluating the applicability of her work to my thesis, it seems that her location is analysed insofar that it endorses a postcolonial approach to the text. This is inadequate on several levels. First, her social location has not been critically evaluated in the light of the reading of her text beyond endorsing the plurality within the Asian context. Second, even though she concludes by raising the question of '*How does one do a hermeneutics of liberation and transformation?*', there does not seem to be sustained engagement with issues of secularism, neocolonialism and multiculturalism which she had identified as part of her analysis of her social location (Tan 2008, 206, emphasis hers). Third, she has largely utilised methods developed in western milieus which at best problematises traditional western approaches without really offering a means to recover Asian ways of thinking about the text. That said, her contribution is vital to mine because it places liberation and transformation at the top of the agenda for Asian readings of the Bible and aspires to be an 'inclusive' reading that tries to keep 'people from the academia, the ecclesiastical tradition and communitarian-based groups' together so that 'the voices of all will be heard, included, celebrated, thereby liberating for all' (Tan 2008, 206).

In placing Singaporean proposals in the wider context of Asian based hermeneutics, I like to raise further concerns. First, it is clear that Chan's (2001) and Lim's (2010) proposals are both locked within the western frames of thought and neither has ventured an Asian turn, much less deal with issues that the current Asian turn has not. In this regard, Tan's (2008) work is a step ahead because she engages her own social location with a higher level of reflexivity. Second, the failure to properly engage the religio-cultural environment may belie a colonial prejudice against other religious traditions as highlighted previously by scholars in South and East Asia. Third, the reluctance to engage the socio-political context of Singapore in the reading of the Bible may be a reflection of middle class Christianity which I highlighted in the previous chapter.

In summary, what has this journey back from the West offered to a construction of a contextual hermeneutic that seeks to be ethical and transformative on one hand and also identity forming on the other? The central issue at the heart of the West is that the sudden upsurge of readings all around the world has raised concern of solipsism leading to distortion of the Bible especially among the white male scholars who fall under *critical-scientific-modern paradigm* and less so with *cultural-hermeneutic-postmodern paradigm*. Yet

in dealing with the supposed speck of dust in the (br)Other's eye, they may have failed to acknowledge the log in theirs. By circumscribing biblical interpretation in terms of 'weak objectivity', I argue that it has inadvertently (or intentionally?) created a hermetically enclosed space which privileges a particular subjectivity whom Audre Lorde (1984) has identified to be the white, financially secure male. This not only brackets out questions of relevance, but also prevents interrogation at the level of social location and its effects on hermeneutics. Nevertheless this does not lessen the key concern of the metropolitan West for ideological distortion but rather intensifies it.

Thus I move to the peripheries of the western academy and engage with hermeneutics in the *emancipatory-radical democratic paradigm*. Rather than developing hermeneutical criteria that are abstract, transcendental and universal, those in this paradigm dive into the complex realities of human struggle against gender, class and racial discrimination. In much of their work, they endeavour not only to make the Bible relevant, but also recover the prophetic role it can play. These modes of interpretation focus on the mechanisms of othering and how the Other can be advocated for. While the causes being championed are worthy and indispensable to the work of contextual hermeneutics, it is not enough because politics of identity cannot be synonymous with identity formation.

It is here I move out of the borders of the 'civilised' West into the world of Asia where there is an immense diversity alongside immense poverty and suffering. Our time is short so the journey brings us only to East, South and Southeast Asia. It is here we find the work of Asian biblical hermeneuts trying to find ways to read the Bible in Asia. The most common among all methods is that of dialogue – dialogue with the many poor, and with the many religions in Asia. However much of Asian reading has yet to engage deeper with issues of internal colonisation in many postcolonial nation building and rising tide of secularist-type ideologies as well as moving out of our minority enclaves to engage with other communities within our multicultural environment that do not necessarily share similar self-interests as we do. Finally I arrive home in Singapore to find that what transpires locally uncannily entrenches the issues of western dominance in biblical interpretation highlighted in chapter 2 with a depressingly low salience of discussions pertaining to what constitutes a contextual reading of the Bible. Bearing in mind the challenges of reading the Bible in the Singapore context and the lessons learnt from the foregoing survey of the work of biblical hermeneutics, I plot in the next chapter what a Singaporean reading strategy would look like.

Chapter 4

Towards A Singaporean Biblical Hermeneutic

In chapter 2, I highlighted the key considerations for a Singaporean hermeneutic, namely the (un)problematic Bible, (un)problematic capitalism and (un)problematic secularism. I then surveyed biblical hermeneutics in the West and Asia to explore common concerns and possible solutions in chapter 3. With these in mind, I turn now to what a Singaporean biblical hermeneutic would look like. Keeping in mind the twin goals of transformative praxis and identity formation set for this contextual hermeneutic in the introductory chapter, I structure my proposal in two frameworks: the first is a typology of reading postures that enable readers to re-problematise the Bible by alerting them to tendencies to impose scientific and/or fundamentalist assumptions. Hence, I call this the ‘conscientisation’¹ framework’ which serves as a constant check on the orientation of the reading to the ultimate audience of any contextual reading – everyday Christians or nonspecialist readers in that context. As the framework reveals, there is need to move beyond the boundaries of the interpreting community and draw on the resources from the wider location of the reader. After establishing the need to read with the Other and how to recognise them, I discuss the second framework – the ‘conversation framework’. Here I outline the considerations I take to enable a constructive dialogue with these cultural resources to generate relevant and productive meaning from the Bible in the Singaporean context.

Conscientisation Framework: Reorienting One’s Posture

This framework is worked out as a response to Quijano’s (2007) call for careful attention to intersubjectivity in the process of knowledge production given the current modern/colonial world system. Yet I take it in a slightly different direction. At the time of writing, Quijano (2007) was located in Peru and thus his concern was exposing how certain subjects aligned with the geopolitical location of the West continue to control knowledge production and social imagination of those in nonwestern parts of the world especially Latin America. As he rightly points out, different regions are exposed

¹ Here I use ‘conscientisation’ in line with Freire’s (1996, 90, emphasis his) proposal that in order for men to ‘emerge from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality’, there needs to be a ‘deepening of the attitude of awareness’ of the complex situation that surrounds the oppressed and the oppressor.

to varying degrees of coloniality of power. As I have shown in chapter 2, being part of the majority Chinese, English educated bourgeoisie elite and gendered male, I am inevitably as Spivak (1999, 361) aptly describes, ‘folded together’ with privilege in my own context while at the same time with respect to the West, marginalised in certain ways. As Moore and Sherwood (2011) eloquently argue about the biblical scholar as a civil servant, my being trained in biblical studies in the West has further compounded that privilege. It is here contextualism gives better clarity to the epistemic terrain that I am located in so as to facilitate a higher level of reflexivity in the process of reading. Since this thesis is about what it means to read the Bible in Singapore, I take everyday Singaporean Christian readers² as the originating point of reference³ for nonspecialist readers in this conscientisation framework. Bearing in mind the need to address issues relating to contextualism, I work out a typology of four reading postures namely: reading *without*, reading *for*, reading *with* and reading *from*. As I argue throughout this section, the conscientisation framework is a reflexive tool for specialist readers (such as myself) to move away from a reading *without/for* towards a reading *with/from*.

Reading without, for, with and from

The first posture is reading *without* nonspecialist readers. This means that the reading does not explicitly recognise nonspecialist readers as part of its *audience*. The main concern is the acceptance into a certain type of guild of specialist readers who mainly subscribe to the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm outlined in chapter 3. This mode of inquiry that emphasises authorship, dating, textual analysis and archaeology has been criticised by Hector Avalos (2010) in his provocative essay, *The End of Biblical Studies as a Moral Obligation*, to have made itself irrelevant to contemporary society. By insisting on the uniqueness of the Bible as either ancient history or classical literature which can only be interpreted with highly specialised tools, it effectively removed the Bible from contemporary readers and placed it only in the hands of an elite few. In other words, this posture is a potential result of the earlier challenge of the (un)problematic Bible. It is important to note that a reading *without* posture is not only enabled by

2 Everyday religion is a relatively new field of sociological research that looks at how the person-in-the-street constructs and practises his or her religion (see Beckford 2003; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008). As it covers a wide range of themes, I have chosen to focus on everyday religion in terms of identity politics and lifestyle politics and how these aspects relate to the expression of religion in the public domain and how religion informs and shapes the way the person constructs his identity in terms of class, ethnicity and gender, and his lifestyle to reflect his religious convictions.

3 This primarily addresses the relationship of the specialist reader to nonspecialist readers. If this were to be vernacularised, then the typology has to be re-adjusted accordingly as nonspecialist reader would have a different set of concerns and issues. In this research project however, I have chosen to take the position of a (would-be) specialist reader relating to nonspecialist readers and therefore it is my hope that the readjustment of this typology for a more vernacular setting can be seen as a possible future project.

elite biblical scholars who have set up many barriers to the study of the Bible but also by the modernisation of the university. As Anthony Giddens (1990) has pointed out, modernisation entails differentiation and specialisation of different social institutions in society. Thus as the university became differentiated from the rest of society, and the disciplines within became more and more specialised, it also had the synergistic effect of isolating biblical studies (see Ford 2007; Moore and Sherwood 2011). Therefore, the consolidation of an elite structure internally within biblical studies and the external thrust of the university to distinguish and distance itself from society which leads to the irrelevance of biblical studies facilitates reading *without* postures.

One possible defense of such reading *without* inclinations is the fear of what Alcoff (1991, 17) calls ‘discursive imperialism’. In terms of biblical interpretation, this means that the scholar who thinks one is able to produce any interpretation that acts on behalf of any marginalised group or claims to be a product of such a group is bound to repeat current structures of patriarchal domination by assuming one is able to *fully* represent this group. No doubt that such a concern is true with its seeming hint of generosity but this relationship is likely overdetermined (see later). More importantly the concern here is whether it is veiling deeper issues that require addressing.

Alcoff (1991) points out that one of the consequences of naïve belief in western individualism is the presupposition that it is possible to hermetically seal off one’s social location such that what one does in this space would not affect another. Put in terms of biblical studies, the biblical scholar believes just because one sees oneself operating purely within a subdiscipline in the academy, one is able to do so with insignificant effect on the immediate surrounding of the university as well as society and church in general. In chapters 2 and 3, I showed that the reach of the objectivist ideology of traditional historical critics goes beyond the geopolitical borders of the West and its debilitating effects on local contextualising efforts. My own further concern as a contextual reader is how this divorces knowledge production from material reality. It would seem that knowledge is now produced for knowledge’s sake. If this were true, then it reminds me of how cancer works. Cancer is fundamentally a normal cell replication process gone wrong where previously the cell reproduces itself for the benefit of its host, now it does so only for the sake of producing more of itself. Following the discussion in chapter 1 about scholars as public intellectuals, if knowledge that scholars of a reading *without* orientation produce is not primarily for the benefit of wider society but rather for a small guild of

scholars who discuss ancient history almost in the abstract with little attempt to make it relevant to the present, then one has to wonder if this has not become cancerous.

The other perhaps more morally and ethically objectionable reason that Alcoff (1991) offers, is the desire to avoid criticism and error. She argues that such fears usually come less from an altruistic desire to present the perfect answer but rather because privilege is associated with personal mastery. The concern, therefore, is to be an expert who is able to fully control one's field of work (which incidentally happens more easily if the field is more tightly circumscribed or in other words, sub-specialised). It is only until that is possible one should venture out and engage with society, especially the Other. To her, the central issue with such an approach is that it brackets out the need to interrogate how one's social location influences the way one looks at the world or for that matter, the object of study. It blatantly ignores the fact that error is unavoidable in the messy affairs of political struggle for truth and shields one's interpretations from the interrogation of outsiders. In the end, it seems like trading a lesser evil of the danger of discursive imperialism for a greater evil of sacralising ignorance (or what is benignly called, detachment) as part of intellectual inquiry which transforms the sin of omission into a virtue.

Thus what we find in reading *without* an orientation of reading practices that hides behind a thin veil of supposed altruism has (unintentional?) consequences of indulging one's intellectual curiosities, valourising epistemologies that systematically ignore external realities and mutating knowledge production into an inward-looking enterprise. That said, there could be justifiable reasons to momentarily retreat such as to contemplate one's privilege intruding on the Other. However I do not think there is any reason that justifies a long term or almost perpetual disengagement, not least from the perspective of a contextual reader. At this point, I would like to say that there is some cause for optimism. With the rise of ideological criticisms such as feminist and liberation criticisms within biblical studies as outlined in chapter 3, we hope that such a posture would slowly be reduced to only a few select strategic situations. This brings us to the next posture of reading which positions specialist readers as 'helping' nonspecialist readers.

The second posture is reading *for* nonspecialist readers. Such an approach assumes a two tiered reading of the Bible that resembles what Barton (2007) had proposed, which was reviewed in the previous chapter – exegesis then application. Here I press the implications of such approaches further by focusing on the linear nature of the process.

It would seem that exegesis precedes and informs the application of texts and is rarely questioned by it. Put differently, application now becomes subordinate to exegesis. The specialist reader has done the leg-work as it were and all that is left for the nonspecialist reader is to act on the products of exegesis and ‘apply’ them to their own life situations.

Now it may appear that this is put in a rather pejorative tone but if one were to see this division of labour from the viewpoint of productivity, one can see the benefits of it not only in making knowledge production more efficient, but also facilitating many advances that have benefited many people such as in the areas of medicine and engineering. Similarly, with respect to the Bible, many nonspecialist readers are able to have a translation in their vernacular is in large part due to the work of specialist readers.⁴ Therefore, one should not be too hasty to downplay the significance of historical critical work in textual analysis as well as the archaeological work that supports it.

Nevertheless, the downside of this institutionalisation is that it creates a hierarchy of knowledge. Tracy (1987, 102–103) observes how this hierarchy transforms the Bible into a classical text that becomes the property of an elite (western) academy heavily guarding it with the requirement that only those with the necessary know-how such as the latest historical critical techniques or literary theory methods can properly interpret it. He is apprehensive of excluding nonspecialist readers as part of the interpretative process and points out that the main criteria ought to be ‘a natural hermeneutical competence’ which he sees as the willingness to be challenged and transformed by the text without manipulating or dominating it (Tracy 1987, 103). Moreover, this hierarchy, as exemplified in the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm, institutionalises what has been discussed in chapter 1 as colonial difference. Specialist readers produce ‘universal’ knowledge and nonspecialist readers, by virtue of their role in ‘application’, produce local, therefore inferior knowledge.

That said, it is possible that even specialist readers who fall under the *religious-the*logical-scriptural* and *emancipatory-radical-democratic* paradigm are *also* guilty of reading *for* nonspecialist readers. In what arguably has become one of the most influential essays in postcolonial studies, Spivak in *Can the Subaltern⁵ Speak?* (1988) used the practice

4 In this case, ‘specialist’ readers should include missionaries and pastors rather than just purely biblical scholars as many of the translations of the Bible in Africa and Asia are more directly the work of missionaries.

5 Spivak (1988) in her article traces her use of subaltern from the Indian Subaltern Studies Group who in turn appropriated this term from the work of Gramsci. According to Green (2002), Gramsci’s use of the word ‘subaltern’, which in the literal sense, referred to noncommissioned military troops occupying the lowest ranks in the army, was subsequently developed in his later writings to refer to the subordinate classes in society. Though agreeing with Gramsci’s concern over the intellectual’s complicity in reinforcing the status of the subaltern, Spivak (1988) views her conception to go beyond it. Where Gramsci still maintained that the subaltern was able to achieve some level of political organisation, she sees the subaltern to be completely stripped of any possible political organisation and representation (also see Green

of *Sati* or widow immolation in India to illustrate how both the British colonialists and the local Brahmin assumed to be acting for the woman. On the one hand, the former advocated that it is inhumane for the woman to throw herself in the fire as her deceased husband is being cremated. On the other hand, the latter argued that it is an act of devotion to inspire other women to be devoted to their husbands. However, neither thought of asking the woman what she thought or wanted. In similar fashion, we find scholars of a more conservative, scientific persuasion are in constant tension with those who have been convinced of the need for more pragmatist readings of the text such as liberation critics or their church counterparts. In a sense, they are arguing over how the 'subaltern', which in this case, could be nonspecialist readers in nonwestern contexts, ought to read the Bible. The issues of liberation hermeneutics being domesticated into potentially imperialistic discourses of western ideas of human rights and progress have been explored in the previous chapter. What is of note here is that even those who seek to speak for the oppressed could also be vulnerable to weaknesses of reading *for* postures that still construct hierarchies of knowledge and engender patriarchal, albeit sometimes benign and well-intentioned, tendencies. In fact, it is hard to see how a specialist reader is able to appreciate the political ramifications of his reading without close attention to the text in contemporary contexts. As a form of corrective, West (1999) in his study of contextual biblical studies in South Africa, proposes an alliance where just as nonspecialist readers can benefit from the expertise of specialist readers, specialist readers also need the perspectives of nonspecialist readers in order to locate their readings in a politically responsible way to the contemporary world. This leads to the next posture of reading.

The third posture is reading *with* nonspecialist readers which I adopt from what West (1999) has argued as a dialogical reading of the Bible with nonspecialist readers.⁶ He polemically couches it as 'a call to conversion' to specialist readers, in particular, biblical scholars (West 1999, 34-62). Drawing from insights of liberation hermeneutics, postmodernism and poststructuralism, he argues for the contingency of all biblical interpretations and the inevitability that these approaches consciously (or subconsciously) either oppose or endorse oppression. Reading *with* then becomes the strategy to correct imperialist tendencies inherent in the approaches of specialist readers. In this respect, reading *with* tends to favour liberation, feminist and postcolonial reading strategies

2002; Spivak 2005; Moore 2010). In this chapter, I follow Spivak's (2005, 476) understanding of subalternity which is concerned with how dominant conceptions of ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality creates a '[subject] position without identity' and that the only way to regain the voice of the subaltern is to reform (or reverse?) the systems of power that have created its alterity in the first place.

⁶ See also BurrIDGE (2007, 388-405) who also agrees with the need to include nonspecialist readers as part of an 'inclusive community' who wish to read the New Testament ethically.

which supply theoretical frameworks that not only expose hegemonic voices, but also unearth silenced ones both in the texts and contexts of the readers (see also Dube 2000). Furthermore, it is often a holistic approach that addresses not only social, economic and political dimensions of societies past and present as part of the exegesis, but also the cultural dimensions as well. This is because the context of nonspecialist readers is a complex interplay of many factors rather than purely a social, economic, political or cultural issue. Finally in its bid to push for a more egalitarian space, reading *with* postures often motivate specialist readers to disclose and analyse their own social locations. In short, reading *with* is a posture that regards nonspecialist readers in their entirety as important dialogical partners in search for meaning and seeks to retrieve their voices, especially the subaltern, through reading the biblical text in their contemporary contexts.

The main goal of reading *with* strategies is to produce meaning from the text with participation from nonspecialist communities who also read it. What this implies is the relativising of questions that have not shown to amount to any relevance to nonspecialist readers such as many of those from the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm. Such participation I show in chapter 3 has been actively undertaken by many Asian scholars through a variety of creative ways. As part of dialogical reading, Asian scholars also include the use of cultural resources that are important to Asian communities such as religious texts or even folktales and legends. Hence, a contextual reading strategy would favour a reading *with* over that of reading *for* and is generally wary of slipping into a reading *without*.

However, there are several concerns about reading *with*. First, it has become highly contentious which marginalities (such as class, gender or race) we should be interpreting alongside with. Given the potential for marginalised readers to slip into narrow identity politics as discussed in chapter 3, there is a constant contestation of who ought to be prioritised. A further complication would be an inversion of the hierarchy of knowledge where specialist readings are uncritically regarded as irrelevant. This then raises new questions on how to arbitrate among the different voices including that of specialist readers in order to bring about a meaningful dialogue. Under the conversation framework, I show how this takes on greater political significance in decolonial struggles in Asian contexts.

Second, as raised in chapter 2, much of the publics of the academy and the church in Singapore constitute a rather uniform demographic. There I argue how this

high degree of homogeneity leads to a domesticated reading of the Bible that does not only fail to address the challenges raised but also work to consolidate and reinforce the three '(un)problematic's. Thus from the perspective of the Singaporean context, reading *with* strategies are not enough as it tends to favour Christian populations that mostly come from privileged backgrounds. Of course, this may work in many other Christian communities in the Global South where they sustain relatively stronger links with the subaltern in society but Singaporean Christian communities tend to be more closed off, by virtue of their demographic.

Finally and in my view most significantly, the concern with reading *with* strategies is the difficulty of moving out of Euro-American frames of reference at the level of epistemology. In other words, it needs to take into account coloniality of power. The issue here is that the simple act of reading *with* nonspecialist readers does not fully prevent the imposition of the scholar's own framework (be it conservative or otherwise) because it has not taken into full account the politics of knowledge it operates in. In fact, very often even when there is disclosure of the social location of the scholar, it seldom moves beyond that. Furthermore, the issue here is reaching beyond the data, (which in this case, the readings of nonspecialist communities) to understanding the epistemic standpoint behind it.

As I have argued in chapter 1, context should be considered as an epistemic terrain where certain standpoints are readily visible whereas others are hidden or even silenced. Furthermore, I established that the Bible's primary mediation in Asia is through colonialism. By adapting decolonial thought, this could be better articulated that the Bible enters the Singapore context through the modern/colonial world system from the hegemonic end of colonial difference. In order to relocate the text into the postcolonial context of Singapore, there is need to re-examine the epistemic terrain for submerged standpoints from the subaltern end of colonial difference and bring it into close conversation with present knowledge production. This is what I propose as reading *from*.

The fourth posture of reading *from*, which in this research project is the location of Singapore, takes seriously the wider context of Singapore especially in relation to the Southeast Asian region and the global context. Of course reading *with* and reading *from* are not mutually exclusive categories as reading *with* also implicates issues outside the community and reading *from* cannot ignore internal considerations of individuals and their reading communities. Nevertheless, the Singaporean church tends to uncritically favour the West especially since there is remarkable elective affinity between white

male subjects and Chinese majority patriarchal congregations. Thus I see the need to differentiate theoretically reading *with* from reading *from*. The former is more concerned with internal issues and often define its relation to the external world along the line of concerns of the individual or the Christian community. In contrast, the latter is concerned with the politics of knowledge and the wider ethical obligations to the world particularly structures shaped and are still being shaped by colonial difference. In sum, although a Singaporean reading will not completely exclude any of these modes of reading, the main implication of the 'conscientisation framework' is the need for the specialist reader in contexts like Singapore to strain towards a reading *from* posture.

Contextual hermeneutics is at its heart the understanding of biblical interpretation as dialogue with and in a particular context. At risk of belabouring the point, this has to entail an effort to actualise the movement from reading *without/for* to a reading *with/from*. In order to do so, it has to consider the challenges that a contextual reading is faced with, especially taking note that many of these challenges cannot be resolved within the western context before exporting the solutions to nonwestern contexts. In other words, a biblical hermeneutic that is meant to be transformative for a particular (nonwestern) context has to include nonwestern participation, otherwise it would just be another reading *for* strategy. But as Chen (2010) shows, because of the history of colonialism, elements of western knowledge production have been embedded in many social and intellectual formations of identity in Asia. Rather than displacing or surgically removing these elements, he argues that western resources should be viewed as *one* of the rich resources that an Asian can use. Hence, contextual hermeneutics, more than just being the alternative voice or as postcolonial scholars would put it, 'writing back', is collaborative in nature. In order to effect this collaboration, the following few sections explore what elements of the dialogue are needed. What reading *from* posture raises is how our dialogical partners are *selected* such that the issues of colonial difference and recovery of 'indigenous' perspectives are addressed. In the next section on the 'conversation' framework, I focus on what it means to draw on the standpoints of the Other to read the Bible in context.

Conversation Framework: Learning to Dialogue as Equals

To reiterate, I think of the conscientisation and conversation frameworks as concurrent processes in this proposed reading strategy. In this section, I focus on the conversation framework. In chapter 3, I highlighted how critics who hold on to objectivist

ideologies often argue that the best way to remove ideological distortion in the process of reading is to detach the subject. I argued instead that it is the very removing of the reader, as it were, that ironically exposes biblical interpretation to greater dangers of ideological manipulation. Thus, I further the discussion here by re-locating biblical hermeneutics into the present times of Asia after a period of colonisation. In particular, is it productive for praxis and efficacious for identity formation to read from a location that has been historically constructed and geopolitically maintained by the West? In this light, I engage Chen's (2010) idea of inter-referencing as a corrective to nationalistic identity politics domesticating the Bible. While Chen's proposal is helpful to think of Singapore as part of a regional and global construct which justifies my move to bring in Asian loci of enunciation, there is still the remaining question of whether it is possible to elucidate the standpoint of the Other within my own context. This very important question was raised by Levinas whom I engage to argue that it is not only possible but also crucial for contextual reading of the Bible.

Who Defines Context?

The context in question here is the modern nation state of Singapore. As several scholars have pointed out, the concept of nationalism is undoubtedly a modern(/colonial) invention (see for example, Anderson [1983]; Wang [2007]). As such issues have received sustained attention mainly in Area Studies especially after the Cold War, I begin with the debates there.

Let us recall the point in chapter 2 that decolonisation did not remove the conditions of colonialism but catalysed its transformation into the next stage of neocolonialism. In lieu of internal governance, what the West did was to set up area studies institutes to monitor movements in various decolonised areas in the world (Chen 2010, 28). According to David Szanton (2004), the geopolitical boundaries of study for Area Studies vary from a single country to association of countries to even a country within a known association of countries. Specifically, the term 'Southeast Asia' which was originally a designation for a theatre of war in the Second World War later became an area studies discipline that first developed in North America where the main concerns were monitoring nationalism and progress of decolonisation in the region (Patke 2012). This became particularly acute during the Cold War because of anxieties over the region being susceptible to communist influence (Bowen 2002). Needless to say, these concerns coincided with neocolonialistic agendas of North America in gaining a foothold in the

region. In view of the history of this area, there have been concerns over perpetuating this area of scholarship, namely ethical concerns over the colonial origins of the sub-discipline and the declining interest in the western academia after the end of the Cold War in 1990 (King 2006). Victor King (2006) adds that the rise of globalisation has problematised regional boundaries such that he queries whether it is still meaningful to talk about Southeast Asia as a distinct area, much less a place of theorisation. Therefore one of the central concerns is the embedding of imperial and neocolonial agendas.

While the origins of Southeast Asia as an area were mainly motivated by western interests, it was formalised into an international organisation known as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967.⁷ Rajeev Patke (2012, 352) highlights three common features that define this association: ‘geographical proximity, shared economic interests and a history of nationhood built – with the partial exception of Thailand – from the aftermath of European (and in the case of Philippines, Spanish and American) colonialism’. Furthermore, Goh (2011) has persuasively argued that ASEAN is not only one of the most stable political association of nations but also an imagined construct that manifests itself in the lived reality of many people in this region through popular culture and media. Of greater relevance to this thesis, Singapore has been a strong leader in sustaining this association and even set up an Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore. Thus what began as a western project has now become a regional identity that indigenous communities have embraced and developed. So what makes such an endeavour Eurocentric or colonial? Does merely following the boundaries set down by the West work against decolonising the biblical text?

Southeast Asian Studies scholars based in Singapore, Beng Lan Goh (2011) and Reynaldo Ileto (2003) point out what makes area studies Eurocentric is when areas are seen no more than sites of testing for theoretical frameworks generated from western contexts. In other words, when an academic chooses to study in relation to particular contexts in Asia, one’s analysis is still subjugated to western categories of thought otherwise one’s work would not be deemed to hold water in the academic context. This resonates with the concerns I have raised in chapter 1 about inter-contextual connections within a modern/colonial world system. Thus, following the claim of social epistemologists that all theories are inevitably bound to their socio-historical locations, delineating geographical boundaries help in determining the loci of enunciation. This, on one hand, aids in the

⁷ The member states of ASEAN include Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam (for further details, see <http://www.asean.org/asean/asean-member-states>, [last accessed 9 Jul 2016]).

provincialising of dominant standpoints and on the other, allows better identification of silenced standpoints and hopefully lending them some voice.⁸

As I showed in chapter 2, there is a tendency for western modes of reading the Bible to dominate in the Singaporean context. Retaining the use of geopolitical boundaries in the light of the above would be advantageous in that it recognises that our social imagination is also moulded by our geographical location. As Chen (2010, 80-81) highlights, much as nationalism and nativism are problematic, there is an important affective dimension in calling the place we live 'home' that should not be discounted. Furthermore, these boundaries facilitate the identification of Eurocentric biases in reading the Bible by relocating the work of biblical scholars back into their respective social locations. In doing so, western interests can be mitigated by provincialising them which then allows articulation of nonwestern ones from their own contexts.⁹ Therefore, thinking of context as a geopolitically defined entity called Singapore in the wider region of ASEAN has potential currency in enabling Bible reading to be a transformative exercise.

Dangers of Territorialism

Nonetheless, there are looming dangers in many decolonising movements in Asia, particularly nationalism and nativism. In this section, I focus my attention on the Asian Values Discourse to highlight the dangers of over-emphasising the boundaries of context.

Chen (2010, 72-96) describes nationalism as a potent force that unified and motivated decolonised peoples towards self-determination. However, in its bid to break away from colonial powers, it often resulted in the establishment of authoritarian regimes which merely took over the colonial state apparatus that was left behind. Thus, previous hierarchies of power under colonial rule were re-adapted to facilitate internal colonisation by local elites. Nativism on the other hand emphasised the recovery and reclaiming of Asian religious traditions and language as forms of cultural resistance against western values. However it is not a complete inversion as there is a continuing paradox of resenting and admiring the European. What we find in the Asian Values Discourse is a synergy

⁸ That said, one has to be mindful that dissolution of boundaries does not make it less Eurocentric. One of the main transformations of racist discourse today is, as Sullivan (2006) argues, a shift from its previous *de facto* mode to its current *de jure* mode. Whiteness is no longer considered a colour but a shared essence among all peoples of the earth (see also Chow 2002, 24-30). In this way the white man is to be the paradigm to which the world ought to understand itself. This is perhaps one of the key reasons why epistemic enterprises of white man still continue to be viewed as 'colourless' and untainted by agendas of race and may I also add, class, gender and sexuality.

⁹ Sad to say, the use of Asian resources to read the Bible was a main focus in the 1970s but according to Song (1976; 2011) it has not gained significant traction in many parts of the region.

of both discourses where capitalist, economic structures are maintained as foundation of the nation-state alongside Confucian-based values of governance to legitimise the rule of local elites and seemingly non-liberal control of dissent.¹⁰

According to Leigh Jenco (2013) the most significant articulation of the Asian Values Discourse in the region of Southeast Asia emerged from Singapore in the 1990s. The core characteristic is communitarianism which basically means that the wellbeing of the social collective would always outweigh the individual private interests. Its main legitimacy came from the rising economic success of many Asian nations, notably Singapore. As a result, authoritarian rule in many parts of Southeast Asia absorbed this discourse into their political narratives so as to justify their governance on the basis of the common good. Beng Huat Chua (1999) also points out that this discourse was developed to combat western liberal individualism especially after the Cold War. Of course, this discourse has its virtues, not least the emphasis on ‘mutual concern, solidarity, loyalty’ as well as ‘foster[ing] consciousness of individual responsibilities and duties’ (Parekh 2006, 137-138). Nevertheless, it harbours great potential for exploitation by the powers-that-be. Chong (2002, 402) demonstrates how in Singapore, Asian Values Discourse adapted mainly from Confucianism through a melding of Confucian ethics and imperative of economic pragmatism to function as a ‘*de facto* national ethic’. Its main purpose was to sacralise a social hierarchy that valorises the scholar-official to have the right to rule through an education system I survey in chapter 5. More importantly, it served to mainly secure the interests of Chinese in Singapore while disadvantaging other ethnic communities which then consolidated the current majority Chinese rule. Despite the fact that Asian Values Discourse has largely fallen out of favour in the region,¹¹ this still continues in much of the elite political discourse in Singapore which often resorts to its unique situation as a defense against international critique ranging from rights of political prisoners to freedom of press (see Rajah 2012; Barr 2012).

That said, the point here is not to rehearse the arguments surrounding the Asian Values Discourse, not least doubts about what makes it Asian. Rather I focus on the implications to our present task of formulating a contextual reading strategy. This is what Michael Hill (2000) calls reverse-Orientalism where now the Occident is the demonised

¹⁰ This has come under much scrutiny in scholarship (see for example Chua 1995, 28-31, 145-168; Chong 2002) where it is often argued that only elements that support the centralisation of administrative power and means of violence to the nation state were incorporated from Confucian thought – such as placing the state before self as well as submission to the rule of the state. Hill and Lian (1995, 193-196) also notes that even at the government level, there were significant debates on what constituted ‘Asian values’.

¹¹ See Thompson 2001 for further details.

Other which the current Orient has placed itself in opposition to. In doing so, it has not only obscured the many overlaps between western and eastern value systems but also legitimised the use of exceptionalism that walls off the Singaporean context from outsider critique. This then forms the basis for current elites to maintain full control over what is and what is not admissible in the public square. Translated into local reading practices, it is unhealthy for a reading strategy to adorn the Asian Values Discourse in this reverse orientalist fashion in order to assert Asian-ness over and against Western-ness. Granted that this happening in the Singaporean context is in all likelihood rare, given how majority of Christianity has capitulated to either North American Protestant Fundamentalism and its variants or western based scientific scholarship, it is nevertheless an important reminder for Asian readers like myself to equally resist both Orientalist and reverse-Orientalist approaches to the Bible.

Reflecting on the trends of nationalistic and nativist discourses in Asia, Chen (2010, 104-107) proposes a corrective that mediates between nationalism that installs local elites as the new perpetrators of white governance (and I add, epistemologies) and nativism which are forms of anti-colonial, anti-West rhetoric that imposes traditional, essentialist notions of Asian identities that often results in strict social control. To him, the central issue with knowledge production in Asia is that regardless of colonial or nationalist/nativist discourse, it tends to reduce the reference point to *itself*. This aligns with what I have discussed earlier as one of the central issues in decolonial thought – that is, the universal is often reduced to loci of enunciation coming out of coloniality that undergirds the current modern/colonial world. What he adds is that anti-colonialist discourses are also guilty of it and thus what is needed is a system of multiple reference points by which knowledge is produced. He calls this, inter-referencing.¹² That is why he finds the need to maintain regional associations be it ASEAN or even Asia as a whole, because using geopolitical boundaries as a guide helps to map the reference points being used and identify other reference points that might hinder the development of dangerous forms of solipsism. The other important effect is that it helps the region to grow closer together without sacrificing the diversity that Asia enjoys.

Chen's (2010) proposal of inter-referencing gives clarity to the issues with decolonising impulses within Asia itself on the regional level. At the very least, it maps Singapore as a nation-state within a larger regional identity of ASEAN and Asia and

¹² Chen (2010, 216-224) also applies this to the problem of the West interfering with local knowledge production.

points to the need to engage reference points from these places. However, it does not address adequately intra-contextual dimensions of contexts especially like Singapore where there is an immense cultural diversity within. This is not forgetting that other than religion and culture, gender and class also adds to the complexity of context. In other words, what does it mean to maintain a reading *from* posture *in* the context of Singapore itself, as it is far from a homogeneous terrain of epistemic standpoints? I have already alluded earlier that it would mean drawing on epistemic standpoints of the Other within the context itself. However the question before us is if it is possible to draw on the Other's perspective to read the Bible.

Dialoguing with An(-)Other

The work of Emmanuel Levinas in the discussions of the 'Other' has received much attention among postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, as he represents a crucial turning point in philosophy when he placed the Other as central to its ethical quest. According to his personal friend, Argentinian philosopher/theologian Enrique Dussel (1999, 126), Levinas was born a Lithuanian Jew whose mother tongues were Russian and Lithuanian and subsequently schooled in French Strasbourg and German Freiburg. The most traumatic time of his life was five years in a Nazi concentration camp where as Dussel (1999, 126, emphasis his) poignantly writes, '[h]e was a *victim* of the Jewish Holocaust in the very heart of Modernity'. These moments in his life caused him to rethink his philosophy, especially much of what he inherited from western continental philosophy, and brought him to postulate the relative poverty of the 'Other' in philosophical thought (Critchley 2002). In *Totality and Infinity* (1969, 33-108), one crucial theme that Levinas raises is the relation of infinity to totality. He argues that totality can be thought of as an assimilating centre that relies heavily on the logic of oneness and universality to integrate the Other through erasure of particularities. As a corrective, he proposed the concept of infinity which is located at the exteriority of totality evoked by the face of the Other. This radical Other has the ability to destabilise the legitimacy of the 'I' that is located comfortably within totality. Unfortunately sufficient provocation would cause the 'I' to resort to murder in order to render the Other unintelligible: 'To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises power over what escapes power' (Levinas 1961, 198).

This raises two important questions in relation to my thesis. First, can the Other be adequately represented without resorting to 'murder'? Second, is it possible to

inhabit an insider's perspective from the outside or in Levinas' terms, enter through the exteriority of the Other? Here I wish to draw on the experience of Japanese theologian and missionary to Thailand, Kosuke Koyama in his book, *Water Buffalo Theology* (1999) to think through the issues of reading the Bible in dialogue with the Other. Koyama (1999, 93-95) recounts how he came to understand Buddhists through personal encounters with real people in Thailand rather than reading their doctrines. However, his understanding was not predicated on regarding the Other's face (to use Levinas' term¹³) as radically different from his own but on the contrary that difference as informed by missionary discourses were not as accentuated as previously believed. Rather, he began to see the Buddhist as someone very much like himself, someone who 'complains, laughs, grieves, sweats, suffers, thirsts and hungers' (Koyama 1999, 94). My reading is that Koyama had to set aside the homogenising effect of missionary discourse that tends to couch Buddhists in its orientalist version of Buddhism in order to understand the other. Put in Levinas' terms, what he called the 'tyranny of doctrines' was the weapon of 'murder' that reduced other religions into terms that it could control and manipulate (Koyama 1999, 95). As a result of freeing himself from the shackles of doctrines, he discovered a newfound empathy for the other which gave him a new lens to understand himself while at the same time, (paradoxically) deepening his respect for others as 'great complex creatures' which cannot be reduced by any human formulation (Koyama 1999, 94). He then re-reads passages from the Hebrew Bible that relate to the covenant with the parable of the arrow as recorded to be told by Buddha as well as simulates a reception of the letter of James in the New Testament by an audience soaked in a Buddhist worldview (Koyama 1999, 96-124). Rather than couching the terms of the conversation in the way Buddhists are caricatured in western missionary discourses, he uses metaphors of 'hot' and 'cold' which are familiar to his Buddhist audience in Thailand as his primary heuristic lens.

What are the implications of Koyama's face to face encounter on Levinas' proposal of the Other? Mayra Rivera (2007, 55-82) succinctly sums up exteriority in Levinas' conception as an unmoveable point that exists outside any human conception which makes the Other separate but not relatable. This is, however, problematic because it confines the Other in spaces of marginality that is conceived to be radically divorced from spaces of intelligibility rather than thinking of these two spaces as overlapping. Of course, it cannot be denied that partial representations parading as totalities have exacerbated the

¹³ Treanor (2006) points out that Levinas does not use face in purely the physical sense but rather in a comprehensive manner to include the countenance of the other.

pain of oppressed groups in being ignored and silenced. In arguing against the tendency in white feminist discourse to represent all women's struggle as ultimately a question of gender, Uma Narayan (2004) *still* points out that while it is not possible to know *all* about oppressed groups that are not one's own, it is *equally* wrong to say that there is nothing an outsider can know about them. Sara Ahmed (2000, 141-147) emphasises that such an insistence of the radical nature of otherness makes it difficult to give attention to the Other as constructed through encounters in the context of problematic social systems that decide the parameters of otherness. This is important in the light of earlier claims of discursive imperialism. For if these scientific thinkers were correct that the Other is mutually exclusive with the totality that controls our abilities to represent the Other, then the only option left for someone outside the current dominant white, male, heterosexist and neocolonial world to survive is to violently erase the self and replace it with that consciousness.¹⁴ Therefore, such a radical rupture between self and Other ironically contributes to further othering of the Other.

Here I return to Koyama's encounter with the Buddhist Other to see if there is any resolution. It is possible to argue that there are two kinds of difference in operation. One follows colonial difference which uses doctrines to define the Buddhist Other as lost in superstition and in need of salvation that seem to follow the totality that Levinas is wary about. The other difference is what Rivera (2007, 73) argues that differences between humans are not so much 'absolute' as 'inexhaustible'. The tension here is holding on to the the irreversibility of the relationship of the self to the Other that Levinas so emphatically claims as it serves as a constant reminder of the limits of our efforts and also our complicity with the world-systems that produces the Other (Rivera 2007, 76). I find that this tension is negotiated in the paradoxical revelation in Koyama's encounter with Buddhists which acknowledges both relations through familiar Asian traditions and the complexity of the Other before him. In this light, it creates possibilities of understanding the Other that allows for new ways of relating while at the same time, remembering the Other is not completely assimilable. For ease of reference, I shall call this, constructive difference.

Thus, the ethical issue I am raising here with claiming Other as absolute is the unintended consequence of supporting current systems of domination as the Other is rendered inert and impotent in relegating him or her beyond human comprehension. As pointed out earlier as a danger of reading *for*, even emancipatory readings of the text could

¹⁴ Of course they would not call it as such but cloak it in 'universal' and 'transcendent' terms.

potentially end up as the totalities they seek to subvert if there is no inclusion of the Other as part of its synthesis. Contextual reading with the intention of transformative praxis is also not immune to such dangers. It would then stand to reason that re-presentation of the Other is an inevitable part of contextual reading. At the same time, the 'I' has to be constantly vigilant about producing portraits of the distinctly different 'Other' from within totality while straining to depart from it.

Nevertheless, the issue remains how one is able to at least inhabit the Other's perspective even though it is not entirely possible to see *completely* as he or she does. In chapter 2, I show how biblical scholars who are mainly in the *scientific-critical-modern* paradigm would endeavour to read the Bible from a disembodied position which transcends even their own subjectivity with the assumption that the white male gaze is all-seeing. Panikkar (1989) and later Mignolo (1995, 11) furthers this by arguing that the West often exercises its hermeneutics with a monotopic lens formed by western intellectual traditions and histories. As a corrective, they propose the use of pluritopic hermeneutics which I think of as reading the Bible using different standpoints of those that belong to the Other. This is enabled as Alcoff (2006, 84-129) argues by the fact that every person is inevitably discursively formed in multicultural, diverse environments. Let us recall the earlier discussion about Gadamer's (2004) proposal regarding the fusion of horizons. Alcoff (2006) adds that the notion of the interpretative horizon represents a decisive break from earlier hermeneutics that valorises disembodied epistemologies by incorporating the need to take into account social location and its epistemic effects. Moreover, she points out that interpretative horizons in his conception is always fluid, dynamic and open to change especially when it comes into contact with other horizons.

What Gadamer (2004) lacks however, in Alcoff's (2006) opinion, is a failure to seriously take into consideration social identities but instead focuses on historical traditions and stated beliefs. These social identities, of which she focuses on gender and race, shape the interpretative horizon. This should not come as a surprise to biblical scholars, as since the rising salience of feminist scholarship, it has become clear that gender influences interpretation (and formation) of biblical texts (see chapter 3). The claim here is that gender is but the tip of the iceberg. Furthermore, these identities are negotiated in context which I highlighted to be formed by spaces of marginality and intelligibility within a modern/colonial world system. In any context, discursive norms are developed based on relationships between the dominant groups and their perceived

Other(s). For Koyama (1999), it was western missionary constructions of Buddhists that structured his relation and therefore his view of them. Yet he (re-)discovers that there are ways that their identities are intertwined, like for instance living in Thailand with them for a prolonged period of time and recognising similar backgrounds of being in Buddhist majority countries. To extrapolate further, the Bible is read by Christians in Asia where Christianity remains a minority religion for most parts. The implication of this is that Christians are formed in environments where Christianity is neither dominant nor deeply embedded as in many western contexts.

Alcoff (2006, 124) asserts that the West has long seen identities as 'coherent, monocultural and internally consistent in all respects'. When in reality, far from being monotopic, our identities are pluritopic. In other words our interpretative horizons which we bring to the reading of the texts are constituted by a plurality of Others which have been embedded through our interactions within our contexts. While it is true that our social identities overlap rather than being distinct and complete in and of themselves, there is still need to maintain the tension between the radical Other and the intimate Other especially since identities are hierarchically related. As a necessary disruption, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1986, 87-108) has urged in the arena of African literature, the need to recognise that the peripheries need to be transformed into centres and respected in their own right to enunciate their standpoints. In terms of reading the Bible, I think of this as a multicentric mode of knowledge production.¹⁵

Nonetheless, there is still the risk of assimilation because our habits of reading are under the homeostatic control of the modern/colonial world system which privileges knowledge that claims to be transcendental. Thus there is tendency to subsume different epistemologies under the dominating control of scientism. This is important because very often what we cannot assimilate would be censored or as Levinas puts it, murdered. In order to counter such territorial instincts to protect privilege, Ahmed (2000, 149-154) calls for a generosity that expresses itself in being hospitable to what we have been conditioned to view as offensive.

Openness to the Other however is still not enough because there are strategies to manage this such as what Moore and Sherwood (2011, 90) have identified as 'enable-and-ignore'. What is needed here is what Medina (2012, 50-52) proposes as epistemic

¹⁵ This resonates with Mignolo's (2012, xiv) proposal for 'legitimizing the pluriversity of knowing, sensing, believing' which serves as one of the central arguments for his own decolonial project. See especially Mignolo 2011, ch 6 and 7; Mignolo 2012, ch 6, 7.

friction. He points out that beneficial epistemic friction is cognisant of the uneven terrain of standpoints and thus facilitates submerged standpoints to challenge systemic ignorances that dominant epistemologies have established so as to uncover blindspots. He reminds me that a multicentric biblical hermeneutic seeking to reinstate standpoints from the peripheries to the centre cannot and should not avoid confrontation and conflict but nonetheless still works hard towards reconciliation. Thus, we return again to the epistemic habits proposed by him that were laid out in chapter 1. Epistemic friction leads to epistemic virtues while epistemic violence (or what he also calls, detrimental epistemic friction) is the result of epistemic vices (see also Medina 2012, 70-71).

Here I wish to add by way of Koyama's (1999) experience is that for colonised peoples, it is also a form of retrieval of what has been alienated from us and transformed into the Other because of our 'conversion' into western Christianity. What this means for the present thesis is that the Bible has to be first taken out of the elite auspices of the academy as well as the homogenising spaces of the church and put into an in-between space within a particular context.¹⁶ This space is bounded by different loci of enunciation engaged in negotiation. In this particular thesis, I propose that the choices of loci of enunciation are guided by the reading subject in the Singaporean context which I elaborate further in the next section.

There is one further complication that need to be addressed. As highlighted in chapter 1, the text itself is also an Other. Pyper (2005, 19) points out that the Bible contains excess semantic material, almost like our human DNA awaiting activation given suitable conditions. It is this latent complexity that allows a variety of perspectives to act upon the text but yet at the same time prevents its reduction to any single one. Thus readers are situated in tension between the textual Other and the so-called real Other in their own context. This is not to say that the text ought to be idealised as it is still dangerous (citing Carroll[1991]) and scandalous (citing Pyper [2005]). Rather it is an acknowledgement that no matter what kind of theoretical perspectives we bring, they neither exhaust the Bible nor claim to have sole mastery over its contents.

The implications of the foregoing discussion is that the conversation framework as its name implies, is a dialogical form of reading that recognises the need for reading the Bible in engagement with the network of different Others within the same context. At the

¹⁶ This is an adaptation of what Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) argues to be border gnosis. In their proposal, they use colonial difference as the guide to re-locate the locus of enunciation from the West to a space between the coloniser and the colonised. This situation is more complex outside the West and that is why I have preferred to use a more general understanding of context as an epistemic terrain while keeping in mind that modern/colonial discursive formations are very real issues in reading the Bible in Singapore (see chapter 2).

same time, there is also need to be aware of the Bible's potential to dominate or colonise that space. This echoes Panikkar's (1995) call to move away from the western impulse of generating the unified, universal theory which tends to replicate the totality that Levinas warns us about. Furthermore, as Medina (2012) has argued, it recognises the issue that generalities obscures the heterogeneity of perspectives so as to detain discussions in the abstract (and I add, the historical) instead of addressing concrete realities.

Rather it calls for a reflexive appropriation of standpoints of those who are Other to readers within a particular interpreting community with generosity and hospitality while being cautious not to invert the hierarchy of oppressor and oppressed. On the one hand, this is a tacit recognition that the generating of praxis from biblical texts require the participation of the Other at the epistemological level. On the other, it pushes beyond praxis to identity formation. By compelling the reader's consciousness to inhabit different standpoints, the self is re-constituted in context. This results in developing of epistemic sensitivities which not only enables recognition of relatively submerged Others (both in the text and around the readers) but also opens a way out of identity politics which decolonised subjects often find themselves trapped in. The most important consequence is that far from taming hybridity and straining towards the (white male) ideal of a unified, coherent identity, it encourages further pluralisation of consciousness into what Medina (2012) calls, 'kaleidoscopic consciousness'.

To sum up, the heart of the conversation framework is a multicentric dialogue. The Bible is read by a reader from an interpreting community which stands in relation to other collectivities of epistemic agents in a given geopolitically defined context. Furthermore, each collectivity would produce a spectrum of standpoints from its locus of enunciation. Certain standpoints would gain dominance and control based on the positionality of the locus which is determined by a whole host of factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality and so on. These relationships within a single context are never static and continue to move according to internal *and* external forces. No doubt that within a single community, there is a certain level of heterogeneity but there are discursive controls which decide what is intelligible and meaningful. These epistemic norms have already been elucidated in chapter 2. As argued earlier, in order to produce knowledge from the Bible that is effective for transformation, there is need for the Protestant Christian community in Singapore to adopt a reading *from* posture. This entails both a recognition of one's cognitive limits as determined by one's experience and a willingness to enter into that of the Other so as

to understand the Bible from an(-)other standpoint(s). Such an entry I have argued is not only possible, albeit unavoidably partial, but also necessary. For without the Other, contextual reading of the Bible would lapse again into the problems of reading *for* and reading *with*. The appropriation of the Other is not meant to be a form of assimilation but rather a transforming of colonial difference into constructive difference. In order to do so, in the conversation framework, I have to locate my locus of enunciation *simultaneously* in different loci of enunciation so as to avoid slipping into western, modern/colonial or nationalist/nativist modes of reading. Through this process my consciousness would then be (re-)constituted in context through epistemic friction and critical reflexivity so as to be pluralised into a kaleidoscopic consciousness.

Singaporean Biblical Hermeneutic as Multicentric Dialogue

Translating the foregoing discussion into concrete terms, a Singaporean reading begins with a reflexive disclosure of the reader which in this case, is myself. Being a Chinese male, I am a complicit part of the majority race and dominant gender in both society and church in Singapore. Trained as a medical professional, I recognise that I am a successful product of the meritocratic system and in many ways I acknowledge that I have been part of the elite. I am born into a Christian family and have been attending churches thoroughly influenced by western Christian traditions, particularly North American Protestant Fundamentalism. In all likelihood, I would have continued to live a middle-class or upper-middle-class life with a strong zeal for evangelism and almost little concern for social injustices in my country, much less the world, had it not been for many (perhaps accidental) encounters with people from very different walks of life such as devout Muslims, Buddhists, blue-collared workers, Indian national construction workers and Filipina domestic helpers. The difference in lifestyle, religious beliefs, countries of origin and so on challenged me greatly about my Christianity and my understanding of the Bible as the foundation of my faith. I used to come to the Bible as a historical critic would (albeit much less sophisticatedly) - intensively interested in who the author was and when the text was written. Slowly I come to realise in many Christian communities where either I led or attended such type of Bible studies, the search for its historicity became so consuming that by the end of the Bible study, hardly anyone had the energy to answer the key question of relevance: 'So what does it mean for us today?' This dissonance deepened as I facilitated Bible discussions with people who are very different from me

like the Filipina domestic helpers in church where a reading from the position of the dominant race and class no longer connects with their life situations. Thus by virtue of my social location and my experiences, this proposal seeks to address this gap of relevance of the Bible to the part of the world I live in.

As this Singaporean hermeneutic is a contextual approach, I begin with reading *from* the location of Singapore (see Figure 2). To recap, Singapore is thought of as a nation-state within the region of Asia embedded in a global context run by western systems of knowledge. In this way, it helps to identify the layers that different reference points can be drawn to read the Bible. As reiterated throughout this thesis, the goal is not to displace western standpoints but to decentre them. So the first locus of enunciation is from the West which in the case studies that follow in the next chapter, I focus mainly on traditional historical criticism and its liberation counterparts. Then following the footsteps of my predecessors in Asian hermeneutics, I draw on cultural resources in Asia for the next two loci of enunciation. The second is Asia in general. In terms of Singapore, South and East Asia should

serve as the beginning points of inquiry since these areas exert more influence as compared to other parts of Asia. Thus in the reading of Daniel that follows, I have chosen to look at luminaries who still have contemporary influence, namely Confucius, Gandhi and Aśoka. The third locus of enunciation comes from the nation-state of Singapore itself. In order to align with a reading *from*

posture, I have chosen standpoints that emerge from *outside* the Protestant Christian community, namely Malay Muslims, political prisoners and disenfranchised elderly from Chinese educated backgrounds.

Therefore taking the above into consideration, I closely juxtapose the context

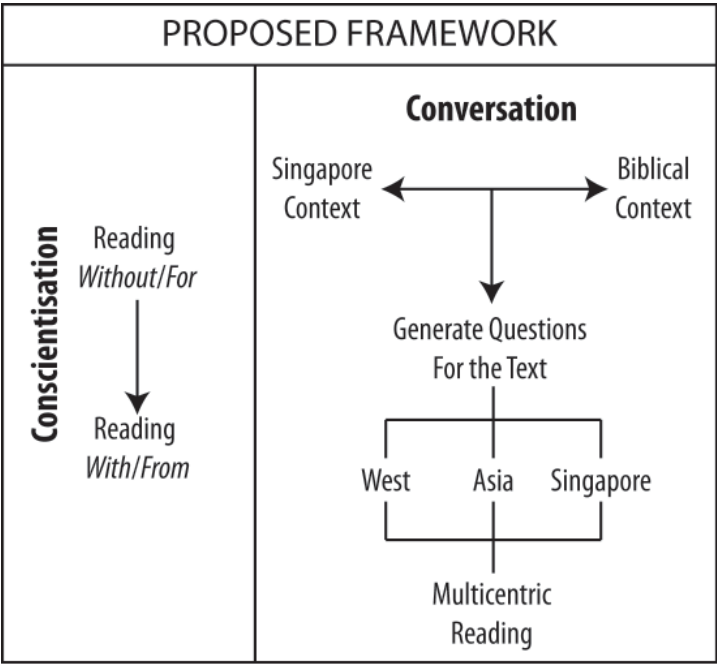


Figure 2: Proposed Framework towards A Singaporean Reading

of Singapore and the biblical context to distil the contextual questions that outline the parameters of this multicentric biblical hermeneutic. After determining the scope of the discussion, I then bring in standpoints from the three loci of enunciation identified above through the conversation framework I have charted. In this three-way conversation, I outline significant relevant meanings that would engage the goals of transformative praxis and identity formation in the Singaporean context.

Throughout the process of scoping the questions and bringing different conversation partners to dialogue, I need to be mindful of the three challenges highlighted in chapter 2. I have to be careful neither to idealise the Bible nor constrain it into a monotopic reading but rather adopt a multicentric approach that is open to even challenging the Bible itself. I also need to engage consciously the text with issues pertaining to the socio-political and economic realities of Singapore especially when it pertains to capitalism, secularist ideologies and multiculturalism. In addition, I have to use constantly the conscientisation framework to check my posture towards the nonspecialist reader. It is important to note that in spite of the rather lengthy discussion, so far what I have mainly done is to create the necessary conditions to allow submerged voices relative to biblical text to emerge rather than proposing a distinctively 'Singaporean' reading (which attests more to how thick the layers of hegemony that needs to be peeled away before any such authentic reading can begin!). This thus falls in line with my understanding of context in chapter 1 as primarily a geocolonial, historical materialist entity rather than an ontological one.

In terms of the church communities, I see myself as an insider. Thus the discursive forces I identify to act upon myself in chapter 2 generally apply to all who are in the Protestant church communities. That said, I do not claim that everyone responds similarly to these influences but rather that we are all subject to similar discursive formations. In this regard, I see myself as someone who falls into a relatively more privileged position in the social hierarchy of both in the church and society. In other words, I am folded together with privilege. Therefore, the task of reading inevitably has to include what Spivak (2003, 100) calls a 'learning to learn from below'. In my understanding, this is an epistemological move that aims to disrupt privilege. I propose that it could be done in two ways. First, engaging in dialogical imagination with the Other has to result in epistemic friction. Through conferring epistemic advantage, the standpoints of the Other are neither assimilated nor silenced. In that way, I endeavour to allow the Other to articulate as fully as possible his or her standpoint in relation to the Bible.

Second, despite my best efforts, it is hard to avoid being rhetorical at a certain level. This is not only because a thesis demands the force of argument in order to be persuasive but also any project that works towards transformative praxis and identity formation has to entail the reader taking a position. In addition to maintaining criticality and reflexivity in the reading, I also devote at the close of my reading a section to consider the discursive effects of my reading on both church communities and the other collectivities in Singapore whose standpoints I have mobilised. This is one of the main ways that Alcoff (1991) suggests to address issues raised by scientific readers about discursive imperialism. That said, I acknowledge that ultimately any re-presentation of any single collectivity or speaking on their behalf cannot escape ideological distortion and hope for further dialogue after this thesis in whatever means possible. With this, I turn to the next chapter to engage in epistemic performance through reading the stories of Daniel.

Chapter 5

From the Abstract to the Concrete: Reading the Stories of Daniel in Singapore

The aim of this chapter is to field-test the proposed methodology. In the interest of space, this is *not* meant to be a comprehensive reading of the stories of Daniel but rather to facilitate an interaction between theory and reading. Therefore, there are several interpretive decisions I have made. First, given that this is a contextual reading within the Protestant Christian communities in Singapore, I have limited the reading to the version of Daniel in the Protestant Bible which follows the stories as found in the Masoretic Text. Unless otherwise stated, Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Second, I follow the commonly accepted convention of dividing the book into two sections: the stories (Dan 1-6) and visions (Dan 7-12)¹ and choose to focus mainly on the former section. Furthermore, as I elaborate below, the stories were likely written in a time of relative peace in the diaspora before being incorporated into the current corpus during the upheaval of the Maccabean revolt. From a Singaporean perspective, the time of more peaceful living would approximate more closely to the current context. More pertinently, the stories have enjoyed far greater circulation in church circles than the visions for obvious reasons of access.²

The opening section of this reading focuses on possible connections between the ancient contexts in which the book of Daniel was composed and the modern context Singapore is in. While the point of the first section is to draw out similar questions raised in both contexts, I do focus particularly on respective periods of each context. For the book of Daniel, it is generally agreed among biblical scholars that the stories were likely circulated sometime in the Babylonian period before being written down, compiled and redacted in the Persian and completed in the Hellenistic period.³ Thus, as far as possible, I apply the theoretical frameworks of world history to the specific periods of Neo-Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic empires. In terms of Singapore, it is currently for all intents and purposes a migrant city where the majority of the populace only settled down

1 Collins (1993, 24-48) argues despite the fact that the Aramaic text only begins in Daniel 2:4 and ends at the vision in Daniel 7, there is sufficient literary ground to divide the text into two sections: the stories (ch 1-6) and the visions (ch 7-12). Not only there is a clear demarcation in genre, there is also distinct change in theme, most notably that empire was seen more positively in the stories and more negatively in the visions. Also see Collins (2002).

2 Of course this should not preclude further work on the book as a whole but that is in itself would require a separate undertaking.

3 See Collins 1993, 130-133, which comprehensively summarises the issues pertaining to historical dating of the text.

after British colonialism began in 1819. The primary attention thus remains on modern-day Singapore which took its current shape after its independence in 1965. The main guiding points are as highlighted in chapter 2: capitalism, secularism and multiculturalism.

As for the literary structure of the stories, Lee Humphreys (1973, 211) was among the first to identify two main types of court tales in the book of Daniel.⁴ He classifies Daniel 3 and 6 as tales of court conflict where there is clash between courtiers in the court where they seek the ruin of the other that ends in only one emerging victorious and the other suffering punishment and; Daniel, 2, 4 and 5 as tales of court contest where different courtiers vie to find the solution to an almost impossible problem. Carol Newsom (2014, 39) usefully adds that Daniel 1 in addition to being an introduction to the story cycle, appears to be a combination of both subgenres where there is mix of quiet resistance to royal command and the protagonists emerging superior to the other trainees. In the light of this, after drawing tangible links between the two contexts broadly construed, I divide the stories of Daniel into three parts – chapter 1; chapters 3 and 6 and; chapters 2, 4 and 5. I then do a case study reading for each part. In each case study, the general questions derived from an inter-contextual analysis are applied. In order to answer these questions, I enjoin three loci of enunciation from the West, Asia and Singapore. As far as possible, I have kept each case study separate and will only bring them together in the final section of this chapter.

The first case study looks at the issue of food in the courts of King Nebuchadnezzar found in Daniel 1. I then read the story through the historical account of an iconic Asian figure, Confucius as well as the stories of local Malay Muslim minorities as depicted by Alfian Sa'at in his anthology, *Malay Sketches* (2012). The second case study takes a closer look at Daniel 3 and 6 which focuses on Daniel and the three Jews being punished for their disobedience to royal edicts. Here I look at another Asian luminary, Mahatma Gandhi and his concept of *satyagraha* before bringing in the experiences of political prisoners in Singapore through the use of two autobiographical and two novelistic accounts. The final case study explores the intersection of dreams and ideology in Daniel 2, 4 and 5. This is read with the dreams of an important Buddhist King from India, Aśoka and the dreams of everyday Singaporeans in a city-state undergoing rapid modernisation and capitalist transformation as portrayed in a locally made film, *Singapore Dreaming* (Woo and Goh 2006). For each case study, I arbitrate among the different perspectives and their products

⁴ Humphreys's (1973) survey also includes other court tales such as the book of Esther and the tales of Ahiqar. (See also Collins 1975; Niditch and Doran 1977; Wills 1990, 1-38; Patterson 1993; Newsom 2014, 12-18 for further discussion on the genre of court tales).

of reading to derive what I consider to be appropriate interpretations of the text for the Singaporean context. In conclusion, I draw the three conversations together to engage the (un)problematics I identified in chapter 2.

Making Connections

To create an overarching framework that encapsulates both the ancient contexts of the Hebrew Bible and the modern context of Singapore as well as capturing the movements in between is an extremely daunting task, to say the least. Thus in order to do so, I look towards world-systems thinking which is notably pioneered by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) that has made significant inroads in trying to draw together pre-modern and modern histories into a coherent framework. Needless to say, since the discipline is still in its formative stages, it is often rife with many debates which clearly exceed the capacity of this thesis to handle. As a way to streamline the myriad and truly bewildering world of world-systems, I focus on the discussions that would aid bringing an ancient text from its historical context into the present.

To begin, the word ‘empire’ or even ‘state’ has been particularly difficult to define for any attempt in circumscribing a category would inevitably exclude some potentially useful elements. As Kathleen Morrison (2001) rightfully points out, typological and substantivist definitions tend to be restrictive and problematic in their own ways. Rather she proposes suspending this exercise of finding the perfect definition of empire fit with a list of key characteristics and focus instead on the *processes* that relate to empires. This would include how empires emerge and form, how they are viewed and represented to people outside, how they are remembered, how they influence and shape future empires, and perhaps most importantly which of these processes constantly recur throughout world history (see also Goldstone and Haldon 2009).

In this regard, Michael Mann has written a four volume magisterial work, *Sources of Social Power* (1986, 2013) to determine what these processes are. In order to understand how social power relates to human history, he proposes a heuristic theoretical framework comprising four inter-locking networks of power – ideological, economic, military and political. Ideological power emerges out of responses forged in the crucible of localised crises that later develop into transcendent conceptions of the world. It largely operates at the level of the subconscious and permeates communications between people. While there are many ways that ideologies are disseminated and assimilated, one of the most abiding

vehicles is religion. This is true even in the current modern capitalist age with increasing numbers of new religious movements and revival of older religious traditions, most notoriously expressed in violent fundamentalisms. Economic power is the organisation of production, distribution, exchange and consumption which requires maintenance at the banal level of everyday living. Military power is self-explanatory as the use of brute force to dominate another. Political power, though it arguably pervades the other three networks, has a distinct form of administrative bureaucracy which I focus mainly on the social institution of education. While governances take many different forms throughout the ages, an essential function they perform is to construct the national cage (borrowing Weber's idea) to keep its subjects in a single place. It is important to note here that Mann (2013) concludes at the end of his four volumes the impossibility to grant any network of power ultimate primacy in determining the course of history. I am also inclined to agree with him that the shape of world history, given our present knowledge, is at best an amorphous one. Reiterating what has already been mentioned earlier, what is shared throughout the ages is not so much a substantive core of characteristics but rather an ongoing negotiation among four competing networks of ideology, economics, military and politics.

Nevertheless, much as the ideal is to keep it as openly dialectical as possible, there are limits to the heuristic process. Thus, I raise several remarks in this regard that pertain to this thesis. First since the concern is about bringing an ancient *religious* text into a contemporary setting, the centre of inquiry would be on ideological sources of power as that is the main network of power that religion participates in. Second, I am equally anxious not to conflate ancient and modern contexts. For instance, one of the most remarkable differences that mark out the current age is rapid advances in technology culminating in industrialisation and facilitating globalisation.⁵ As Mann (1986) points out, world history develops in spite of its seemingly cyclical nature. Therefore, every epoch would have its unique challenges. Since there are qualitative differences, a limit should be imposed on the extent to which an ancient text is able to transcend its own historical context, even if one's faith or religious convictions would indicate otherwise. Finally, that being said, it also does not mean that a text is unable to speak across difference. I would not deal with it in this section but rather in the subsequent reading of the text. Suffice to say for now how a text speaks into another time other than its own is *not* limited to the

⁵ To be clear, this is not to say that there were no technological advances until the modern era but rather it is the *rate* of technological advancement that is unprecedented. See also Spivak 2003, 73.

similarities between the context it is produced and the context it is placed in.

Dynamics of Empires

Carla Sinopoli (1994) in her survey of ancient empires points out three discernible goals – first, it is to extract and accumulate wealth both in the form of subsistence and other resources, including human labour. Second, it is to establish military supremacy, power and security in the region. Third, it is to bring about cultural transformation of a given landscape although it is often met with varying degrees of success. This is usually facilitated by state religions. She then postulates that empires undergo different phases – an initial phase of expansion where it is marked by geographical expansion usually through military conquest, followed by a phase of consolidation and then finally a phase of collapse usually due to a combination of factors such as ailing economies, political infighting and foreign invasion. Of interest to a contextual reading, is how an ancient text negotiates these different phases of empire building. The main focus here is on the phase of consolidation where cultural products like the Bible would have the greatest effect. Therefore, as the most likely place of negotiation of a biblical text is within the network of ideological power, I begin with ideological apparatuses and discourses before moving on to politics and administration, economic structuring and finally a brief note on military and the use of violence.

Ideological Apparatuses

Although coercion is needed to establish an empire, Sinopoli (2001) highlights that empires which enjoy longer rule tend to use violence as a final resort. In other words, after the initial expansion phase, more effort is put into restructuring the empire in order to legitimise the rule of the current emperor. Countering popular understanding of ancient empires as despotic regimes, Norman Gottwald (2001, 144-150) points out that the contrary seems to be truer that many kings spared no effort in propagandistic campaigns. King Nebuchadnezzar, during the Babylonian period, built a museum extolling himself as a just ruler who stands on the side of the weak (Wiseman 1992, 239-240). Several inscriptions found on the tomb of King Darius of Persia were extolling him as a righteous king (Young 1988, 95-96). Susan Sherwin-White and Amelie Kuhrt (1993, 129-132) highlight that during the Hellenistic age, many sources such as royal inscriptions, civic decrees and even Babylonian official documents attest that the ideal king was a moral ruler who led a just government and was fair to the people. It is, of course, hard to gauge to what extent these claims were realised. However, regardless whether it is a true reflection

of reality, it at least informs us that there was a shared belief that rule should embody justice and fairness. Thus, royal ideology often venerated different kings as upholders of peace and justice for the empire.

Beyond installing the king as judge and guardian of justice, the king was often magnified to almost god-like proportions. This manifested itself in many ways such as monuments, iconography, coinage, luxury goods and ritual practices. During the Hellenistic era, kings often wore military badges of courage, leadership and military success because war is what defined a successful ruler. Moreover, Seleucid kings were depicted visibly through a wide assortment of media such as coinage, statues set up in public places such as temples and civic buildings, the celebrations of annual cult festivals, renaming of months and even the creation of local priestly order in their name. Furthermore, the economic prosperity of the empire which directly reflected its power often manifests in building projects initiated and supported by the king (Sherwin and Kuhrt 1993, 129-132).⁶ Such public displays of the king's power also included the participation of his subjects. Newsom (2014, 104) points out that the reliefs at Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire, depicted peoples of the empire bringing tribute to the king 'in a choreographed pageant of great dignity'.

As stories in Daniel deal specifically with the dreams and visions of kings, it is relevant to highlight that it was not unusual for dreams of kings to be part of the propagandistic machinery. Diana Lipton (1999, 221) points out in the conclusion of her study of patriarchal dreams in Genesis that studies on dream reports tend to overlook the fact that they are presented as literary documents with political functions all the more because they belong to kings.⁷ In this regard, she outlines three features of literary dreams of kings in the Ancient Near East (Lipton 1999, 52-54). First, succession is a common issue among different empires and thus dreams function to smooth the transition by lending divine endorsement of the king's claim to rule. Second, incubation rituals and associated dreams are usually used in the context of fertility and ensuring an heir to the throne. Finally, dreams are used to endorse the king's decision to build religious buildings

⁶ See also Boer (2015, 134-139) who argues how such ideological manipulation is required to mediate class conflict that is a key foundation of empire itself. He later on substantiates how religion is the main ideological device that legitimises exploitative extraction of wealth by the empire (Boer 2015, 139-145).

⁷ One mainstream approach within biblical studies is to use form critical understanding of ancient literary dreams. Adolph L. Oppenheim's (1956) landmark study, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East. With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-book*, typifies the basic understanding that dreams need to be sorted into a typology of which he proposes three types: message dreams, symbolic dreams and psychological dreams. This has been modified and taken up by various scholars (see Gnuse 1984; Butler 1998; Flannery-Dailey 2004). See also see Lipton 1999, 9-25; Noegel 2007, 4-9 for a more general survey of Ancient Near Eastern dream reports. As Lipton (1999, 25) points out in her survey of literature on dream reports, much of the work tends to isolate dreams from the narrative into which they are placed not to mention, the context the text was written in.

that signify his favour with the gods. Thus documented literary dreams also function as part of the ideological arsenal of empires to legitimise the king as the rightful ruler.

Like empires of old, such ideological apparatuses doubtlessly exist in the context of modern day Singapore. As discussed in chapter 2, the foundational ideology of Singapore is that of economic pragmatism. What concerns us here are the manifestations of this ideology in the consciousness of everyday people.

Singapore is an ostensibly prosperous and well organised city. One chief landmark that inscribes the success of its ideology is the erection of the casinos, or as it is locally called, 'integrated resorts'. Nathan Bullock (2014) argues through a Lacanian lens how the casinos function as a master signifier that organises political and cultural discourses.⁸ The ideology became increasingly salient when so-called founding father of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew passed away in 2015 on the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence. There was nation-wide mourning with thousands thronging the parliament house to pay their last respects, not to mention wailing masses that came onto the streets in full force in the last drive-by that carried his coffin to its final resting place.⁹ With remarkable efficiency, the National Museum of Singapore set up an exhibition remembering the work of this man within a few months of his death.¹⁰ On the first year anniversary of his death, numerous events and exhibitions were set up to venerate Lee Kuan Yew.¹¹ The churning of national symbols literally transfigured this man from a mere mortal to the national icon that embodies the ideals of the city.

Conversely, the state also curtails the abilities of the people to challenge its own ideology. In what is locally remembered as the Catherine Lim Affair, said author wrote to the official mainstream newspaper pointing out that there is an 'affective divide' between the government and the people (Lim 1994). In response, the state instituted what is famously known as 'OB markers' or 'out of bound markers' which was an important reminder that not everything can be discussed openly in the public square and boundaries have to be respected (Lee 2002). As mentioned earlier in chapter 2, the casinos were opposed by an unprecedented front formed by all the major, recognised religions in Singapore but to no avail. Here I add that one possible reason why such restrictions

8 See also Vale (1992) for a more general discussion about architecture and ideology.

9 See for example, <http://www.rememberingleekuan-yew.sg/index.html> which chronicles the life, death and afterlife of Lee Kuan Yew (Last accessed 10 Oct 2016).

10 <http://nationalmuseum.sg/exhibitions/exhibition-list/in-memoriam-lee-kuan-yew> (Last accessed 10 Oct 2016).

11 <http://www.straittimes.com/singapore/activities-to-remember-mr-lee-kuan-yew-kick-off> (Last accessed 10 Oct 2016).

continue to be tolerated despite visible protests is because of the widely held belief in economic prosperity as the prime imperative of nation-building which could only be achieved by the present government.

Thus in the light of ideological projects that legitimises rulers within empires, new and old, we need to ask: what discursive effects do the stories of Daniel have in shaping desire and the social imagination? How should we as contemporary readers located in the Singaporean context in turn respond?

Administration and Education

It would seem that ancient empires were no less capable than modern nation states of sophisticated systems of governance. As Sinopoli (2001) points out, empires that endured longer tended to have kings with good administrative abilities. This is most certainly the case for Nebuchadnezzar who transformed Babylon into a cosmopolitan capital of the empire with an organised bureaucracy (see Wiseman 1992) and Darius who is credited as the chief architect of the Persian Empire with an efficient system of twenty satraps accountable only to the king (Young 1988; see also Van De Mieroop 2004, 271-279). This is not forgetting that the king's rule is supported by a complex network of imperial and regional elites (Sinopoli 2001).

Part of the state machinery includes training of elites within the empire. Thus we find in the neo-Babylonian period, elites were educated in Babylonian cultural works such as aetiological tales of origin or disaster and historical epics that valourise their kings and thus, serve purposes of political propaganda (Reiner 1992).¹² Such uses of the education system were also evident in the Persian Empire. According to Mann (1986, 240-241), one of the reasons why Persian legitimacy was able to weather even military defeats was because they managed to establish an 'international' upper-class ideology through education. Thus not only children of their local elites but also that of conquered and allied elites and noble classes were taken in as young as the age of five into the palace. There they were trained in Persian history, religion and traditions. Thus political power provided the infrastructure in terms of buildings and administration to facilitate the education of the elites within imperial capitals.

The political bureaucracy within Singapore is well known for its centralised, highly

¹² It is also important to note that much of writing, scribal work and education in general would not have flourished if not for the sponsorship of the imperial centre (Schniedewind 2013). Furthermore, the knowledge generated in these imperial centres did not disappear with the decline of the empire but persisted in the cultures that succeeded them (Aaboe 2012; Schniedewind 2013).

organised and efficient civil service administration. What is less known is what Michael Barr (2012) has mapped out based on available resources how main networks of political elites are intermeshed with commercial circuits of wealth chiefly through government linked companies. More relevant to my purposes is how the education system produces the political leadership through what appears to be a meritocratic system. In reality, Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis (2008) show how the system preferentially selects from certain number of elite schools where significant amount of wealth is concentrated.

The role the social institution of education plays is not limited to identifying and nurturing the next generation of leaders. It is also about producing certain kinds of citizens that would play their role in nation-building. One ostensible marker of this is the formalisation of national education on 17 May 1997 by our present prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong who was then deputy prime minister.¹³ However, it would be erroneous to assume that educating Singaporeans in the ideology of the state only began then. Leslie Sharpe and S. Gopinathan (2002) demonstrate how education in the pre-1990s was one of the main reasons for the economic success that undergirds the political legitimacy of the current dominant party. It focused mainly on what was needed to make the nation-state successful - namely bilingualism, moral education and civics, science, mathematics and technical education with regular student assessment and clear lines of progression charted according to the calibre that the system assigned. So while ancient empires tended to rely more heavily on patronage and networks of elite, Singapore favours education as the means of identifying and generating elites as evidenced by a larger proportion of middle class citizens. Nonetheless, both systems of rule are heavily vested in education as means to not only train their citizenry to maintain the inner machinery of the empire, but also instil loyalty to empire by indoctrinating them with its dominant culture and values.

That said, there is an important difference between political institutions of modern states like Singapore and that of ancient empires like Babylon or Persia. At the very least,

¹³ National education, according to Sharpe and Gopinathan (2002) was formulated as a political strategy to ensure the legitimacy of the current government in the face of the Asian economic crisis in 1997. The central message could be summed up on the official National Education website is as follows:

1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong.
2. We must preserve racial and religious harmony.
3. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility.
4. No one owes Singapore a living.
5. We must ourselves defend Singapore.
6. We have confidence in our future.

Taken from <http://ne.moe.edu.sg/ne/slot/u223/ne/index.html> (last accessed 30 Sep 2016). See also Chua 1995, 31-37.

Singapore is still formally a democracy. This means there is always a chance within the length of an empire for leadership to more gradually change hands completely. The general elections in 2011 proved such a possibility when for the first time after independence, the dominant party lost an entire group representation constituency comprising of five parliamentary members to an opposition party. Therefore, it could be argued that there is a greater possibility for a significant changeover of leadership without completely overhauling the state when compared to the empires that the Jews were exposed to in ancient times or for that matter, possibly any ancient empire before the modern age. The implication, of course, is the potential for change to be relatively less abrupt in the modern era than in the past.

The stories in Daniel paint different kinds of engagements with the political apparatus of their day both in school and more broadly, the royal courts. By analogy, many Singaporean Christians are either in the education system or in the employment of the state. What kind of relationships do the texts portray between Jews and empire and how does that inform how we relate to the nation state today?

Sacred Economies?

Zipporah Glass (2010, 32) points out in her survey of possible models of ancient economies that what remains consistent despite the debates is the content of the conflict which she defines as:

[t]he conflict or struggle... situated as between and/or among any group(s) or institutional form(s) over the primary assets, land and labor, within an agrarian economy.

While one could argue that the stories of Daniel do engage with the issues of economic injustice, it is hard to detect any programmatic proposal on how to correct structural issues of economic injustice. Therefore my concern here is less of offering any resolution to organisation of political economy in the Ancient Near East but rather outline a usable sketch for comparing to the Singapore context.¹⁴

The model of ancient economy that has yielded a more comprehensive treatment of the various vested parties is found in Roland Boer's latest work, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (2015). There he argues for understanding the ancient economy of Israel as 'sacred economy' where he identifies several sites of production: the subsistence-

¹⁴ See Glass (2010, 11-35) who has summed up the different approaches to ancient economies as non-market oriented, rational-action constructs and movement towards modernist market orientations. To which she adds sacred-temple oriented constructs, notably of Weinberg (1992) and Boer (2007). As for debates about using modernist concepts to understand ancient contexts, see Wallerstein 1974; Rowland 1987; Goldstone and Haldon 2009.

survival, kinship-household, patronage, (e)states and tribute-exchange. The former three constitute what Boer (2015) identifies to be allocative economies which is community based sharing of resources while the latter two function as part of extractive economies which chiefly draw resources from allocative economies. Both regimes of allocation and extraction with their mutual interactions constitute what he calls ‘theo-economics’.¹⁵ The key competition is between the agriculturally based communities of peasants and the estates which were originally part of the temple but have become independent because of the rise of Babylonian and Persian empires. It is important to note that the estates continue to function in close alliance with priests and scribes. They also act on behalf of the empire and sought to assimilate the allocative economies into their territories.¹⁶ Thus the asymmetrical power relations that result from this economic arrangement would likely cause strain on the lower classes.

Recalling the earlier discussion in chapter 2 about (un)problematic capitalism in Singapore, it would seem that the structure of capitalism in Singapore and the actors involved bear some similarities to ancient economies. The main one I see is how the church is aligned with the state and the middle-upper class in terms of its demographic profile and social conservatism. Like its temple counterparts, the church is distant from what would be the class equivalent of village communities such as foreign construction workers, one room flat dwellers and so on. Thus while the terms of exploitation have undoubtedly changed and the dominant social actors have acquired significantly more sophistication, economic inequalities still remain structurally entrenched with major religious centres (uncomfortably) close to centres of economic power.

In this light, the biblical text, both in the ancient and the contemporary context, is called upon to respond to unequal social relations built on such structures. The question here is whose class affections the stories of Daniel resonate with and what kind of interventions are envisioned into such an unequal economic structure, if any at all.

Militarism and its Relevance

While the network of military power takes a relative backseat in this reading, it is not to say that it is unimportant. Mann (1986, 26) describes military organisation as

¹⁵ See Boer 2007 for a more concise argument that outlines what constitutes ‘allocation’ and ‘extraction’ which he favours the former as the more dominant form of economics in the ancient world.

¹⁶ See for example, Schäfer’s (2003, 27-28) analysis of the pseudo-Aristoelian treatise *Oeconomica* which outlines the system of tribute to the empire by stratifying into four departments: the king, the satrap, the *polis*, and the private citizen. The lowest strata of allocative economies is understandably missing. According to Boer (2015, 126-132), it is not unusual that written documents tended to reflect the details of extractive modes of production more than other modes because of its complicity with empire building.

‘concentrated-coercive’ which is an intense focus of force at a single moment in time. The most obvious use is during war. The other which is of more interest to me is peacetime use of violence. Similarly, such localised use of violence by the state is also highly concentrated. It manifests itself most commonly in ancient times as directly coerced labour but has been used in other instances like quelling civil riots. To highlight this ‘concentrated-coercive’ military force in a more localised setting, I look at two incidents - the first is the key events leading up to the infamous Maccabean revolt in 2nd century BCE and; the second is the alleged Marxist conspiracy of 1987 in Singapore.

One key event that is relevant to my thesis was when Menelaus usurped the role of the high priest from Jason by offering a higher bribe to the Seleucid Empire which forced the latter to flee in 172 BCE (Portier-Young 2011, 120-121). Seizing on the rumour that Antiochus IV died in Egypt, Jason staged a civil war to regain his position in 168 BCE. However, the rumours were unfounded. So when Antiochus IV returned to Jerusalem, he had to forcibly quell the riots that were raging in the city. If the accounts in Maccabees were by any means true, his soldiers went further not only to slaughter brutally people in the streets, but also invade their homes to massacre them or sell them into slavery (cf 2 Macc 5:12-14). Furthermore, he plundered the treasury of the temple, banned the practice of Jewish religion by royal decree and demanded the worship of pagan gods (Habicht 1989). Anatheia Portier-Young (2011, 140-175) argues that this was all part of a larger mechanism of control through what she identifies as ‘state terror’. The extensive use of violence was meant to weaken the will of the polity to resist as well as to curtail the city’s freedom of self-governance. By reordering the space of the city which includes the temple and interfering with the cultic calendar, Antiochus IV remoulded Jewish identities by delinking them from their ancestral laws and recreating them in his Hellenistic image.¹⁷ The actions of Antiochus IV eventually provoked an armed revolution led by Mattathias and his son Judas Maccabaeus which led to the recapture of Jerusalem and the deposing of the governor of Syria. As Antiochus IV was then tied up in war in the Far East and was running low on finances, an amnesty was issued which allowed for the return to the former open cultural policy. He died in late 164 BCE and his son who took over effected a complete reversal of his father’s policy in Palestine and allowed once again the Jews to

¹⁷ Christian Habicht (1989) argues against absolving the Jews of their responsibility towards their own repression (see also Shipley 2000). He was calling to question mainstream views that tend to agree with Jewish vilification of Antiochus IV (see for example, Heaton 1956, 74-79). While it is true that the elite Jews, not least those who were part of the temple, were complicit with Empire and the violent repression of Antiochus IV could be attributed to an internal grab for power, this does not account for the disproportionate show of force. Thus I agree with Portier-Young (2011) that the revolt supplied the opportunity for Antiochus IV to reassert his sovereignty over Jerusalem and instil in them fear for his power to create and destroy. See also Portier-Young 2011, 191-215 for her detailed analysis of how the Edict of Antiochus disrupted and reordered Jewish identity.

freely practise their Jewish way of life and freedom of religion (Habicht 1989; Shipley 2000, 286-293, 307-312).

On 27 May 1987, it was revealed in the mainstream newspaper of Singapore, *The Straits Times* that a Marxist plot had been uncovered with sixteen members arrested one week ago. The authorities identified the mastermind to be Tan Wah Piow with his main ring leader, forty year old Vincent Cheng who was then an active Catholic social worker working with church groups and students. It was further reported that the group 'succeeded in establishing and expanding their clandestine network' through 'manipulating' various members of the public but yet 'concealing' their true motivations and intentions from them. This was done so as to 'revive class hatred and conflict, breed disaffection towards existing and economic system, and revive political instability' (*The Straits Times* 27 May 1987a; 27 May 1987b). However as first person accounts later revealed, many of the detainees had never met one another and in fact, they did not perceive their work to be of a political nature.¹⁸ Basically, they were in their different capacities trying to help the marginalised in society cope with the difficulties of life rather than inciting a revolution against the government.¹⁹ One key underlying concern of the state was the possible connection of the movement to liberation theology, which was perceived as a threat to its ideology of economic pragmatism (Barr 2010). Thus the operation was well coordinated and executed with concentrated force. As Hill (2003) has argued, the use of such decisive force was meant to create a moral panic about religion as an emerging folk devil threatening to throw society into upheaval which garnered support from both the elite of the state and the grassroots leaders. In the light of the above discussion, this 'concentrated-coercive' force by the state against religion conceivably inspired fear among religious practitioners about speaking up against the state.

Thus the issue here is how could biblical texts be read in the face of empire's potential for almost unbridled violence or what Portier-Young (2011) calls 'state terror'?

Contextual Questions

What the above discussion has shown are key currents that link both the contemporary context of Singapore and the Ancient Near Eastern context of Babylon, Persian and Hellenistic empires. Imperial ideology is heavily reliant on propaganda to

¹⁸ See for example *That We May Dream Again* (2012), a compilation of essays edited by Hoe Fang Fong which includes the stories of several of the detainees.

¹⁹ This point has been emphasised by Barr (2010) who point to the lack of proper organisation among the detainees, their eventual release with no open court trial, the then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew acknowledging that they themselves constituted no potential threat and first-hand accounts of various detainees.

establish its right to rule. In this regard, the desires of people are policed to follow closely the logic of the empire. This is intertwined with elaborate bureaucratic machineries which use the social institution of education to produce subjects who would fall in line with empire. Economic networks not only yield the prosperity and stability needed to build the empire's legitimacy but also entrench structures that insure class inequality. If need be, the empire can rely on concentrated-coercive force to keep the populace in line with its objectives.

From the perspective of praxis, the key question is how should Christians *within* these networks of power respond? Thus what is the perception of empire in the stories of Daniel in the light of the networks of power illustrated above? How would the standpoints from various loci of enunciation help a reader such as myself identify different modes of praxis within biblical texts? More crucially, which of these modes ought to be embraced, adapted or problematised?

Moving to the question of identity formation, the network of power that interferes most intrusively is that of ideological power. I have demonstrated through a reflexive analysis of my own social location what normative identities are expected of a Christian living in modern day Singapore in chapters 1 and 2. Thus the question is how would a multicentric mode of reading texts renegotiate the interpellation of desire by dominant interpretive powers of the state and the West? More importantly, how would it seek to realign readers such as myself with submerged identities both in ancient and contemporary contexts in hope of pluralising their consciousness?

Before going into the various case studies, I would like to reiterate here that these case study discussions are centred on elucidating meaning from biblical texts for the Singaporean context. Historical critics have highlighted several issues with the text, most notably the historical veracity of the stories, the dating of the various pericopes and linguistic issues such as the bilingual nature of the book. However, in the interest of space, I focus mainly on the meanings that historical critics have distilled and examine the relevance and issues with regards to their conclusions. Thus I would not dwell too long on textual issues unless it has significant bearing on how the text is to be appropriated into a contemporary context. As and when necessary, I detail it further in the footnotes.

Case Study #1: Reading Daniel 1 in the Classroom of National Education

Daniel 1: More than Food?

According to the opening story of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah in the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim.²⁰ As part of his empire building project, a curriculum is put together for the elites who are gathered from both Babylon and the subjugated nations. This is in order to school them in the ‘literature and language of the Chaldeans’ so that they will learn their ways and help in the governance of the empire (Dan 1:4). Thus we find our protagonists, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah at school where they are not only given the finest of the king’s food but also new names that their Babylonian masters can call them. However, Daniel is determined not to eat the king’s royal food and wine. Therefore, he requests permission from Ashpenaz, the king’s palace master, to abstain from it. But Ashpenaz, fearing for his life, does not grant Daniel his request. Daniel then decides to ask the guard who has been appointed by Ashpenaz. This time he makes a deal with him – he tells the guard to give them a test for ten days. Daniel promises the guardian that at the end of ten days, no one will be able to tell that he and his three friends have abstained from the king’s royal food and wine. True to his word, Daniel and his three friends appear even healthier than their peers. God thus honours their desire to abstain by making them ‘ten times better than all the magicians, enchanters in his whole kingdom’ (Dan 1:20).

As John Goldingay (1989, 8-12) points out, the story is organised chiastically around Daniel’s refusal of the king’s royal rations (see also Newsom 2014, 39). It is also clear from a literary point of view that the text climaxes at Daniel’s determination to take a stand. Therefore, resistance is the main entry point. I begin with the first locus of enunciation in the current work of western biblical scholarship. The second locus from Asia is through the eyes of Confucius during his time in exile. Here the main interest is to see how a distinctively different response to perhaps similar circumstances may help to contrast the meaning in the text. The third locus is drawn from an anthology of short stories in *Malay Sketches* (2012) written by Alfian Sa’at which portrays the different aspects of living as Malay minorities in Singapore.

Biblical Scholars: Piety or Protest

There are two main, though not entirely mutually exclusive, reasons that biblical

²⁰ The problem with this dating has been well explored by many biblical scholars and will not be discussed here. See Collins 1993, 130-133, 140-141 for one of the most comprehensive survey on this issue.

scholars have found to account for Daniel's resistance to the king's food. The first dominant position tends to view it as a form of resistance against full integration into Babylonian culture thus compromising Jewish identity. The second position sees it more as a form of socio-political protest against the excesses of the empire and economic exploitation within the kingdom.

With respect to the first position, John Collins (1993, 145) concludes that the story has a specific practical application and that is 'to encourage Jews of the diaspora to avoid defilement in their food while participating actively in the cultural life of their environment'. Defilement to him is 'no doubt...primarily ritual' (Collins 1993, 142). Goldingay (1989, 8, 18-20) furthers this by pointing out that the story is mainly organised around two main Hebrew verbs – גָּאַל ('to defile') and נִסָּה ('to test'). To him, Babylon was a testing ground to see if Daniel and his three friends are able to maintain their 'purity' by closely relating food to identity. Thus the narrative is representative of the will of the exiles to resist foreign indoctrination which he perceives as defilement. Such a view of being distinct from the world is widely held in various ways by many commentators of the text (see for example, Montgomery 1927, 130-131; Heaton 1956, 119-120; Barton 2003, 154-155).

Having said that, there are certain incongruences in the text that need to be pointed out. If it were an issue that the food had been offered to idols thus constituting its uncleanness, then Daniel's request for vegetables is equally problematic as that would also have been offered (Goldingay 1989, 18). Furthermore, there is no particular prohibition against wine in the Pentateuchal laws or early Jewish traditions (Goldingay 1989, 18-19; Seow 2003, 25). Collins (1993, 142-143) then appeals to more contemporaneous texts such as the Tobit, Judith and Jubilees to argue that there is commonly held belief that Jews saw food of the Gentiles as generally impure or unclean. Such injunctions would have intensified during the Maccabean revolt. The issue here however is that Daniel could have eventually eaten food of Gentiles (cf Dan 10:3). Fewell (1991, 19) also points out that eating Gentile food in exile could be said to be unavoidable (cf Ezek 4:13; Hos 9:3, 4).

While the issue of his abstinence remains ambiguous and debated even among traditional historical critics, many scholars like those above still put it down to ritual defilement. I like to suggest one possible reason from Humphreys' (1973) proposal that the tales modelling a 'lifestyle for the diaspora' seems to be influential on their readings.

His study draws together the stories of Esther and Daniel as ‘tales of a particular type’ which ‘suggest and illustrate a certain lifestyle for the Jew in his foreign environment’ (Humphreys 1973, 211). By identifying key elements such as the success of Jewish courtiers in a foreign court and the emphasis on maintaining Jewish ways, he argues that these tales conceive the possibility of living and even flourishing in Gentile environments while maintaining their fidelity to the Jewish religion. In fact, their success is because of and not in spite of their faithfulness. Thus, the fact that Daniel 1 takes the form of such court tales as it shares key features of Jewish courtiers, Gentile court, upholding Jewish scruples and eventual success further corroborates what many historical critics have identified as the key praxis of this story: maintaining food practices is mainly about persevering in piety in a non-Jewish environment that could be hostile to it.

Singaporean biblical scholar Gordon Wong (2006, 2-4) follows closely traditional historical critical methods as he surveys the different options for understanding food abstinence. However, he is hesitant that the issue here is food due to the lack of consensus but focuses instead on what Humphreys identifies as one key element of the tale: success. To him, Daniel and his three friends exemplify their faithfulness to God through excelling in their studies (Wong 2006, 10).

The second commonly held position is to view it as a form of socio-political protest. While form critics seem to focus more on גָּאֵל (‘to defile’), these critics appear to pivot their interpretations more on the understanding of פְּתֻבָּג (‘royal rations’). The issue is not so much the ritualistic nature of the food but rather the source of the food. As Choon Leong Seow (2003, 26) highlights, the text emphasises repeatedly that the royal rations and wine come *from* the king (Dan 1:5, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16). Philip Davies (1985, 90-91) infers from this association that there is a political dimension to the food where partaking of it would signify aligning oneself with the patronage of the king (see also Portier-Young 2011, 206-210). Daniel Lee Smith-Christopher (1996, 40-42) furthers this by connecting this to other biblical references to feasting (Dan 5; Isa 5:8-14; Amos 4:13) to show that the food on the king’s table is the result of heavy taxation of the rural countryside to sustain the excesses of the capital cities. To him, Daniel is in essence rejecting the claim of the king to be the only source of provision in the empire.²¹ In short, the refusal to eat from the king’s table is a tangible response that symbolises their unwillingness to be part of an empire which has done untold injustice and violence to their people.

²¹ See also Portier-Young (2011, 211-212) who asserts a similar point through reading the text intertextually with 1 Macc 1.

Two main issues complicate this understanding of Daniel's resistance. The first is that Daniel and his three friends accepted Babylonian education and even excelled in it. I highlighted earlier that education served as a tool to assimilate minorities into the dominant system through which the rule of empire is naturalised. The apparent contradiction has been detected by some commentators but appear to be excused on various grounds. Collins (1993, 146) points out their willing embrace of Babylonian education but seems to imply that this is of little consequence to Jewish identity as compared to food practices here and issues of idolatry and religious practice of prayer (in Daniel 3 and 6 respectively). In fact, he goes further to argue that the grounds of Daniel's resistance have little to do with political connotations of royal rations. André LaCocque (1979, 26) points out that this shows how much Daniel and his three friends were a kind of model minority excelling in the oppressor's knowledge. Daniel Pace (2008, 30) attempts to differentiate wisdom from magic within Babylonian education, thus putting forward the idea that Daniel excelled in the former but abstained from the latter. In other words, one could accept secular education without compromising one's religion (see also Montgomery 1927, 121-122; Goldingay 1989, 16-17). Newsom (2014, 45) at least acknowledges the ambivalent relationship of oppressed to oppressor in that the desire to resist is also mixed with the desire for elitist education of the Babylonians which was considered 'both highly attractive and often unattainable'.

The second issue is that Babylonian names were imposed on them. The Hebrew verb שׁוּם ('to determine') was used to describe both the actions of the palace master determining their names and Daniel determining in his heart not to defile himself (Dan 1:7-8). While Seow (2003, 25) thinks that it implies the resolve behind Daniel's actions not to partake of the king's royal rations, I add that it is also possible to see that their names were determined with equal force. Smith-Christopher (1996, 28) argues that the changing of names was equivalent to slavery which included the removal of one's identity and social death. This intimate relationship between identity and names was also developed by Chia (2006b) who draws on contemporary experiences of how western colonialism has distorted Chinese names. He argues that the issue is the *changing* of names which symbolises one's link to one's ancestry, tradition and history. However, there are those who do not view renaming as hostile. It was not uncommon for Jews to be renamed like for instance, Joseph was given an Egyptian name (Gen 41:45). Furthermore, Jews were commonly known by their Babylonian or Persian names such as Hadassah is better known by her Persian name, Esther (Montgomery 1927, 123; Newsom 2014, 46-

47). Goldingay (1989, 24) thinks that the text is making a mockery of Babylonian rule by defacing the Babylonian names beyond clear recognition (see also Seow 2003, 24).

It seems to me that very often while the ambiguous nature of Daniel's actions is acknowledged, it does not address adequately how Daniel negotiates with his foreign environment. On the one hand, those who advocate piety as the main response would resolve this on the basis that these issues are peripheral to religiosity and therefore Jewish identity. Surely this raises questions to whether the Jews then (or for that matter, at any time) viewed religion as many contemporary Christians do now as separate from politics. By failing to acknowledge the effects of education and names on religious identity, does that not also reduce religion to a mere matter of what goes into the mouth? On the other hand, those who favour socio-political resistance as the reading of Daniel's actions would foreground the social injustices behind these issues without directly addressing how accepting a coveted Babylonian education or new Babylonian names is consistent with his refusal to partake of the king's food. In other words, why would these be less indicative of accepting the king's patronage than the food he supplies?

In sum, what is certain about the text is that the central focus is the resistance of Daniel and his friends to the royal rations offered to them. What is equally clear is that their defiance is significantly made ambivalent by their lack of resistance to their new names and their embrace of Babylonian education which made them successful in the empire. In relation to applying the text to context, western biblical scholarship has identified two main responses in the text: piety through maintaining ritual purity by refraining to eat Gentile food and, resistance by refusing to acknowledge the king as the sole provider who demands their political allegiance.

Daniel the Confucian Gentleman?

The second locus of enunciation would be taken from the story of Confucius as recorded in *kongzishijia, shiji* 47²² by ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian who lived between 1st and 2nd century BCE. The version I would be using is translated by Lin Yutang in his book, *Wisdom of Confucius* (1938, 42-78). As I elaborate later, the story tells of the chaotic period of Chinese history that Confucius lived through that caused him to spend a significant part of his life in exile. Like Daniel, he was a prominent scholar who had a political career in exile. Furthermore, he was keenly sought after for his wisdom

22 The transliteration of mandarin words would follow the *pinyin* system as used in mainland China, Singapore and Malaysia.

and insight. However, it is the differences that are of greater interest to me, particularly how Confucius constantly spurned the wooing of different feudal lords into their foreign courts. For if he had been like Daniel and his three friends in accepting the favours of a foreign empire, he would have arguably enjoyed similar social status and political power. As I raised in the previous chapter, Confucian thought has had significant impact on state formation in Singapore especially in many of the nationalistic projects. One such instance raised in the previous chapter was the Asian Values Discourse that largely harnessed its cultural power from Confucianism. Thus these two considerations would frame my interest in Confucius' point of view on Daniel 1. Put in a dialogically imaginative way, how would Confucius (as characterised by Sima Qian) read the story of Daniel's abstinence of the king's food? At what points would he find resonance and agreement and why? Conversely, what would be his apprehensions and reasons for them?

According to the account translated by Lin (1938), Confucius was born in the country of Lu in 551 BCE. Even though he was born out of an extra-marital affair of a noble with a lady presumably from the rural countryside, he did well in the country of Lu and impressed many of the bureaucrats with his strong organisational acumen and societal awareness. Soon after, the country of Lu descended into chaos because the reigning Duke of Lu was forced into exile due to internal political strife. It was under this dire circumstance that Confucius also went into exile in the neighbouring state of Qi which marked the beginning of the greater part of his life spent away from his homeland of Lu. In exile, his influence was mainly *outside* the official courts before he finally settled back in Lu towards the end of his life editing, compiling and writing one of the most influential corpuses of literature that continues to stimulate thought and imagination up till today.

The *Analects*²³ (2:21) record Confucius being famously asked, "Why do you not take part in government?"²⁴ The reasons for his refusal to join administrative service can be found in his understanding of politics and religion. As noted by many scholars (see for example, Chen 1986, 498-512; Yao 2000, 165-169, 178-189; Carreiro 2013), Confucius did not endorse open rebellion to a king who had legitimate claims to the throne such as through his bloodline because he believed that this was an order sanctioned by the will of Heaven. Rather he called for gentle resistance to oppressive authorities. This was reflected

23 Unless otherwise stated, the translation for the *Analects* (1992) used in this chapter is by D.C. Lau.

24 To which Confucius answered: The Master said, "The *Book of History* says, 'Oh! Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence upon the government'. In so doing a man is, in fact, taking part in government. How can there be any question of his having actively to 'take part in government' (*Analects* 2:21)?"

in his comments on how three counsellors to the corrupt last king of Shang chose to express their dissatisfaction with his rule:

The Viscount of Wei left him, the Viscount of Chi became a slave on account of him and Bi Gan [sic] lost his life for remonstrating with him. Confucius commented, "There were three benevolent men in the Shang [sic]" (*Analects* 18:1).

As it can be seen, Confucius emphasised that the counsellor had a responsibility to reprimand the king and if the king so choose not to heed those warnings, the counsellor had to choose to either resign and flee or persist at the risk of his own life. Therefore Confucius was consistently forthright about the need for social and moral order aligned with the traditions of the ancestors embodied in the rites and music.²⁵ In the light of this, he never really found a comfortable place in the courts of any of the kings in the countries he wandered while he was in exile.²⁶ This is in spite of the many opportunities he had to enter their courts as a high-ranking official. In fact, when he was asked what he thought of the politicians of his day, his reply was: 'Alas! These puny creatures are not even worth mentioning!' (*Analects* 13:20, Tu's [2008] translation)

Based on this short overview of Confucius' life and thought about public engagement with politics, how does this relate to Daniel in Babylon? Up until the end of Confucius' life, he was passionate in bringing about 'a new governmental ideal'. When he realised it would not be achieved from a position of power, he chose to leave his legacy in writing (Lin 1938, 75, see also 71). In his mind, the Confucian way was to remain socially and politically engaged with the world.²⁷ In that regard, Confucius could have understood the potential for change that comes with Daniel and his three friends continuing to serve in the courts of the king. In fact, Confucius constantly laments he lacked the empowerment through the courts to bring about governmental reform to the many wars in the region that were driven by greed for power (see for example, Lin 1938, 58, 71). Thus Confucius is also positive about the place of the courts in governance.

In terms of abstinence of royal rations and wine, Confucius comes from the perspective of propriety. As Xinzhong Yao (2000) points out, one central theme in Confucian thought is harmony and order. In the courts of Lu towards the end of his

²⁵ See for instance Lin 1938, 63-65 which features an exchange between Confucius and his disciples about his political choices which led him to being persecuted by the ministers of Ch'en and Ts'ai.

²⁶ For instance, Confucius left the courts of Wei when the Duke did not attend to his duties and put his land to order (Lin 1938, 58). Another episode was when he was on his way to Chin to see the Baron, he heard that the Baron had two good ministers of Chin killed after using them to attain power. Thus he chose not to offer his services to the Baron whom he perceived to be 'unrighteous' (Lin 1938, 59-60).

²⁷ Similarly in the *Analects*, Confucius had received several invitations from hermits to retreat and live a life that was separate from the world in communion with nature. To which, Confucius replied, 'One cannot associate with birds and beasts. Am I not a member of this human race? Who, then, is there for me to associate with? While the Way is to be found in the Empire, I will not change places with him'. (*Analects* 18:6; see Tu 2008).

life, Confucius would not do anything that is out of place which includes eating fish or meat that was not properly kept or cooked (Lin 1938, 72). It is important here to note that Confucian notion of harmony encompasses both religious duties and politics. While on the one hand, Confucius may have resonated with the proposal that it is about avoiding ritual defilement, insofar that the food was not prepared according to a code of propriety. On the other, it is also possible to think of it as a socio-political act within this understanding of harmony. It is conceivable he would have read the opening of Daniel 1 as indicative of the exploitative tendencies of the king. Should he have the benefit of what ancient historians have revealed about the Babylonian Empire, he would have concluded together with emancipatory readers such as Smith-Christopher (1996) that the king's food could have been secured through a failure of moral order. Thus, the abstinence of food, from a Confucian standpoint, need not choose between the possibilities of piety or resistance but could be both as harmony and order includes both religio-cultural and socio-political dimensions.

The difficulty that Confucius would immediately face is the hiddenness of the act. This is because the upholder of harmony is the Confucian gentleman (*junzi* which Tu [2008, 20] rightfully points out can also be translated as nobleman, superior man or profound man). He is not fearful of doing the right thing, even if it means death at the hands of the enemy as illustrated above. If there were anything displeasing about the food, Daniel and his three friends ought to be unafraid to make it known and if necessary, bring the matter to the king. This is further exacerbated by the quiet acceptance of new names which would make their success in the courts difficult to accept in Confucius' eyes.²⁸ While Confucius may not be inclined to an open confrontation as there is the possibility of violence, but if the king is unable to see the point of view of Daniel and his three friends, then they ought to leave or lay down their lives for their beliefs.²⁹ If the reason for Daniel and his three friends being in the courts is to bring about a better governmental order, then they could consider following Confucius example and leave their proposals in writing for future generations to take up and use (Lin 1938, 69-75).

In sum, reading Daniel 1 from a Confucian standpoint shows that from the point of view of harmony, the act of food abstinence can be conceived as both a religious and

²⁸ When this story was discussed with a group of students from China in Singapore, one of the students declared that he would rather die than to have his family name changed and accept favours from a king who has taken away his land and his people. This is a point I believe Confucius would also agree with.

²⁹ Of course if Confucius were to continue reading, he may be relieved to read that Daniel does openly challenge the king for sacrilege (Dan 5) and his three friends were willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs (Dan 3). That however does not change the present dissonance in the text.

political infraction of proper order. However the act of hiding one's actions contradicts Confucius' own understanding of being a gentleman which he himself had shown in his life. In all likelihood, he would have been appalled that this was accompanied by other compromises of embracing new identities and gaining success through consorting with the king who had taken their land and their people.

Daniel the Malay Muslim: Between Resistance and Oppression

The third locus of enunciation I have chosen is from Malay Muslim minorities in Singapore. It is well known among the majority Chinese such as myself that Muslims have certain strict religious practices such as praying five times a day, adhering to *halal* food practices and wearing the *tudung* (headdress) for women. The difficulty is that the state has been explicit in maintaining the secularity of public spaces. Thus it would be hardly surprising that such ostensible displays of religiosity tend to meet with varying degrees of suspicion and at times hostility by the state and wider society. One of the chief issues with the Malay communities is what is locally known as the 'Malay problem'. This is a shorthand for the perceived slowness by which Malays have been 'integrating' into Singapore society due to their reluctance to put behind their Islamic convictions and way of life (Kamaludeen, 2007).³⁰ What of course is often overlooked is that in the name of economic development, rapid modernisation demanded that Malay communities had to adapt to a rapidly secularising space, replacement of the lingua franca with English (even though our national language is Malay) and a majority Chinese rule that became fully autonomous after independence in 1965.³¹

From the point of view of Protestant Christian communities in Singapore, Malays are palpably absent in internal discussions especially since proselytism to Malays is explicitly banned. Given that most churches are overwhelmingly Chinese and wealthy (see chapter 2) which is exacerbated by extremely low number of Malays who are Christians,³² it would be hardly surprising that the perceptions of Malays among Christians would

³⁰ Kamaludeen et al (2010) point out that the Malay-Muslims in Singapore are one of the more closely monitored ethnicities as evidenced by the state appointing in 1996 a minister in charge of Muslim Affairs and instituting specific laws pertaining to them such as the Administration of Muslim Law Act. To them, this is symptomatic of the deeper view of the state towards the Malays since Singapore's independence in 1965 that is locally known as the 'Malay problem'. In other words, the Malay community is seen as deliberately distancing itself from Singapore society and thus constantly poses problems to integration. Prior to 1990, it would seem to be a failure to embrace modernisation of the nation state. However even after embracing modernisation, they remain profoundly religious. This has become increasingly problematic after September 11 which is followed in the next year by the Bali bombings and the arrests of the first Jemaah Islamiyah (or JI) members in Singapore. See also Suratman (2010) whose study of media portrayals of Malays reveals a similar rhetoric.

³¹ See Rahim 2009 who traces the exit of Singapore from Malaysia and how its relationship to Malaysia and Indonesia has changed over the years since 1965.

³² According to the population census done in 2010, 13.4% of the resident population is Malay, with almost no representation within the Christian community (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010).

resonate with that of wider society and the state.

The above brief sketch immediately highlights several resonances of the experiences of Malay minorities with that of Daniel and his three friends. Both are minorities with relatively strict religious practices trying to live in an environment that would at least perceive their respective religions with suspicion. Being minorities, there is a constant pressure to assimilate into dominant culture. One important vehicle of such interpellation of state ideology is education. Therefore in order to succeed as minorities in the societies they are placed, they are required to excel in an academic curriculum that is developed from a different cultural milieu. In order to elucidate standpoints from Malay minorities that can be mobilised to understand Daniel 1, I read the text alongside a small selection of short stories about Malay minority experiences in Singapore taken from Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches* (2012).

While exile for Malays happened in a different way from Daniel and his three friends in that the former's land was taken over by a Chinese majority government but the latter were deported out of Jerusalem, they likely share similar experiences of disorientation, readjustment and marginalisation. This is especially so in adopting a new language as their lingua franca just as Daniel and his three friends did as they were educated in the 'literature and language of the Chaldeans' (Dan 1:4). The protagonist in 'The Barbershop' (Sa'at 2012, 123-126) recalls the embarrassment when as a young boy he tried to tell a Malay barber how he would like his hair cut in English. The barber would retort, 'You don't know how to speak Malay, is it?' (Sa'at 2012, 124) The difficulty was not so much finding the right vocabulary but 'getting the inflections right' (Sa'at 2012, 124). Such an estrangement is felt in a paradoxically different position by Nur Jannah in 'His Birthday Present' (Sa'at 2012, 131-133) when she found herself and her son being the only two Malays in her son's Chinese friend's birthday party. She felt palpably embarrassed when she had to apologise to one of the other guests at the party that 'My English not so good' (Sa'at 2012, 132). What rings true is the alienating and assimilating effect of learning the dominant tongue. For the Malays who mastered the English language, their relations with fellow Malays become tinged with embarrassment and haunting doubts about betrayal. Yet for those who are too old to learn the new tongue, they feel isolated when they engage the Chinese majority enclave. This raises other questions with regards to the text at hand. Being grounded in the dominant literature and language, how did it affect their relations to their communities?

The determination to abstain from the king's royal rations and wine would resonate with Muslim *halal* practices which incidentally also includes the prohibition of alcohol. When Nur Jannah's son rescued her from a difficult situation of communicating in English by offering her food from the party so as to interrupt their conversation, a new dilemma arose (Sa'at 2012, 131-133). Despite her son's adamant insistence that it was chicken, not pork, the mother told him to put away the food from the party and not to eat it. The sense of futility intensified during the gift unwrapping when Nur Jannah dragged her son away before his friend could open the gift they gave. It almost seemed that the food became the tipping point of a revelation of how it was near impossible to assimilate into the majoritarian Chinese. The entanglement of food practices with other issues of social relations was also subtly foregrounded in 'Two Brothers' (Sa'at 2012, 194-198). Helmy, Hazry's twin brother came one Saturday evening from Malaysia to Singapore to bring his parents and his brother out for dinner. He lamented the difficulty in finding proper *halal* food in Singapore and tried again to convince his family to relocate to Malaysia. Helmy was boasting about how he had been rising up the corporate ladder in the private television company in Malaysia while Hazry remained a documentary cameraman in Singapore for many years. The idea of food was spun in a different trajectory where the dinner table was a constant contestation of whose life was better in terms of *where* one should eat *halal* food – under the rule of the 'Sons of the Yellow Emperor'³³ or the 'Sons of the Soil'³⁴ (Sa'at 2012, 198). The common sentiment in many of the stories was that 'this [Singapore] had become their [the Chinese's] country and one had to play by their rules' (Sa'at 2012, 158).

In 'The Drawer' (Sa'at 2012, 156-159), the rules were not limited to just food but also to other Malay practices. It is also important to note that it would be a categorical mistake just to view Daniel's abstinence in terms of *halal* dining as if 'food' is the main connecting point. Maria's mother was convinced that her daughter was unable to find a job because of her insistence on wearing the *tudung* to her interviews. So she deliberately hid the cream headscarf in order to force her daughter to go to an interview without it. Food practices cannot be isolated from other markers of cultural identity. What the dilemma of Maria's mother about the *tudung* foregrounds is the constant tension between performing Malayness and achieving success in Singapore.

Therefore, the success of Daniel and his three friends is hard to miss from the

33 Chinese are commonly referred to as yellow skinned in Malaysia and Singapore.

34 The Malays in Malaysia are known as 'bumiputra' which is Malay for 'sons of the soil'.

standpoint of *Malay Sketches* (Sa'at 2012). They have achieved academic success that far outstrips even their Babylonian peers. In 'Shallow Focus' (Sa'at 2012, 72-75), the protagonist was dragged by his mother to a graduation photo shoot. To him, 'only Chinese people do this kind of thing' (Sa'at 2012, 73). Things became awkward when the photographer turned out to be his secondary school rival, Min Heng whom the mother often compared him to. After the photo-shoot, he was reminded by his mother that she gave him good advice to 'follow whatever the Chinese students do'. He became irritated because it implied that success was determined by how 'Chinese' one was. This notion of success is what landed Nur Jannah and her son (Sa'at 2012, 131-133) in a socially awkward position because she wanted her son to 'pick up some of the habits of the Chinese' such as 'a competitive spirit and a natural aptitude in Maths' (Sa'at 2012, 131). Yet at the same time, we find Maria (Sa'at 2012, 156-159) still optimistic that one can still display Malayness and be successful on one hand whereas on the other, Helmy and Hazry (Sa'at 2012, 194-198) were resigned to the notion that there was a glass ceiling for Malays in many sectors of work in Singapore. What brings these varied responses together is the perception of Malayness as an obstacle to success. Recalling the earlier point made on the 'Malay problem', I submit that it is this precise antithetical relationship that reveals the extraordinary effort that Daniel and his three friends undertook to abstain from royal rations and wine *without* offending the empire. From the standpoint of many of the protagonists in *Malay Sketches*, they would immediately notice how Daniel, having failed to convince Ashpenaz, tried to persuade the guardian on grounds that *no* one would know that they have not eaten what the king has offered.

The above discussion reveals at least two significant ambivalences in the text. First, speaking the 'Master's' language is not a superficial phenomenon. While language competency can be used as a means to negotiate a foreign, dominant culture, it is undeniable that inhabiting another's linguistic system has consequences. On the one hand, there is an interpellation of consciousness which becomes apparent when transiting between linguistic systems. Even within the supposedly familiar confines of the Malay barbershop surrounded by one's so-called mother tongue, one who is steeped in the dominant language becomes aware of the difficulty of 'disguis[ing] the fact that these very words had been frantically translated from English' (Sa'at 2012, 124). On the other, it has social repercussions that affects one's standing within one's minority community vis-à-vis the dominant one. Fluency no doubt is a better guarantee of one's chances to succeed, yet it comes with a price of losing touch with one's cultural communities.

Second, even though success determined by dominant society appears nothing more than a badge of honour on one's chest, the costs are not simply what meritocracy would have us believe to be only rewards for one's time and effort but also that of one's identity and loyalty. The connection between being Chinese and successful is strongly drawn in several of the stories. Following a similar vein, one wonders whether embracing another's 'literature and language', adopting new names and accepting the honours of being the top scholars in a foreign empire's court (which incidentally is the one who conquered and subjugated them in the first place) are but the tip of the iceberg of the price they paid. While it is most certainly possible that the authors or redactors of the story would have wanted to distance the noble act of food abstinence from these other actions, reading it through the variegated albeit somewhat banal experiences of Malay minorities would sustain these internal relationships within the text. If that were true, then it could be reading against the grain of the story itself or at least as imagined to be intended by the authors or redactors.

This then brings us to the central thrust of Daniel 1. For Malay minorities who struggle against a culturally foreign system, his actions cannot be understood apart from its ambivalent relationship to the concessions he has made to the empire. But the appraisal need not be entirely unsympathetic as many of the protagonists feel the struggle of being in between resisting and being oppressed by the system. It seems to me that many times they choose religious actions that allow them to appear on the outside to be 'playing by the rules' but in private keep them anchored to a collective consciousness. In my view, it is not *just* because secularism dictates a secular-sacred divide, but also because religion is a deeply private and intimate affair. On the other hand, the expression of solidarity has potential for political and social manifestations. Religion is at the same time private and public, sacred and everyday. I believe that the pragmatics of Daniel's choice lies in the fact that it is possible to *hide* not eating the king's food and wine. This is what would resonate with the above-mentioned protagonists. What then emerges is a notion of resistance that differentiates itself from the logic of purity which I explore in the next section.

Two further points need to be made before we bring the three loci of enunciation together. The first is the dissonance of success in the story. It is dissonant because Malay minorities can relate to the paradox of being attracted to the oppressor's system and at the same time disturbed by the contradictions of subjugation and subordination. The second is the theological implication of such a reading. In the light of the struggles of Malay

Muslim communities, I submit that the theological message should veer away from any rhetoric of purity and/or protest towards re-conceiving God as one who knows and above all, understands.

In Conversation: Biblical Scholars, Confucius and Malays

In order to better facilitate the conversations, I have chosen to refer to my interlocutors by shorthand. As western biblical scholarship is a consistent feature, it would henceforth be referred to in this and subsequent conversations as 'biblical scholars'.³⁵ In a similar vein, I refer to Confucius as characterised by Sima Qian and translated in Lin's *Wisdom of Confucius* (1938) as 'Confucius' and the protagonists I have used from *Malay Sketches* (Sa'at 2012) as 'Malays'.

Thinking in terms of praxis, it appears to me that biblical scholars subscribe to what Lugones (1994) has argued to be the logic of purity. The subject is assumed to be unified and internally coherent, which thus legitimises him to categorise praxis unambiguously into what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. In fact, what is 'right' is often predicated on the antithesis of what is 'wrong'. The manifestation of this logic, I claim is found in the dominant voices within western biblical studies. The empire is often seen as what is 'wrong' to which the protagonists, Daniel and his three friends, respond with what is right. On the one hand, it is asserted when food is seen as a source of defilement. Purity seems to work itself out primarily in isolating Daniel's abstinence and then focusing the search for intertextual references within and outside the book for relevant laws, customs and practices that relate to food.³⁶ The other significant position thinks of refraining from royal rations as protesting injustice. Here the empire, rather than primarily being the source of ritual defilement, is the origin of greed and exploitation. Similarly, the historical search would focus on political and economic dimensions of food in empire. Thus in both kinds of readings, Daniel is a unified subject. He acts with a single voice, either to maintain his ritual purity or to defy the economically exploitative empire. Confucius would find this curious as he thinks of order as a concept of harmony that encompasses the religious and the economic. His purity is of a different order as I show that he would find Daniel's overt acquiescence to the oppressor's renaming, embrace of foreign education

³⁵ I am fully aware that many would feel edgy about such a generalising label but in my defense, this serves more like an easy reference to the works of biblical scholars surveyed in this thesis rather than a representation of *all* that sees itself as biblical scholarship. I would also like to add that part of the work of reflexivity is to refrain from such defensive reactions that seem more rooted in individualistic understandings of autonomy and uniqueness so as to move on to the need to acknowledge complicity.

³⁶ This recalls Mary Douglas' work on *Purity and Danger* (1966) where order is based on a classification of what is sacred and what is profane.

and covert abstinence troubling. A gentleman (*junzi*) does not compromise his integrity for anything, not least the empire. While western biblical scholarship and Confucius seek different notions of purity, it seems that praxis here is understood as a kind of pure essence – religious purity, economic justice or personal integrity.

The Malays in *Malay Sketches* (Sa'at 2012), on the other hand, seem to operate by a different logic. Such purity of religion, politics and gentlemanly conduct is distant from the lived experiences of minorities. To them, the story of Daniel 1 is a kind of pragmatic survival – ‘playing by the rules’ on the surface but being creative about constructing private spaces for subversive acts to preserve their own cultural consciousness. They are sympathetic and perhaps curious about the hiddenness of Daniel’s actions.³⁷ What *Malay Sketches* (Sa'at 2012) does for this reading is to anchor the reader in everyday realities of being in between acquiescing to dominant order and resisting it. Lugones (1994) calls this the logic of *impurity* as a response to the logic of purity. Recalling the notion of polyphonic contextualism in chapter 1, the logic of impurity tethers at the edges of the zones of intelligibility which is governed by the logic of purity. It could be said that the logic of impurity flirts with those boundaries from the zones of marginality by making itself look attractive to the dominant but yet there is something subversive underfoot. The result of this often looks ambiguous to those who occupy dominant positions because the decisions of the marginalised usually stem from a negotiation *in between* resisting and being dominated. I propose that from the view of *Malay Sketches*, Daniel and his three friends were trying to create a safe space within a hegemonic system where they can begin to work out what it means to act like and be a Jew in a foreign empire. Hiddenness is not purely a sign of the power of God but also signifies the place where one rethinks resistance *away* from the logic of purity. Viewing it from the interstices of society where survival is a key concern, Daniel’s actions could be thought of as the best possible action within a system of oppression. This is a reminder not to romanticise the place of marginality

37 Fewell (2003, 117-130) similarly explores this narrative through Scott’s (1990) ‘public transcript’ to argue that the initial encounter of Daniel with Ashpenaz was because of his own naiveté about his current status in exile. This forced him to ‘construct a world of secrecy’ where he needs to appear like the average Babylonian so that his personal actions which could potentially be perceived as threatening to empire would not be detected (Fewell 1991, 123). I further her reading in two ways. First, I want to maintain that the ‘world of secrecy’ is not a hermetically enclosed environment effected by strategic thinking so as to allow Daniel and his three friends to mature with little interference from empire. This leads me to my second point which is my hesitation to think of Daniel’s actions in the light of similar experiences of Malays as having little impact on his own identity. There are *real* consequences in adopting Babylonian names, training and treatment.

Newsom (2014, 49-51) reads the hiddenness as exposing the hubris of the Babylonian king who assumes to know everything in his land in contrast to an omniscient God. While her interpretation gives a new perspective on the text, it seems to me that it still operates within the notion of purity. Both readings, while astutely picks up the trope of hiddenness, seem to me to still have the potential to fall prey to the logic of purity. God is distinct from empire and is perhaps its binary opposite. Daniel and his three friends remain the ‘sons of Israel who have set it upon their hearts not to be defiled’ (Fewell 1991, 123).

while it is doubtlessly a generative space. Rather one should refrain from foreclosing that the narrative is pointing to definitive action. In other words, the text could be gesturing beyond itself and inviting the reader to re-imagine other social possibilities with the ones that have been currently created.

As for identity formation, the logic of purity, Lugones (1994) argues, is enabled by a 'privileged vantage point'. In other words, the conditions for its possibility are social identities like that of biblical scholars and even Asian religious luminaries like Confucius. As these are also identities I am deeply folded together with, I explore them further at the conclusion of the chapter. For now I shall keep this conversation brief and anticipate the next with Gandhi and political prisoners in Singapore.

Case Study #2: Braving the Furnace of the Lion's Den in the Lion City

Daniel 3 and 6: Tales of Political Intrigue

This case study looks at the court conflict tales of Daniel 3 and 6. In Daniel 3, the narrative is about Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (whom for ease of reference, I henceforth refer to as the 'three Jews') who defies the royal edict from the king to bow before his statue of gold. They are brought before the king by 'certain Chaldeans' (Dan 3:8).³⁸ The king interrogates the three Jews only to be told that they 'have no need to present a defence' (Dan 3:16). This throws the king into a rage and he has the three Jews bound by 'some of the strongest guards' (Dan 3:20) and thrown into a furnace that is heated up 'seven times more than was customary' (Dan 3:19). It is here they experience the most miraculous deliverance as the three Jews survive the furnace unharmed. In addition King Nebuchadnezzar witnesses a fourth person with them in the fire. He is shocked into radically transforming his position from seething anger to bountiful praise as he declares a new decree that 'any people, nation or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruin' (Dan 3:29). He also promotes the three Jews to high office in Babylon.

In Daniel 6, we find Daniel now as the second most powerful man in the land of Persia next to King Darius. This incurs the jealousy of the court officials who instigate the king to pass an edict that in the next thirty days, petitions and prayers made other than

³⁸ The MT has a different verse numbering as compared to the NRSV. Here I follow the NRSV as it is the main text I am engaging with as indicated in the introduction of this chapter. I will indicate the MT reference if Aramaic words are being referred to.

to the king himself is considered treason punishable by death. Having heard this, Daniel still continues to prostrate himself before God and prayed to him. As the windows to his upper room are opened, it is not difficult for the conspirators to catch him in the act and they force the king's hand to throw him into the lion's den. God then delivers Daniel from the lions by sending 'his angel [to] shut the lions' mouth' (Dan 6:22). The very next day when the king finds his favourite courtier to be unharmed, he immediately brings Daniel out of the pit and in his stead, he throws all those who conspired to kill Daniel, together with their families, into the lion's den where they are overpowered and brutally killed. Daniel on the other hand prospers from the reign of Darius to even that of Cyrus.

Both stories present Daniel and the three Jews as a form of threat to the empire and their political opponents make use of their religion to bring about their conviction. Using this as the starting point of reference, I now venture a reading through the eyes of biblical scholars, an Asian luminary - Mahatma Gandhi and political prisoners in Singapore.

Biblical Scholars: Piety or Politics?

From the perspective of western biblical scholarship, there are at least two commonly held positions on Daniel 3 and 6. The more dominant of the two sees the text as an endorsement of religious piety. Daniel and the three Jews acted in the interests of protecting and preserving the Jewish faith in the face of threats from the empire. The less dominant view is that the text is about resisting the imperial rule in its socio-economic and political dimensions. I begin with the dominant view before moving on to the next view which serves as a bridge to the next interlocutor, Gandhi.

Piety as Response

The opinion of most commentators on the central meaning of Daniel 3 and 6 is perhaps best summed up by Goldingay (1989, 127) who writes that

the exiles are to be willing both to maintain their 'no' to public practices that are incompatible with their commitment to God, and to maintain their 'yes' to private practices that are essential to their commitment to God.

In this light, the stories portray empires intruding upon the rights of the Jews to choose whom they would worship and the kind of religious observances they were to keep. Therefore, this suggests that modern day readers of the text ought to read the stories as exhorting them to hold on to their religious practices regardless of state regulation.

Such a conclusion is mainly established on form critical grounds. Daniel 3 and 6

are classified as a folkloric type of ‘Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister’ which is a kind of court conflict tale (Collins 1993, 45, 192, 272; Newsom 2014, 100, 190).³⁹ This (sub)genre of tales would have the heroes begin in a state of prosperity who are later imperilled usually through conspiracy and consequently condemned to death or prison before they are released for various reasons. They are ultimately vindicated on the basis of their wisdom or merit and usually promoted to high positions of power and privilege. It is therefore not difficult to see how Daniel and the three Jews begin their respective stories in positions of power which provoked the jealousy of other royal courtiers who then plotted to have them removed. The conspirators use their kings’ decrees to exploit the religious commitments of Daniel and the three Jews before forcing the kings’ hand against them by catching them in the act. Be it in the fiery furnace or the lion’s den, their lives were preserved through divine intervention of their God. In the end, the king promoted Daniel and the three Jews to high office on the basis of their unflinching loyalty to their God.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in comparison to other stories in the same genre such as the tale of Ahiqar and Esther, Collins (1993, 192) concludes that Daniel 3 is ‘more overtly religious’. Thus, by reading the stories through the lens of this genre, it would suggest that the main rhetorical point is to emulate the three Jews in their public refusal to bow down to other gods and Daniel’s perseverance in his private prayers even it is at the cost of their lives.

This is further supported by identifying the religious significance of the decrees. In this regard, the ‘image of gold’ in Daniel 3 has invited much speculation. Those who favour piety as the central response of the story would attempt to find analogous constructions. Among the most commonly cited options would be Herodotus’ (I, 183) account of ‘a large golden statue of Zeus’ with another in the same precinct: ‘a statue of solid gold, twelve cubits high’. Goldingay (1989, 70) postulates that it could be the image of Bel, one of the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. Collins (1993, 180-182) after an impressive survey of historical possibilities, thinks that it is most probably Nabonidus’ construction of the moon god Sin that likely provided the initial stimulus which birthed this legend. While it is hard to conclude which image in antiquity it is referring to, Collins (1993, 182) is convinced that there is ‘no explicit suggestion of worship of the king in the Aramaic text

³⁹ That said, it is not surprising to also find commentators like Montgomery (1927) who write unapologetically that the stories are about religious piety without recourse to form criticism. He agrees wholeheartedly with earlier commentators like Bevan who writes ‘the general purpose of this Chapter [3] is *perfectly clear* – from beginning to end, it is a polemic against the heathen worship and in particular against idolatry’ (Bevan, cited in Montgomery 1927, 193, emphasis mine). As for Daniel 6, he views it as ‘valuable’ because it is ‘a picture of the ritual of piety of early Judaism’ (Montgomery 1927, 274).

⁴⁰ Similarly, historical inaccuracies as a result of stereotype, hyperbole and versimilitude are justified on grounds that the stories belong to the genre of folklore and legends (see for example, Collins 1993, 192).

of Dan 3'. Agreeing that the text is not clear about the statue, Goldingay (1989, 70) argues that attention should be pointed towards the act of worship rather than what is being worshipped. Thus he sees the statue as a symbol of idolatry, robbing God's people away from him.⁴¹ Wong (2006) similarly focuses on how human authority has been abused in order to compel the three Jews to bow before the idol. To him, it is also 'a matter of worship' (Wong 2006, 43).

While it would seem fairly obvious that the image of gold in Daniel 3 is a religious idol, these commentators are less certain about the decree in Daniel 6. Like Daniel 3, the primary motivation that drives the conspiracy against the Jews is the jealousy of their fellow courtiers (Collins 1993, 186). There is general agreement that religion facilitated the plotting against Daniel but was never the primary consideration (see for example Goldingay 1989, 130-131). That said, the focus inevitably turns on Daniel's perseverance in prayer despite the decree. Much is made about the *private* nature of his religious practice. Goldingay (1989, 131) remarks that 'there is no fuss or no rush about his stand' to continue praying. Towner (1984, 83) adds that this was 'not public and violent' conflict, rather it 'takes place quietly, non-violently, in the private realm'. Collins (1993, 91) points out that he is 'neither publicizing nor hiding his practice'. Here Wong (2006, 84) adds that Daniel was merely modelling what it means to be an 'openly godly man'. To Daniel, he is just going about his own business as usual.

It seems to me that there is an implicit assumption that the private sphere of prayer is hermetically enclosed and separate from the public square. Most certainly there is nothing routine about the king issuing a decree to ban possibly private practices of citizens to petition their gods. Furthermore the story makes it a point to say:

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he *continued* to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously (Daniel 6:10, emphasis mine).

The connection between Daniel's knowledge of the decree and his persistence in the private practice of prayer does not seem to have problematised the search for the religious basis of his practice. Yet there is no incontrovertible proof that to pray three times a day on one's knees facing Jerusalem was part of any established religious practice of the Jews at that time. Smith-Christopher (1996, 89) points out that the Torah as we have it does not

⁴¹ Here Goldingay (1989, 72) concedes that the story presumes a consensus among the Jews of its time to refrain from taking part since not all bowing to statues in the Hebrew Bible is considered prohibited (cf 2 Ki 5:18-19; Deut 4:27-28).

document such requirements (see also Newsom 2014, 197). Surveying extant literature including Antiquities, Qumran scrolls and rabbinic traditions, Collins (1993, 268-269) too concludes that such a practice never became a norm before 1st century CE. Some have appealed to the Psalms but there is no agreement about the frequency of prayer either (cf Ps 55:17; Ps 119:164; see Montgomery 1927, 274; Goldingay 1989, 126). It seems to me that these lines of inquiry suggest that the operating assumption at work here is that the act of Daniel's prayer is largely *independent* of the literary contexts it is found but instead obtains its (true?) meaning in some historical origins of its practice.

Political Resistance

Among the alternative interpretations, the second most common position is that the actions of the three Jews and Daniel were political in nature. In this line of thought, the golden statue would not only possess religious significance, but more importantly embody the political and economic ideals of the empire. Smith-Christopher (1996, 61-62) focuses on the fact that the statue is made up of gold through the work of Dutch Theologian Ton Veerkamp. He agrees with Veerkamp on how gold was central to the Seleucid Empire, not only in terms of the economy but also how kings often used it to flaunt their prosperity. Therefore he infers that building a golden statue indirectly installs gold as the god of the world. Moreover, to him, Dura was not just a plain but a prominent area along major trade routes especially for Antiochus III and Antiochus IV. Pace (2008, 110) chooses to locate the idol of the golden statue in the wider context of Jewish diasporic perceptions. He argues that the worship of idols was more than just bowing down before wood and stone but rather 'the acceptance of values that were symbolized and justified by the religious, economic, governmental ideals connected with it' (Pace 2008, 110). Fewell (1991, 38-42) agrees that the image is a form of political propaganda extolling Nebuchadnezzar's accomplishments as a ruler when she notes the similarities between the head of gold in Daniel 2 which symbolises Babylonian rule and the golden statue which he erects. Therefore, the narrative's golden statue is a representation of the sovereign's right to rule and control the political, cultural and economic spheres of life. In that light, as Smith-Christopher (1996, 66) puts it, the narrative gives no room for 'sympathy with tyranny' and only allows the 'possibility of [revolutionary?] change'.

Again when it comes to reading Daniel 6, an ambivalence of a different kind is seen. Unlike in Daniel 3, there is no open confrontation between Daniel and Darius. In fact, Darius was concerned for Daniel to the point of losing appetite and sleep. Where the

three Jews were open and public about their disobedience to the king's orders, Daniel's actions appear to be more private. Smith-Christopher (1993; 1996, 91-96) accounts for Daniel's actions through Gandhi's interpretation. He asserts that this text is about active, nonviolent resistance against exploitative empires. As Gandhi's position on the text is one of the key influences on his interpretation, I have decided to look at this in the next section while at the same time, incorporating Smith-Christopher's insights and analysis. But as far as I know, no other commentator has explicitly articulated that Daniel here is practising any form of civil disobedience including those who see the act of the three Jews as political in nature.

Much as it is possible that Daniel and the three Jews were participating in political resistance, the question remains what political effect(s) did their actions really have? It is indeed true that they displayed remarkable courage in the face of potential 'state terror'. Nonetheless, it needs to be said that the empire, save for the loss for a few high ranking officials, remained largely intact. At the very least it was intact enough for Daniel and the three Jews to enjoy the wealth and power bestowed by the empire. Here Fewell (1991, 116-118) goes so far as to say in Daniel 6, Daniel is the only one who had profited unambiguously while God remains entangled with the king as God's laws are still susceptible to the king's capriciousness. Thus, what kind of tangible socio-political change, if any, did the actions of Daniel and the three Jews achieve? On this point, it would seem western commentators remain largely silent.

Unfair Comparisons?

The above discussion should not obscure a good degree of agreement among western readers of the text. In fact, much of it arguably comes from analyses that contrast God and his people with the king and his other subordinates. One such binary portrayal expounded by most commentators is God as the true sovereign and the hubris of the king. The contestation is on power: 'who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?' (Dan 3:15). Thus the miraculous deliverance of the three Jews then answers the king's question that it is the Jewish God who has real power over life and death (Newsom 2014, 109-110). The impotence of the king is also emphasised, albeit differently, in Daniel 6 where he is unable to save Daniel from his own decree which God could (Goldingay 1989, 135). The other commonly observed feature is the extravagant nature of the worship the king mandates of the image of gold both in terms of its comprehensive scope (Collins 1993, 183-184; Seow 2003, 54) that cuts across all class boundaries (Smith Christopher

1996, 63). This is complemented by the excessive punishment that is meted out should the decree be disobeyed.⁴² These varying descriptions of a power-hungry tyrant and a benevolent dictator deepens the irony that the ultimate vindication of God's sovereignty is found on the lips of the kings themselves as they acknowledge the superior power of God.

Similarly several commentators have noted that court officials are caricatured as binary opposites of Daniel and the three Jews. The Chaldeans are read to be jealous of the successes of the three Jews in Daniel 3 with possible hints of anti-Semitism (see for example Collins 1993, 186; Newsom 2014, 107). Similarly, the presidents and satraps in Daniel 6 perceived Daniel's rise in power as a threat to their own authority (see for example, Goldingay 1989, 130; Smith-Christopher 1996, 88). Some have found several ways that the conspirators made use of the words of the king to frame Daniel and the three Jews.⁴³ In contrast, Daniel and the three Jews stand out as calm and collected, firm in their resolve and unwavering in their commitment even in the face of certain death. One could almost hear the strong conviction of the three Jews as they declare before King Nebuchadnezzar that they have no need to present any defense.⁴⁴ And Daniel remained confident in his God as he silently accepted his punishment, only to emerge declaring the faithfulness of God in shutting the lions' mouths. The narratives scarcely give any hint of doubt or fear on the part of those who stand before a powerful empire with its king and court officials.

Thus it is little wonder given this binary comparison that with very few exceptions,⁴⁵ commentators have taken little issue with the morality of throwing the conspirators together with their wives and children into the lion's den. Another concern that is often overlooked though mentioned in passing is that there is no nullification of the previous decrees. Rather an additional burden is added to the peoples of the empire through a second decree that they are not to offend the God of the Jews which by implication would include the Jews themselves.⁴⁶ Taking into consideration earlier reservations with

42 Collins (1993, 185) notes that there is no clear evidence of death penalty for the failure to worship until Antiochus IV. It could have also been drawn from motifs of persecution found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, fire in Daniel 3 could be alluding to the fate of Zedekiah and Ahab 'whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire' (cf Jer 29:21-23; Newsom 2014, 106).

43 See for instance, Fewell (1991, 41) who has been particularly sharp in detecting how the Chaldeans had manipulated what the king said to make the Jews look more dangerous. Newsom (2014, 108) on the other hand shows how the Chaldeans paralleled what the king said so as to make the actions of the Jews sound more sinister.

44 Dan 3:18 has been a focus of much debate since the early Patristic period because it suggests that the three Jews entertained the possibility that God was *unable* to save them. See Collins 1993, 188; Goldingay 1989, 71.

45 See Fewell 1995, 115-116.

46 Newsom (2014, 113) notes how the commands of the king at the end adds to the one at the beginning but takes it in a different direction by comparing them to argue that the king still is not fully sincere as he failed to understand that the Jewish God demands exclusive worship.

the political nature of their actions, how would this textual portrayal of Jews joining the ranks of power subvert empire? Put differently, is the protection of one's right to religious freedom a good enough reason to avert one's gaze from the atrocities of empire?

Before moving on to the next section, allow me to sum up the dominant positions of mainstream, western scholarship on the narratives of Daniel 3 and 6. The majority of scholarship in the West favours a pietistic reading of the resistance of Daniel and the three Jews. Nevertheless there is a significant minority of western scholarship that is open to the interpretation that Daniel and the three Jews were engaging in political resistance. In spite of their differences on the kind of praxis the texts are advocating, the overwhelming majority of scholars readily open up the teleological dimension of the text and put forth the sovereignty of God as a central motif. In addition, they subscribe almost unproblematically to the binary depictions of self-aggrandizing, foolish kings and their manipulative officials, to the sovereign Jewish God and his faithful, courageous and righteous people.

Gandhi: Politics of Piety

As a result of playing a pivotal role in leading the diasporic Indian community in Apartheid South Africa to resist racial discrimination through state-imposed registration and issuing of identification, Gandhi was sent several times to prison in the years 1908 to 1909. In the May 1909 edition of the Gandhian campaign newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, it is reported that:

During the last three months [in prison], he [Gandhi] had found much consolation in reading the book of the prophet Daniel in the Bible. Daniel was one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived, and they must follow his example (Gandhi 1999, vol 9, 335).

In this section, my reading is guided by Gandhi's interpretation of Daniel and its relation to his conceptions of *satyagraha* (truth-force) especially in one of his most influential works, *Hind Swaraj* (Indian home rule). I begin with how Smith-Christopher (1993; 1996) has drawn Gandhi in as part of his interpretation before attempting to further his reading so as to contextualise it to the Singaporean context.

Arbitrating on the issue of whether Daniel's actions constituted socio-political resistance or merely his own private religious practice, Smith-Christopher (1993) uses Gandhi's interpretation of Daniel 6:10 in support of the former. Gandhi was of the opinion that Daniel deliberately opened his windows in defiance of the interdict of

Darius.⁴⁷ He points out Gandhi's interpretation has prompted reconsideration on several fronts. First, it has highlighted the inconsistent rendering of the verb פתח ('to open'; cf Dan 6:10 [6:11 MT]) where the Aramaic text, the Theodotian text of the Septuagint and Ethiopian texts favour the passive form whereas the Old Greek Text and Vulgate texts the active form. Second, he argues that court tales as a genre were very likely resistance stories by looking at how the protagonists were often portrayed as ethnic heroes defending the purity of faith and the redaction to include the apocalyptic visions at a later date reflected the editor's view of the stories as resistance. Third, Smith-Christopher (1993) points out that ancient historians paint a picture of the Persian Empire as far less benign than biblical scholars were led to believe. All these factors have led him to favour an interpretation of political resistance.

This interpretation has many merits, not least that it engages with the fact that Daniel was cognisant of the politicisation of his religious practice. Furthermore, it highlights the usefulness of taking seriously the view of nonspecialist readers who actually have put their interpretation to *practice* in real life. However, I do not think that enough justice has been done. From the concern for transformative praxis, there is need to elaborate further on the specific conception of resistance that Gandhi was thinking about when he read the texts in Daniel. Therefore, I propose to further Smith-Christopher's (1993; 1996) readings by drawing in the other parts of Gandhi's worldview, namely his understanding of nonviolent resistance. At the same time, I would also like to highlight how Gandhi's understanding of Daniel's action may not sit entirely at ease with the narrative. In addition, even though Gandhi never articulated his interpretation of Daniel 3, nevertheless I extend his reading of Daniel 6 to propose what his reading of both stories would look like.

Passive Resistance

The practice of non-violent non-cooperation was one of the key cornerstones of Gandhi's vision for social change in India. However, as Gandhi himself concedes, the notion of passive resistance is very liable to being misunderstood:

When in a meeting of Europeans I found that the term 'passive resistance' was too narrowly construed, that it was supposed to be a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterised by hatred, and that it could finally manifest itself as violence, I had to demure to all these statements and explain the real nature of the Indian movement (Gandhi 1927, 291 as cited in Jefferess 2008, 118).

⁴⁷ However the more important point Gandhi was making was that religion did not need the protection of the law in order to be practised and in fact as evidenced by the outcome of the story of Daniel, religion was 'its own seal and sanction' (Gandhi, 1999, vol. 90, 300). See also Gandhi 1999, vol. 20, 39-45.

Therefore, I would like to explore further about Gandhian resistance. What is it resisting? What constitutes the essence of its practice? How does it translate to socio-political transformation?

The true object of resistance as conceived by Gandhi was clearly not any particular leader or personality. Gandhi often emphasised that passive resistance as displayed by individuals like Daniel bore no ill will towards authority figures (see for example Gandhi 1999, vol. 16, 12; vol. 20, 40). Moreover, in citing from the Bible,⁴⁸ Gandhi (1997) takes it one step further by arguing that violence only perpetuates more violence and ultimately leads to destruction of all involved. In fact, Jefferess (2008, 95-135) argues that the true enemy that Gandhi conceives is that of violence itself and that is the true object of resistance.⁴⁹ Thus in his iconic work, *Hind Swaraj* (1997), Gandhi offers another way which he calls 'passive resistance' or what he would later prefer to call '*satyagraha*'.⁵⁰ *Satyagraha* as outlined by Gandhi (1997, 90) is 'a method, by which men, enduring pain, secure their rights'. Understanding that this is what Gandhi conceived of violence and its relation to social change, it is not surprising that he was taken in by Daniel's refusal to take up arms to protest the injustice dealt to him in Daniel 6 which earned his praise that Daniel was indeed 'one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived' (Gandhi 1999, vol. 9, 335).

The question still remains as to how passive resistance can result in social change. Gandhi (1997, 84) wrote that in order to practice *satyagraha*, one has to 'observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness'. Jefferess (2008, 122-135) proposes that Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha* redirects attention away from the oppressor to the oppressed. By allowing the oppressed to participate in the struggle which is not only a means but also an end, the oppressed is now able to regain their agency to live out their vision of society in the here and now. Therefore on the level of self-determination, there is little difference between the oppressed and the oppressor. Of course, Gandhi was not keen to allow material and cultural differences, especially those that reinforce power asymmetries to elide. Moreover, as Ashis Nandy (1983, 4) has shown, the oppressor is usually typecast as hypermasculine, using force as a means to get what he wants. *Satyagraha*

48 He quotes the verse from Matt 26:52: 'Those that wield the sword shall perish by the sword' (as cited in Gandhi 1997, 89).

49 Gandhi's view of violence was not limited to physical violence but also encompassed cultural, economic and political forms.

50 Gandhi (1999, vol. 34, 94-98) argues for a differentiation between passive resistance and *satyagraha*. Passive resistance in his opinion tolerates physical force, albeit limited to property and other non-living things but *satyagraha* does not condone violence in any manner. Passive resistance has room for hatred and anger but *satyagraha* only has room for love.

then presents a radical alternative – it is no longer contingent on brute strength which is the preserve of the strong male figure and thus it is accessible to all, regardless of gender, class or race. In this conception, resistance does not begin with opposing or overthrowing a tyrannical government but rather with ‘the transformation of Indian (and ultimately human) values, ideals, and ways of understanding the world’ (Jefferess 2008, 107). In this light, the word ‘passive’ is most probably too misleading to describe Gandhian resistance as it tends to imply inertness and impotency. Perhaps it is more appropriate to see it as nonviolent opposition.

(Re-)reading Daniel and the Three Jews

In the light of the above, it seems to me that Gandhi may have over-idealised the character of Daniel so as to support his concepts of *satyagraha* as he never expressed any issues he had with the narrative. Thus, taking into account Gandhi’s notion of nonviolent resistance and the work of Smith-Christopher on the text, I venture a re-reading of Daniel 6 and a reading of Daniel 3 by applying his hermeneutic in a more consistent manner.

Following Smith-Christopher (1993; 1996), I propose that Gandhi would be heartened to read of the trials of Daniel and the three Jews and naturally see their actions as acts of resistance against a hegemonic empire. To him, both would have demonstrated *satyagraha* perfectly – a conscious, courageous nonviolent protest against the excesses and evils of the empire up till the point of death. In fact, he would see the actions of the three Jews to be reflective of that of Daniel. Just as the three Jews intentionally defied the edict by not bowing before the golden statue, Daniel likewise consciously opposed the interdict of the Persian Emperor by continuing his prayer practices. Furthermore, as Akeel Bilgrami (2011) points out, *satyagraha* does not compartmentalise the political, the social and the religious. Thus, Gandhi would have readily seen the responses of Daniel and the three Jews as both religious and political.

Furthermore, through their practice of conscious, nonviolent opposition, the three Jews were able to change the heart of King Nebuchadnezzar. More precisely, it could be read that God was pleased to ‘convert’ the king through their actions. As for Darius, Daniel also won the respect of the king for his God through his own persevering in the practice of consciousness. Thus the turning of the kings’ hearts towards the Jewish God and the stamp of divine protection would be further proof that Daniel (and I add, the three Jews) was indeed the greatest passive resister that ever lived!

However, there are potentially several dissonances in the text with respect to Gandhi's understanding of *satyagraha*. Unlike Daniel and the three Jews, Gandhi relinquished his role as 'family man, lawyer, public notable' in order to work out an understanding of *satyagraha* (Brown 1989, 95). Furthermore, in order to relate to his own people back in India, he intentionally avoided wearing the clothes of wealthy Englishmen but instead chose to don the traditional, Gujarati clothes (Brown 1989, 96). As mentioned earlier, this was in line with what he thought a true passive resister should be. Neither Daniel nor the three Jews are by any stretch of the imagination ascetics in the measure of Gandhi, not least their positions as top government officials becomes even more consolidated by the end of the narrative. On this issue, Gandhi has been vocal that one should neither accept ill-gotten wealth nor associate oneself with tyrannical rule (see Gandhi 1999, vol 9, 339-342). Moreover, the promotion of the Jewish protagonists up the ranks of the empire would not seem to Gandhi to be congruent with the cultural and structural transformation for the benefit of the oppressed that he envisaged.

Furthermore, Gandhi never desired the destruction of his enemies (Nandy 1983, 16; Jefferess 2008, 134). Smith-Christopher (1996, 95) in his reflections did comment that the violence in the text is symbolic of the anger of the marginalised towards their oppressors and should not under any circumstance be translated into physical force for he feels such acts can never be justified. However, I contend that given how thorough Gandhi's conceptualisation of passive resistance in the concept of *satyagraha* and regardless if this was meant to remain metaphorical, it is odd that he did not find the conclusions of both narratives ethically questionable or unsettling. In Daniel 3, the edict now turns its violent gaze on those who profane the Jewish God and in Daniel 6, this is taken further where seemingly innocent parties like the conspirators' families were thrown into the lion's pit. The dissonance is all the more deepened when Daniel and the three Jews were not troubled at all.

Therefore, passive resistance is a viable interpretative option for both stories in resisting a hegemonic empire. However, there are several points relating to resisting the empire that Gandhi would likely have distanced himself from. It seems incongruent for a man of faith to allow himself to be clothed in the luxuries of the empire who has subjugated him. Furthermore, the destruction of his enemies as a result of resistance is not desirable, much less violently killing those who were not complicit in the conspiracy.

Singaporean Political Prisoners: Piety and Politics

I highlighted earlier the plight of political prisoners during the Marxist conspiracy as an illustration of the concentrated-coercive force of the state. Here I look at four different literary works – two autobiographical accounts of political prisoners, *Beyond the Blue Gate: Recollections of a Political Prisoner* (2011) by Soh Lung Teo and *Persecuted for Justice's Sake* (2012) by Vincent Cheng and two fictional accounts, *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) by Gopal Baratham and *Playing Madame Mao* (2002) by Siew Mei Lau that seek to open up the different dimensions of this horrific experience. In the following section, I engage with the different standpoints these literary works are presenting to read Daniel 3 and 6.

The Furnace in the Lion's Den

Perhaps one of the most striking points reading from the perspective of political prisoners is the seemingly terse account of Daniel and the three Jews in their respective 'detention cells'. While the account in Daniel 3 is about six verses (Dan 3:19-25), it is mostly focused on what Nebuchadnezzar is perceiving rather than the experience of the three Jews themselves.⁵¹ The narrative gap in Daniel 6 becomes unbearably apparent as the only report we have is from Daniel who proclaimed to Darius upon his release that 'My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me' (Dan 6:22).

In contrast, be it fictional or nonfictional, the place of the detention cell is usually portrayed in its sheer rawness where the weakness of the flesh meets a powerful state. The stories do not shy away from the dehumanising nature of the detention cell. Hernie Perera, the chief protagonist in Baratham's (1991) fictional account, was held in the detention cell for abetting the escape of the head of the religious group, the Children of the Book. A crime made all the more heinous because he was working in the internal security department which was tracking down this group for disseminating pamphlets advocating for the rights of the marginalised. The unbearable torture in the detention cell stripped him of his dignity:

There are marks on my body I can't explain. They don't worry me. Nor am I bothered by the excrement I find clinging to my person. I have become quite unashamed. I scream, I wet myself, vomit, let loose my bowels and burst into tears without caring. (Baratham 1991, 194).

⁵¹ That said, the Old Greek and Theodotion accounts include Azariah's prayer and the three Jews' song. As I am mainly working with the version of the Bible that ordinary Protestant readers would normally read in Singapore, I have not included them in the reading here.

Soh Lung Teo (2011, 80) who was one of those detained during the Marxist conspiracy describes her experience as ‘a caged deadly animal’ that becomes a spectacle for the wardens who ‘noisily peep in at intervals to ensure the animal is safely inside’. Therefore in these accounts, the detention cell is painted as a place that violently strips away what makes one human and slowly turns one into an animal.

However, more than just a dark place that threatens to release the beast within, it is also a place of guilt and betrayal. Vincent Cheng (2012, 11) who was portrayed by the media to be one of the main ringleaders of the Marxist conspiracy, writing twenty five years after his arrest in 1987 shares that many of them were forced into writing ‘tracts of self incriminating lies and half-truths’. He writes:

It seemed less painful to surrender in the interrogation room, but it was more painful when I was put back in the cell. There I would shed tears, stemming from my sense of utter loss of self-esteem, and constant worry about how my ‘confession’ would harm others (Cheng 2012, 12).

To further compound this, betrayal manifests in other ways such as abandonment. Cheng (2012) shared about how the then Archbishop of the Catholic Church during the Marxist Conspiracy withdrew his initial support after meeting with the local authorities. Until the day he died, he never heard the story from the side of the detainees even though many of them were members of the Catholic Church. Sometimes the abandonment was the result of isolation by the state. Teo (2011, 158-160) relates to how her letters, which was her main means of communication with the outside world, were often censored. It was important to her as ‘through the letters she was assured that she had not been forgotten’ (Teo 2011, 160). In short, the detention cell is a dehumanising place wrought with guilt and betrayal, abandonment and isolation. Perhaps the greater mercy is to be eaten by lions rather than to become one.

Thus in my view, one of the decisive contributions that political prisoners bring to the reading of Daniel 3 and 6 is the lived experiences of suffering under detention through filling in the gaps. As I show later, filling in the gaps of a narrative is not just a supplementary move of enriching the story but may also lead to destabilising the narrative itself or at least loosening the hold of specialist readers over the text.

Empire as Ambivalence

As noted earlier by many biblical scholars, the portrayal of empire in the stories of Daniel would approximate closer to that of Teo (2011) and Cheng (2012) who tend to cast the government as a high handed entity impervious to scrutiny and capable of violence

without impunity. The novelistic accounts, on the other hand, are more ambivalent in their portrayal of the authoritarian state. Lau (2002) through the eyes of the protagonist Chiang Ching, the wife of a political prisoner and successful actress, paints the perspective of the government of Singapore by inflecting it through the stories of the First Emperor of China and Chairman Mao. In an intimate encounter with the Chairman, Ching came face to face with the man himself. Lau (2002) blurs the boundaries between Chairman Mao and the first Prime Minister of Singapore making it difficult to ascertain if Ching was playing the scene out onstage as Madame Mao or having a real live interview with the prime minister of Singapore. This, in my view, intentionally creates a bifocal effect of looking at both the recent past in a far off land in China and at the local contemporary setting in Singapore. In so doing, it foregrounds the pragmatist strategies of both men in doing whatever it took to secure the stability and prosperity of their respective countries, even at the cost of civil liberties.

However Lau (2002) also attempts to present the state's side of the story. Through an interview with the Chairman, the protagonist reveals how the Chairman has overcome numerous obstacles, be it the Japanese invaders during the Second World War or the British colonialists, to secure the present prosperity that the country enjoys. There are similar echoes in Baratham's (1991) account where various characters including Hernie valued the security that the state had given even if it was at the expense of many freedoms. Therefore where the autobiographical accounts tended to lean towards a negative portrayal of the government which is understandable given that these are given by political prisoners themselves, the fictional accounts, as it were, attempt to portray both sides of the story and thus cast the government in more ambivalent light.

Thus when read through the ambivalence of empire in the stories of Baratham (1991) and Lau (2002), one faces once again the possibility that Daniel and the three Jews were more entangled with the empire than what is seen on the surface. I like to believe that Teo (2011) and Cheng (2012) would appreciate the way the stories in Daniel foreground the hubris of empire which echoes their own experience. Yet at the same time, the lack of sustained opposition by Daniel and the three Jews seem to express sympathies for empire in line with Baratham's (1991) and Lau's (2002) accounts. Much as empire is corrupt and not to mention excessively violent, it seems to be still necessary for order, stability and security of its peoples.

The Imperfect Heroes

Another significant difference when it comes to facing a potentially violent authoritarian state is that of fear. Daniel (implicitly) and the three Jews (explicitly) show absolutely no fear in the face of deathly punishments. The sheer audacity behind claiming that ‘we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter’ becomes both a point of admiration and shame if I were to read it from the perspectives of political prisoners (Dan 3:16).

By contrast, the element of fear haunts the stories of political prisoners. Cheng (2012) shares very candidly that prior to the first arrest, he always had the distinct feeling of being followed and was often chastised by family and friends for being over-paranoid. Teo (2011) writes that upon her first release, she felt that she was still under constant surveillance and had to live a life always looking over her shoulders. This notion of fear was best explored through Lau’s character (2002), Tang Na Juan who was one of the political prisoners forced to make a televised confession of his part in a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the government. Upon release, he found himself emasculated and fearful of expressing any public opinion against the government. When his frustration could no longer be contained, he went on a hunger strike like Gandhi in protest only to finally succumb to the temptation of food offered by government officials. The shame was too much to bear that finally he chose to end his own life by hanging himself in the toilet leaving his final words:

They have a barrage of lawyers and the law ends with them. I know only I am afraid, and in this fear, there is at its core, something wrong, something evil in this city...against which I am impotent (Lau 2002, 272).

I cannot help but wonder if he were to read the stories of Daniel, would he find solace in the protection and vindication of Daniel and the three Jews? Or would he curse God as the noose tightened around his neck suffocating the life out of him?

Yet in the face of fear, there is an alternative account by Cheng (2011, 20) who relates an intimate practice in the darkness of the detention cell:

In prison, I made a candle out of toilet rolls and affixed it on the wall. It burned with a bright red flame. On the candle, I inscribed my motto: ‘To give light, the candle must endure burning’. Above the candle, I placed a cross. These images signified for me sacrifice and victory. And victory it will be. It is only a matter of time.

The profane place of suffering and torture is interrupted like the fourth figure in the furnace and the angel in the lion’s den by the sacred act of prayer. It signifies not only

the artificiality of the divide between the religious and the political, but also the need for the religious as flesh meets the merciless machinery of the state. Religion is not only the opiate of the masses as Marx would put it but could also be a potent motivation towards enforcing limitations on empire with its mostly hidden totalitarian ambitions. Through this act of dialogical imagination, Daniel's prayer in the privacy of the upper chamber is brought into the public spectacle of the lion's den. Daniel was not depoliticising his religious practice in the face of its politicisation but mobilising it as a political weapon for 'although Daniel *knew* that the document had been signed', he persisted in prayer (Dan 6:10, emphasis mine).

Nonetheless, one key difference between these stories of political prisoners in Singapore and the stories of Daniel 3 and 6 is that the former are not heroic accounts with what it seems to be a happily ever after. Teo and Cheng, to this day, have not found the proper public redress for the detention they experienced under the state. Attempts to speak about their experiences in the public arena have been mostly denied. Hernie, in Baratham's (1991) account, is left in the detention cell with the only comforting thought that his lover is free. Ching in Lau's (2002) story had to leave Singapore to restart her life in Brisbane after her husband, Tang Na Juan, committed suicide. This difference in endings gives pause to ponder the seemingly satisfactory conclusion to the stories of Daniel. I would submit that it is both a comfort that God will vindicate them in the end and a frustration that the likelihood of it happening to them is increasingly dismal even though it is going to be 30 years since the Marxist conspiracy broke out. This is all the more puzzling that Daniel and the three Jews did not bring about the collapse of tyrannical empires but instead continued in their service in higher positions of the royal court. They became prosperous while the empire remains intact. In fact it could be said, they were prosperous *because* the empire remains intact. The very reason why these political prisoners were branded Marxists and detained without having even stepped into a court of trial began not with the state's inquisition but their own desires to see social transformation (see Teo 2011, 336).

In sum, reading through the stories of political prisoners has yielded much ambivalence about the stories in Daniel 3 and 6. They would most certainly celebrate the vindication of Daniel and the three Jews. Yet this would be tinged by several concerns. There seems to be a glossing over of the struggles in the fiery furnace and the lion's den. Their experiences of authoritarianism that recognise their entanglements with the nation-

state do not seem to feature in a binary depiction of Jews and empire. Their continued service in the empire that sought their destruction is above all, the most puzzling since its governance remaining largely intact appears to be masked by what would be impossibly happy endings. On this disturbing note, I move on to bring all three loci of enunciation in conversation.

In Conversation: Biblical Scholars, Satyagrahi and Political Prisoners

The shorthand I will be using henceforth to personify Gandhian reading of the text is 'satyagrahi' (one who practices *satyagraha*) and the perspectives of Singaporean political prisoners, 'political prisoners'.

There appears a similar quest for purity in the interpretations of biblical scholars of these two stories in Daniel. The treatment of the protagonists follows the logic of purity where they are considered pure as opposed to the impure who are unproblematically identified to be conniving, jealous royal officials and foolish, easily manipulated kings. Just as the pure is conceived as independent of the impure, Daniel and the three Jews were regarded as heroes separable from Babylonian society. Those who are inclined to think of court conflict tales as 'Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister', the hero subtype is assumed to be perfect and pure. Purity, in this case, seems curiously religious. However, these religious connections are not to be found in the stories themselves but in a *historical* referent of sorts. It is as though the pure essence of their actions is unequivocally determined by the time and place that they *originated* from. As a result, the image of gold in Daniel 3 is described in religious terms, thus construing it as idolatry. Similarly, the intention behind Daniel's prayer is searched along lines of religious practice, thus upholding freedom to practice one's religion. Furthermore, it seems to me that although there is no clear historical referent to key elements of the story such as the image of gold or the practice of prayer, biblical scholars of this persuasion continue their search. Such an insistence is likely connected to the belief in the universal right to freedom of religion which I suggest is a hypothesis based on western modern experiences of religion.

In this exchange among the 'logicians of purity', the opposing side is the political. A minority of vocal biblical scholars are arguing that Daniel and the three friends were refusing to bow to the socio-political rule of a proto-capitalist empire corrupted by greed for wealth. Again Daniel and the three Jews are separate from empire and stand against a violent, authoritarian regime. Thus regardless of whether their inclinations are towards piety or political resistance, the logic of purity is playing itself out again. This time, while

purity's essence of either being religious or political is maintained, there is an additional emphasis of the autonomy of the hero. In the face of certain death, Daniel and the three Jews chose to stand up to empire.

The satyagrahi would likely agree with the actions of Daniel and the three Jews for nonviolently protesting the empire's excesses. In fact, by viewing the actions of the protagonists as a practice of consciousness, they would agree with biblical scholars that Daniel and the three Jews exercised their autonomy in their disobedience. Inasmuch that Smith-Christopher (1996) would like to emphasise the political aspect of Gandhi's interpretation, I argue that the satyagrahi would insist on maintaining the religious is political as much as the political is religious. But yet, there is a logic of purity at work here as well. I point out that the satyagrahi would likely be uncomfortable with the level of violence that Daniel and the three Jews overlooked – the additional burdens on non-Jewish peoples that increased the scope by which capital punishment can be meted out and the violent destruction of one's enemies and their families. This comes from the radical nature of nonviolence that the satyagrahi adheres to. A true and pure social order has to abhor violence in any form. The empire is to be resisted, but never with violence.

Arguably among political prisoners in Singapore, the relationship between the political and the religious receives varying treatments. In all accounts, the spectre of religion remains within the political such as the preaching against social injustices in private meetings of the Children of the Book or Vincent Cheng's pious act in an otherwise politicised space of the detention cell. What I am not saying here is that political prisoners do not subscribe to a kind of logic of purity. Rather given the extreme conditions of detention and the domination of the nation-state over the public sphere of Singapore society, I would think that they did not have such a luxury to separate the religious from the political. Taking Cheng's (2011) act of prayer in detention as a paradigmatic example, the upper chamber of Daniel appears to have been transformed into the lion's den while keeping the act of prayer. Like the appearance of the fourth figure in the furnace, the sacred now enters into a profane space tainted by human weakness and suffering. There is recognition that when flesh meets the machinery of empire, it needs all the resources it can get. This provokes further reflection about myself as a privileged member of Singapore society which I explore later in the conclusion of this chapter. Suffice to say for now, the logic of purity is more elusive for those who suffer the heavy hand of empire even if they desired for it.

A further point can be made with respect to the ideas of authority and individual that might be common to both the satyagrahi and political prisoners. Asian societies such as India and Singapore tend not to see the individual as independent of society but rather as entities that are folded together. Thus both in the *Hind Swaraj* and the stories of political prisoners, the concerns seem less about the individual and his freedom but more about the notion of society or nation-state and where it is heading. In this light, it would work against the inclinations observed among biblical scholars to see religion (in its broadest sense of the spiritual) and politics as separate. This is because society is more than political economy but complex and not to mention difficult to systematise collectivity that implicates religion and culture.⁵²

Perhaps other than the notable exception of Fewell (1991), biblical scholars have not largely focused on the material success of Daniel and the three Jews at the end of their respective narratives. This would be, I argue, profoundly disturbing to the satyagrahi who has embraced a life of ascetic simplicity. Political prisoners might also find this disconcerting, albeit for different reasons. Certainly, the one-party rule in Singapore remains entrenched and the system that they protested in the 1980s could be argued to be largely intact. This leads to the second point which I see as more problematic for political prisoners, that is, the continued service of Daniel and the three Jews in empire. As raised earlier, it is unclear what sustainable political change their actions had brought about other than entrenching their privilege and power in an empire that is seemingly corrupt. Furthermore, the distancing of the sovereign from plotting court officials gives the overall impression of a benevolent image of the king who seems fairly innocent of wrong. To be fair, this is a point that has been raised by several biblical scholars (see for example, Newsom 2014, 191, 198-199). In spite of that, the tendency to valorise the actions of Daniel and the three Jews remains. It seems to me this has come about because their main actions are often viewed in isolation from the rest of the narrative – a problematic I argue in the next chapter to be constitutive of form criticism that potentially compromises understanding. What introducing the satyagrahi and political prisoners have done is to first put their actions in the immediate context of the narrative and *also* the contemporary setting of Asia and Singapore. This simultaneous relocating back into space(s) then raises the concern of whether Daniel's and the three Jews' complicity with empire could be excused on any grounds. Could the stories then be rehabilitated before appropriating to

⁵² This is of course not to say that western societies are any less complex. What is being indicted here is not so much a comparison of level of complexities of western and nonwestern societies but rather the kind of thought systems that are birthed.

another context or to be entirely resisted altogether? It would seem to me that biblical scholars are not easily perturbed by this because they do not face the dilemma of empire in the magnitude that Gandhi did during decolonisation of India or political prisoners in the modernisation of Singapore after independence from British rule. As a Singaporean Christian reader, this is an aspect that cannot be overlooked. That said I postpone the discussion of this difficult question to the conclusion of all three case studies as this issue of appropriation permeates all the stories of Daniel.

By way of concluding this section, I explore the implications of the above discussion on identity formation. Thinking of identity as performed rather than negotiated would seem to be the dominant motif of biblical scholars and the satyagrahi. For biblical scholars, it would appear that Daniel and the three friends are acting from an inner place of conviction, be it a divinely given right to worship god or deep sense of social justice. As for the satyagrahi, the practice of passive resistance with its firm stand on nonviolence forms that place where one engages external realities which I include the biblical texts. For the political prisoners, on the other hand, being pressed on all sides including religious institutions, it is difficult to think of identity as anything but a continuous negotiation. As pointed out earlier, the interpenetration of the sacred and secular in the act of Vincent Cheng's prayer in the detention cell as inflected through the narratives of Daniel 3 and 6 deprives one of the privilege to claim any pre-determined identities that have been constructed in the space of intelligibility as one's own. This is all the more accentuated in the dehumanising environment of the fiery furnace or the lion's den where physical coercion to make choices beyond one's volition is an undeniable reality. This complex dynamic of identity as performed and negotiated is discussed reflexively later through my own complicity with certain privileged social identities. For now, the notion of choice and options opens another dimension of investigation – that of dreams and desires which would be the theme of the next conversation.

Case Study #3: Whose Dreams?

This last case study looks at the court contest tales in Daniel 2, 4 and 5. As the mapping of both ancient and contemporary contexts has shown, the main concern is with the role that these literary dreams and visions play in the network of ideological power. In order to facilitate that, I have chosen three loci of enunciation. First, I outline the spectrum of meanings derived from Daniel, 2, 4 and 5 in western biblical scholarship by

focusing on dominant trends. Second, I look at the texts through the dream of Buddhist Emperor Aśoka as recorded in *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (1983) translated by John Strong. The third perspective I use to illuminate the text is through the Singaporean film, *Singapore Dreaming* (2006) directed by Colin Goh and Yen Yen Woo. I then engage all three loci of enunciation in dialogue to distil what the texts would mean for a Singaporean.

Dreams and Visions in the Stories of Daniel

Daniel 2 opens with King Nebuchadnezzar in his second year of reign⁵³ being troubled by dreams he cannot understand. This prompts the king to summon the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to interpret his dreams. The king is clearly wary of his own specialists and demands that they tell him the dream before interpreting it. The wise men all protest that only the gods ‘whose dwelling is not with mortals’ would be capable of this (Dan 2:11). The king becomes enraged and decrees that all of them be put to death. When the executioner is about to kill Daniel and his companions, Daniel asks that he be granted further extension so that he could seek the God of Heaven to reveal the mystery to him. As the story unfolds, Daniel is able to tell the king his dream of a large statue whose ‘head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet of iron and partly of clay’ (Dan 5:32-33) which was destroyed by ‘a stone [that] was cut out’ (Dan 5:34) and ‘became a great mountain [that] filled the whole earth’ (Dan 5:35) in its place. He tells the king that the dream is about the downfall of his kingdom being succeeded by another three more kingdoms before the God of Heaven will then destroy all of them and establish his kingdom. The king is so awed by Daniel’s ability that he ‘fell on his face’ and ‘worshipped [him], and commanded that a grain offering and incense be offered to him’ (Dan 5:46). He gives praise to the God of Daniel and promotes Daniel to ‘ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon’ (Dan 5:48).

Daniel 4⁵⁴ again begins with King Nebuchadnezzar being harassed by another dream. This time he tells the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the diviners the dream. However, they are still unable to interpret the dream. King Nebuchadnezzar

⁵³ This has been a subject of discussion for many historical critics mainly because it is very unusual for Daniel and his three friends to have graduated from their training in such a short time to make an appearance in the king’s court. See Collins (1993, 154-155) and Newsom (2014, 66-67) who have attributed this to redaction. See also Seow (2003, 37-38) who disagrees because he thinks that it is not implausible that a second year trainee could outdo the best in the empire. Furthermore, it would make the anxiety of Nebuchadnezzar more believable given that he just attained absolute power.

⁵⁴ There are significant differences found in the Old Greek translation, particularly papyrus 967 evident in the stories in chapters 4 and 5. See Collins 1993, 216-221, 241-243 for further comparative analysis between the different manuscripts.

finally remembers Daniel and is elated when he comes in. Unlike in Daniel 2 where he declares that the previous dream comes from the God in heaven, here Daniel is more sympathetic and fears for the king. He tells him that the great tree in his dream signifies the extent and power of his kingdom. The ‘holy watcher’ (Dan 4:13, 23) who represents the ‘decree of the most High’ (Dan 4:24) has declared that Nebuchadnezzar is to be driven out of his kingdom and live as an animal in the wilderness until he learns that ‘Heaven is sovereign’ (Dan 4:26). Only when he repents would his kingdom be restored to him. Where Daniel 2 does not record the fulfilment of the dream, Daniel 4 goes on to tell us that Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to have learnt his lesson and he is afflicted with the very fate predicted for him. The story concludes with Nebuchadnezzar finally acknowledging the Most High and he is restored to his former glory.

Daniel 5 moves the story from Nebuchadnezzar to his so-called son, Belshazzar.⁵⁵ While he is feasting with the vessels of ‘gold and silver [from] the temple in Jerusalem’, a disembodied hand appears before him and writes on the wall. Horrified by this spectacle, he calls for the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners to come and interpret the writing on the wall. Again none is able to decipher what it means. The queen, remembering the deeds of Daniel during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, suggests to Belshazzar to consult him. Belshazzar calls Daniel and promises him material rewards and the third highest position in the kingdom if he interprets the writing. After defiantly rejecting the reward, Daniel declares to Belshazzar that the words ‘mene, mene, tekel, parsin’ mean that God has judged him and limited the days of his rule because he has not humbled himself before him. Therefore his kingdom will be taken from him and divided among the Medes and the Persians. The story concludes with the fulfilment of the vision⁵⁶ as Belshazzar is killed and deposed by Darius the Mede.

Dreams of Falling Empires

In surveying the literature on these three stories, there is good agreement on many points regarding meaning of the text despite differing approaches. It is these themes that form the basic framework of this section where I discuss the main points of resonance before looking at the points where opinions differ.

Most, if not all, are in agreement that they are about the sovereignty of God over

⁵⁵ It is generally agreed that the heir to Nebuchadnezzar is Nabonidus and not Belshazzar (see Collins 1993, 30).

⁵⁶ I do not discuss at length whether there is need to separate dreams from visions as elaborated in form critical debates, because as established earlier, there is no need to distinguish between dreams and visions when it comes to understanding them as ideological apparatuses. See also Noegel 2007, 160-161. Moreover, as will be duly noted later, Buddhist dream theories also do not differentiate between waking and sleeping states (see footnote 66).

human kingdoms. The 'God of Heaven' or 'Most High' uses the medium of dreams and visions through the Jewish interpreter, Daniel to communicate his authority over human kings and call for their submission. In particular, the dream in chapter 2 highlights that the destruction of the statue represents the future of human kingdoms⁵⁷ and portends their future replacement by the 'great mountain [which would fill] the whole earth' (Dan 2:31).⁵⁸ Moreover, this is contrasted to the hubris of the kings in other parts of the narrative. For instance, Smith-Christopher (1996, 51, emphasis his; cf Dan 2:5) points out how Nebuchadnezzar lays claim to '*spectacularly lethal*' force which enables him to determine a person's demise and success.⁵⁹ In the light of this, it would seem deeply ironical that he falls facedown to Daniel by the end of the story (Dan 2:46). Despite this initial humbling and being warned again in another dream of a cosmic tree being cut down, we find Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 musing to himself about the greatness of his empire (Dan:4:28-30; Goldingay 1989, 95; Smith-Christopher 1996, 75). Thus the dreams in Daniel 2 and 4 serve as a reminder to the king that he is still under the authority of God. Belshazzar has the temerity still to offer up a reward when his own demise is near (Dan 5:16). Seow (2003, 82) reads Daniel's reminder of Belshazzar in Daniel 5 of God's power in the light of the assertions within the Hebrew Bible that the prerogative to decide the fate of human rulers lies with God (Dan 5:19). Barton (2003, 157-159) argues that the dominant theme not only here but also in the entire book is that submission to God is binding on Jews *and* non-Jews as well. Thus on the scale of the meta-narrative of human history, it is difficult to find a commentator who would disagree that one of the central motifs of these stories is the Jewish God asserting his right of dominion over that of human kings.

The other common feature noted is the heroic portrayal of Daniel. As a dream interpreter, he surpasses even Joseph when he was able to tell the king his dream without prior knowledge (Seow 2003, 34-35).⁶⁰ Of course, it goes without saying that he is clearly

⁵⁷ See Montgomery 1927, 185-192; Collins 1993, 166-170 for a comprehensive survey of possible historical references the dream could be pointing to. Alternatively there are those who have departed from a diachronic approach to argue that the referents are internal to the book of Daniel itself (Seow 2003, 44-48).

⁵⁸ This is yet another metaphor that has occupied the imagination of the readers of this text. Collins (1993, 171) gives the most comprehensive survey and notes that the most common interpretation is that it refers to Christ. However he points out that the only explicit text in the New Testament that supports such an interpretation is Luke 20:18. Seow (2003, 46-47) adds that another possible reference is the elect people of God (cf Isa 40-55). Regardless of the specific identity of the stone and the mountain, the theme of sovereignty of God is still maintained.

⁵⁹ The public display of violence, Newsom (2014, 69) shows, is not limited to Babylonian but also Persian kings as well.

⁶⁰ That said, several commentators prefer not to bring both the stories of Joseph and Daniel too closely together for analysis. Collins (1993, 155) wants to keep the distinctiveness of the text and prefers not to go so far as to call this a 'new version of the story of Joseph' or 'midrash on it' though he acknowledges that it is entirely possible for the redactor or authors to be influenced by the Joseph story. To him, such close association tends to overlook that a possibly far greater influence is the Prayer of Nabonidus. Smith-Christopher (1996, 50) on the other hand, prefers to focus more effort on the text at hand rather than dwelling too much on diachronic issues.

superior to his fellow professional dream interpreters in the Babylonian court (Smith-Christopher 2002, 286; cf Dan 2:20-23). Indeed, Daniel is 'endowed with a spirit of the holy gods' (Dan 4:18; 5:11). So it would seem Daniel's relationship with God is 'close', 'personal' and 'divine' (Wong 2006, 20). There are those who also argue that Daniel's lowly status as a Jew contrasts with the monumental achievements in the royal court (see Goldingay 1989, 54; Seow 2003, 40-41). However, there is a potentially darker side to this seemingly perfect protagonist. Fewell (1991, 101-103) points out that by Daniel 5, it is no longer possible to tell apart Daniel and God in the narrative. He does not differentiate in his speech which words belong to him and to God. Nor does he seek God for confirmation like he did previously. Belshazzar is not allowed to respond as Daniel's presence eclipses his own for the rest of the story. By the end of the court contest tales, Daniel (not God), as it were, has the last word.

One particular area with a greater divergence of opinion is the relationship of the Jews to imperial rule. The main issue is the different attitudes that Daniel had towards the various kings. To Belshazzar, he was forthright in his defiance where he exclaims 'Let your gift be for yourself or give your rewards to someone else!' (Dan 5:17).⁶¹ However, to Nebuchadnezzar (and also Darius), Daniel is more deferential in his replies. So what was Daniel's position towards power? It is possible to outline two main positions by contemporary biblical scholars. The first is that the narratives are positive towards non-Jewish rule insofar that certain conditions are met. The second is that the stories are constantly subverting and therefore delegitimising non-Jewish rule.

What is emphasised in the interpretations of the three stories for scholars who belong to the first position is that since human rule is derived from divine initiative, it is God's prerogative to set up and depose of kings. Collins (1993, 174-175) highlights that this is a form of deferred eschatology where the judgement of God would not come to pass until the final end (see also Montgomery 1927, 185-192; Goldingay 1989, 57-61; Barton 2003, 159). Thus in this schema of divine sovereignty exerting power over human kingdoms, Daniel serves as the messenger par excellence. As a result, what Daniel says receives more attention than the implications of what he says or even his other non-verbal responses in the stories. It is acknowledged that Daniel accepting the worship of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:46-49) and the reward of Belshazzar (Dan 5:29) is incongruent with the image of Daniel but this does not seem to trouble scholars of this

⁶¹ Of course one should also consider that the three Jews in Dan 3 were openly defiant of the king's orders as well but there is no means of comparison as this is the only story that displays the attitude of the three friends towards imperial rule.

position (see for example, Montgomery 1927, 181, 266; Collins 1993, 171-172, 252). What did get reasonable attention was Daniel's over-zealous concern over the welfare of the king in Daniel 4:19. Montgomery (1927, 238, emphasis his) leaves it ambiguously as a 'characteristic of his humanity' which only lasted '*for a moment*' that was 'long enough to show that *his thoughts were troubling him*'. Collins (1993, 228) clarifies by pointing out Jerome's explanation that Daniel does not want to give the impression he is taunting the king. That said, Collins himself does not commit to any position. Goldingay (1989, 94), on the other hand, positively evaluates Daniel's concern by inferring that we should do likewise and 'have compassion on world rulers, specifically the wicked ones' and that 'judgment is never inevitable'. He argues that we should not 'bait the tyrants and dare them to do their worst' but that we must

care about people in power, even people who abuse power... appeal to their humanness not their sinfulness, and... treat them as people given a responsibility by God and people who may respond to an appeal to right and wrong (Goldingay 1989, 94).

Overall, it seems that the position is that God would ultimately judge all kings, especially the evil ones, but it is just not yet. Thus the option of praxis emerging here is that Daniel serves an example of quietist piety who only when called upon, would speak God's prophecy in all earnestness and sincerity to those in power so that the sovereign, as Barton (2003, 157) puts it, would learn 'to worship whom Jews worship as the only true God and impos[e] that worship on their subjects'. Otherwise, they risk the judgement of God.

The other relatively minority, nevertheless significant, view is that these stories could be subverting royal rule. Smith-Christopher (1996) argues that the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar are more likely the dreams of the disenfranchised. With reference to Daniel 2, he argues that it expresses hope for the eventual demise of hegemonic rule to come quickly (Smith-Christopher 1996, 57-58). As for Daniel 4, it is the vision of powerful tyrants being brought down to become like those he had displaced from house and home (Smith-Christopher 1996, 77-78). Thus by portraying that powerful kings are not immune to judgement in the here and now, he sees the stories as literary tools to disarm and disempower those in power. In this light, he sees Daniel as an active participant in speaking truth to power. In his interpretation of the dream in chapter 2, Daniel outrightly reminds the king that his power derives from God's initiative. Smith-Christopher (1996, 55) looks closer at this opening and points out that Daniel is in reality challenging the authority of the king by issuing 'a challenge to human pretensions [which] is far more in keeping with the spirit of these passages, both in Daniel and in the New Testament'. This

is of course all the more confrontational when Daniel tells Belshazzar to keep his gifts to himself (Dan 5:17). As for Daniel's apparent concern for the welfare of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4, Smith-Christopher (1996, 74) is of the opinion that biblical scholars over-interpreted Daniel's reply and does not think that Daniel is sympathetic to the king. He sees it part of the obligatory ritual that Daniel has to partake in to avert the evil in the dream but in his heart, Daniel actually knows it is not possible. In fact, in calling Nebuchadnezzar to 'atone for your sins with righteousness' (Dan 4:27), he argues that the king is being reduced by Daniel to one of the many subjugated subjects. Thus this second position tends to cast Daniel as actively confronting oppressive powers rather than seeking to align the welfare of the king with the sovereignty of God.

In sum, it is almost unanimous among biblical scholars that the stories are about the transient nature of human rule contingent on the prerogative of God. There will come a time that God's kingdom would replace all other human kingdoms and establish itself forever. In the meantime, Daniel is the role model of faithfulness to the cause of God and his commitment is never questioned. The issue arises mainly on whether Daniel subscribed to a quietist mode of witness which is passive and reliant on the careful direction of God or that he is actively resisting the empire by openly condemning the corrupt power of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Dreams of Transcending Empires

The second locus of enunciation for this case study is the dream of famous Buddhist Emperor Aśoka as recorded in the *Aśokāvadāna*.⁶² The primary reason for this choice is that according to Bhagwan Josh (2012), the icon of Aśoka was so alive in the imagination of Indian people that it was used as part of the political discourse of postcolonial nation building efforts in India. Since then, the emblem of Aśoka has been found to dominate both in the public and private spheres, from the cutlery used in the homes of ambassadors to embellishing the exteriors of the public transport system to even adorning weapons of destruction produced by the Indian state. Most pertinently, Aśoka, like Gandhi and Confucius, is often mobilised in Asian discourses that assert Asian-ness over and against Western liberal discourses.

According to Strong (1983, 3), Aśoka ascended the throne around 270 BCE.

⁶² The Aśoka legends, not unlike other ancient manuscripts, have multiple versions in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Burmese, Thai, Sinhalese, and other Asian languages (Strong 1983, 3-37). I have chosen to follow the translation of John Strong (1983) which is perhaps the only English translation of the legends. This particular version is translated from the Sanskrit work. I also follow the transliteration of Sanskrit terms as written by John Strong in his translation which is the standard Devanagari script.

The version of *Aśokāvadāna* that records the story of Aśoka used here is part of a larger Sanskrit collection of Buddhist tales and other writings called the *Dīvyāvadāna* (Strong 1983, 16).⁶³ We know about Aśoka from two different types of evidence: the inscriptions that he had set up throughout his kingdom and the texts that discuss him in Buddhist traditions. According to Strong (1983, 3), he was the emperor best known both for unifying the whole Indian subcontinent under one rule and the almost unprecedented peace and prosperity he brought.⁶⁴ This reputation is based upon the inscriptions. For Buddhists, his importance was his patronage of the *sangha*, the Buddhist community of monks and nuns. The information about this comes mainly from Buddhist texts which give a different account from that found in the inscriptions, although the inscriptions do confirm Aśoka's conversion to and patronage of Buddhism. My intention here is not to explore fully the different historical records of Aśoka to arrive at an accurate account but rather to see how this particular story can help read the biblical text differently. Therefore, I have restricted the following account of Aśoka mainly to that recorded in the *Aśokāvadāna* as translated by John Strong. According to Strong (1983, 40-42; 210-213), Aśoka was known as 'Aśoka the fierce' before his conversion. He did not hesitate to act cruelly against all those who stood in his way to power. For instance, he deceived his brother by luring him into a pit filled with hot coals and murdered him there so as to usurp the throne. He then experienced a dramatic conversion to Buddhism that transformed his reputation into the Cakravartin, the wise monarch who rules the world. It is important to note here that in spite of his conversion, the *Aśokāvadāna* does not shy away from reporting Aśoka's persistence in certain acts of violence that is not in keeping with Buddhist notions of Dharma. A notable instance is in a part of the story I use to read with the Daniel stories where Aśoka mercilessly executes the queen for betraying his trust. Indeed, as Strong (1983, 42) emphasises, Buddhist traditions maintain critical distance to kingship and continue to treat it with ambivalence (see also Tambiah 1987, 43-50).

This however should not detract from the achievements of Aśoka. Once he declared his faith in Buddha, he reformed his empire in line with the Dharma and

⁶³ Strong (1983, 3-5) points out that much of the enthusiasm about Aśoka began in 1837 when James Prinsep discovered the royal edicts of Aśoka. Since then, scholarship tended to revolve around the royal edicts and rock inscriptions that have been largely preserved. He cautions against conflating this enthusiasm with that of contemporary Buddhists around the world. Instead, he argues that Buddhists in the Asian region know Aśoka more from the Legends of King Aśoka as handed down through the Buddhist *sangha*.

⁶⁴ While Strong (1994) acknowledges that these inscriptions, better understood as political propaganda, give a more reliable chronology of his life, he also points out that many of them were written in a Brahmin script that was almost all forgotten after Aśoka's reign. Therefore, it was more likely that the traditional understanding of Aśoka which holds important significance for today was handed down through the oral traditions. These diverse oral traditions then culminated in the different writings of his legends across Asia.

even sent envoys to the surrounding Greek kings such as the Seleucid Empire with the expressed purpose of spreading Dharma. What is meant by Dharma in the *Aśokāvadāna* is still a matter of debate. For the purposes of this reading I follow what Strong (1983, 4) has argued to be a ‘moral polity of active social concern, religious tolerance, ecological awareness, the observance of ethical precepts, and the renunciation of war’. As a result, the empire prospered and flourished until he re-married. He was also well-known for his building of the eighty-four thousand stupas,⁶⁵ his generous donations to the *sangha* and worship of the Bodhi-tree (Strong 1983, 21).

Dreams of Fellow Kings

Comparing Aśoka with Nebuchadnezzar, we do find several remarkable similarities in their literary accounts. First both were credited for bringing their respective kingdoms to the height of its power, so much so that they were given almost iconic status for each of their kingdoms in the respective texts. Second, in both literary accounts, their kingdoms came to ruin in the generation after them. Third, both kings, known for their dictatorship, experienced conversion and became good as a result of it. Put differently, both accounts accommodated the possibility that the sovereign king himself could be converted, no matter how tyrannical they were. Finally, it is the religious texts of the Hebrew Bible and the Buddhist corpus that record the dream reports of both kings. Just as we find in the Daniel stories, O’Flaherty (1984, 37) comments that Indian religious texts often portray Indian kings gaining understanding of their dreams through interpretation by religious specialists such as soothsayers and Buddhist monks.

However it is important to note several distinctive points about each account. Nebuchadnezzar wavered a lot more than Aśoka in submitting to the rule of a foreign religion as evidenced by his building of a golden statue immediately after the dream in chapter 2 and in chapter 4 his continued complacency in his own achievements. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, it appears that Aśoka remained mostly faithful to the teachings of Buddha after he was converted. This leads to the second distinction. It is not certain how much Nebuchadnezzar embraced the Jewish God. There is no indication in the stories that he gave up his polytheistic practices or instituted any reforms that are in line with the Torah. Aśoka on the other hand, instituted Dharma throughout his kingdom. Finally, their respective sons, Belshazzar and Kunāla could not be more different. Kunāla was a dutiful son who even forgave his step-mother who nearly took his life while Belshazzar

⁶⁵ A stupa is a dome-like structure containing Buddhist relics, typically ashes of Buddhist monks, that can be used as a place of meditation.

squandered away his father's legacy in blatant irreverence of the god his father honoured.

The dream report in the *Aśokāvadāna* follows Aśoka sending his son Kunāla to an uprising in a northern country, Takṣaśilā following the instigation of the second queen Tiṣyarakṣitā who was portrayed as self-serving and ambitious as opposed to the virtuous first queen Asandhimittā. This is because Tiṣyarakṣitā wanted to take revenge on Aśoka's son for spurning her affections. To complete her plotting for revenge, she convinced Aśoka to cede his throne to her for seven days as a reward for curing his illness. Once she became the sovereign, she needed Aśoka's approval to issue an order to the people of Takṣaśilā where Kunāla was fighting to have him blinded and killed. So she went to see Aśoka while he was asleep so as to get him to bite the letter which would expedite her order. Her attempt was interrupted twice by Aśoka waking up from two nightmares. The first was a dream of two vultures picking out the eyes of Kunāla and the second was of Kunāla entering the city with 'a beard and long hair and long nails' (Strong 1983, 274). After which, Tiṣyarakṣitā was successful in getting Aśoka's bite. This coincided with a third dream where Aśoka dreamt that his teeth were falling out. The next day, Aśoka called the soothsayers for their interpretation:

'Your majesty,' they replied, 'one who sees such dreams will see the eyes or his son destroyed'.

And they added:

One whose teeth decay
and fall out in a dream
will see his son's eyes destroyed
and the death of his son as well.

(Strong 1983, 275)

After hearing this, Aśoka paid homage to the soothsayers and declared his praises for Buddha and the *saṅgha*. Fortunately for Kunāla, those who were ordered to blind and kill him respected him greatly. So they only blinded him and then allowed him to flee Takṣaśilā where he roamed the countryside playing the vīṇā (an Indian classical stringed instrument) and singing. Aśoka was eventually reunited with his son. Having learnt the treacherous deed of Tiṣyarakṣitā, he had her burnt to death.

Coming down to the dream reports of both kings, I first explore the relevant parts of Buddhist understanding of Aśoka's dream before reading with the stories of Daniel in chapter 2, 4 and 5.⁶⁶ According to several scholars, Buddhaghosa posits that predictive

⁶⁶ While form critics find it hard to classify Belshazzar's vision as a dream, especially since it lacks certain features such as the requirement of sleep and waking, there is no such dilemma in Buddhist dream theories. In the dream of Aśoka, it is important to note what provoked the dream was his wife's attempt to get him to bite down on her order so

dreams⁶⁷ are intertwined with the karma of the dreamer (Young 1999, 46; Sumegi 2008, 62-64). Thus, the *Aśokāvadāna* records Upagupta explaining to several monks from Kunāla's past lives the reason for the loss of his eyes which was because he blinded several hundred deer in his previous life (Strong 1983, 285-286). Therefore, dreams are seen as part of larger cycle of cause and effect, of merits and demerits. Reading the stories should always prompt one to ask the deeper question of how the dreamer came to be deserving of his dream.

Another point emphasised by analysts of Buddhist dreams is that what may seem like an evil dream still has the potential to become good (O'Flaherty 1984, 19-20). This can be readily seen from the account of Kunāla's blindness (Young 1999, 50). Even though Aśoka dreams a terrible dream of his son becoming blind and destitute, it turns out to be a blessing in disguise. Kunāla assures those who were to excise his eyes that he does not see what is to happen a misfortune but a way to draw closer to the teaching of Buddha on the transient nature of life (Strong 1983, 277). The ultimate reversal of the dream finally happens when he pleads with his father to spare his step-mother. And as he is doing so, not only his sight is restored but also his eyes regain their former glory (Strong 1983, 284-285). This nevertheless does not stop Aśoka from brutally executing his wife and the citizens of Takṣaśilā.

Through the eyes of the Aśoka's dream report, Nebuchadnezzar's dreams can be seen as a result of his own karma. Therefore, I look for tangible links between the dream and the real events in the life (or lives) of the person it is supposed to affect. What would be some clues of Nebuchadnezzar's misdemeanours that may point to the reason why he has these dreams? One such clue would be the unreasonable nature of the king's request coupled with his indiscriminate use of force to get what he wants in Daniel 2. It is a reminder of Aśoka the Fierce before his conversion who would randomly send people

as to expedite it. Moreover, after Aśoka had the dream of his son wandering around a desolate man, he had a dream of his teeth falling out which happened immediately after his wife's successful attempt to get his bite marks. What this dream report does, according to Serinity Young (1999, 158), is that it problematises the divide between waking and sleeping. Events of the dream-world and the waking state are intimately connected and the separation of the two states seems more like a modernistic construction (see also Davids 1963, 157-161; O'Flaherty 1984, 3-13). Moreover, a dream in Buddhist conception is that which comes to the mind (Young 1999). Hence, it is not difficult for Buddhist interpreters to put the three stories together as they do not differentiate between dreams and visions on structuralist grounds.

67 From a Buddhist perspective, this dream would have been classified as a prognostication type. Ancient Buddhist dream theories have proposed different types of typology. One of the earliest is found in *Milindapaṇḥa* (Questions of King Milinda) which records conversations between King Milinda and the Buddhist sage, Nagasena. According to Nagasena, dreams are classified into six types. The first three types have to do with the disposition of the person, whether he is of wind, bile or phlegm. The fourth type depends on whether the man who dreams is under the influence of spiritual beings, the fifth type is whether he has experienced the dream many times and the final type is whether the dream is by 'way of prognostication' (Davids, 1963, 157, see also O'Flaherty 1984, 18-19, 24; Young 1999, 45-46; Sumegi 2008, 55-58). It is the final type that Nagasena declares to be true and the rest to be false. He taught the king that the dreamer is never able to discern whether the dream will yield a good or bad outcome and thus requires someone to explain it to him. Therefore based on this typology it is very likely that Aśoka was having a predictive dream.

to his hell-like prison camps (Strong 1983, 41). This could be an indication of a wider practice of the king in the way he treats his subjects. The other possible cause for his bad karma can be inferred from how the text in Daniel 4 emphasises that Nebuchadnezzar is 'living at ease' and 'prospering' (Dan 4:4) and continues to revel at 'magnificent Babylon' that is built by his 'mighty power' and for his 'glorious majesty' (Dan 4:30) in spite of the warning of the dream. Of course his prosperity could be shared with the rest of his citizens. If I were to follow the law of consequence evident in the *Aśokāvadāna*, an intimate connection is formed between his dream of being turned into an animal and this indulgent lifestyle he is enjoying. It would suggest that the demerit he is sowing is closely associated with how his wealth is most likely earned at the expense of his citizens and even possibly perpetuated through his neglect of them. Similarly, Belshazzar's vision is linked (via karma) to his own deeds. From the narrative, they may conclude that it is likely his dishonouring of other religions, particularly the Jewish faith. Moreover, the feasting seems to suggest an indulgent lifestyle that betrays an over-reliance on material wealth and neglect of the affairs of the state. However, in Belshazzar's case, there is no reversal. He receives what he deserves as he is being killed and deposed by Darius the Mede.⁶⁸ Thus both Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar in the eyes of Buddhist interpreters deserved their dreams and visions for the various ways they had mistreated their subjects.

Is there an ironic reversal at work like that of the dreams in Aśoka's legends? It is hard to tell from the dream in Daniel 2 as the fulfilment is missing from the story.⁶⁹ Daniel 4 on the other hand is closely reflective of the tale of Kunāla. Nebuchadnezzar, because of his own karma, becomes debased and reduced into an animal. However, like Kunāla, he became enlightened and understood the meaning of his suffering. Thus by submitting to the Jewish God, not only was his body and mind restored to its former state, but also he regained his kingdom and its power. It would seem his conversion is genuine and thus can be further inferred that the authors of the text are inclined to the idea that rulers can convert to foreign gods and find the path to truth and justice.

In looking at Daniel's role in the stories, I bring along the account of Samudra, the monk who was responsible for the conversion of Aśoka (Strong 1983, 214-219).

⁶⁸ Of course, the narratives in Daniel are not supposed to reflect exactly the Buddhist understanding of the cycle of karma. What I am taking from Buddhist dream theories is that for every effect, there is a tangible cause, even if the effect is a dream. Such an understanding of cause and effect also resonates with the principle of *lex talionis* that is in operation in much of the Hebrew Bible.

⁶⁹ It is possible that this may not sit well with Buddhist dream theories. I propose that the open-ended nature of the tale could possibly prompt Buddhist interpreters to re-consider their own texts like that of Aśoka's dream. Is it necessarily limited to one instance in history or are there ramifications that they have not considered by restricting the text to its historical referents?

Samudra entered the king's mansion to beg for alms without knowing that entry would mean capital punishment. He was caught by the king's executioner whom he pleaded for a stay of execution for one week. During that period, Samudra finally understood the transience of life and gained enlightenment. So when the time came to be thrown into an iron cauldron of boiling water, human blood, marrow, urine, and excrement, the executioner found him to be sitting in a meditative position unharmed. This was brought to the attention of Aśoka who after witnessing this miracle was open to hear what Samudra had to say. Samudra taught Aśoka the Dharma and thus led him to become a Buddhist. It was then Samudra left him. Aśoka after gaining the Dharma decided to destroy the torture chamber and placed 'a guarantee of security [on] all beings' (Strong 1983, 219). Throughout his kingship, Aśoka would continue to encounter other monks such as Upagupta (Strong 1983, 238-256) and Pindola Bharadavaja (Strong 1983, 260-268). Like the soothsayers, the various monks in Aśoka's life tend not to dominate the *Aśokāvadāna*. They were never drafted into the palace, nor the gifts that Aśoka presented ever given to them directly. While it is not explicit in the *Aśokāvadāna*, it is safe to assume that these monks continue their life of ascetism and alms gathering.

The above sketch sheds some light on the character of Daniel as a Jewish dream interpreter. It is hard to see how Daniel's interaction with Nebuchadnezzar, even less so Belshazzar, led to the king *repenting* of his violent temper to kill all the sages over the failure to interpret his dream or his excessive materialism likely procured through unjust means. Furthermore, it is possible that the Buddhist monks like Samudra and Upagupta may find it unsettling that Daniel was lavished with material wealth and social status. This contradiction is deepened further in chapter 5 when Daniel tells Belshazzar to keep his wealth to himself, yet at the end of the story, he does not refuse those rewards. This runs against one of the central understandings of Buddhism as a practice of divesting oneself of material things so as to attain enlightenment. With regards to some reservations by biblical scholars about the king bowing to Daniel, they would not find it problematic as it is clear in the *Aśokāvadāna* that when the king bows before the monk, it is because the monk is recognised as a *representative* of Buddha (see Strong 1983, 76-83).

That said, what perhaps would be surprising is the portrayal of God as an active actor in the stories of Daniel which is in stark contrast to the relative absence of Buddha in the *Aśokāvadāna*. It is clear that Buddha's role is not to intervene in the affairs of Aśoka and his main influence is through the Dharma. Even the messengers on behalf of Buddha

tend to be effaced in the account. Thus what is foregrounded is a rather involved God who hears the prayers of his people and grants them grace in time of need and even actively punishes tyrant kings through the curse of lycanthropy and even through death for the sins they have committed.

In sum, reading the three stories of Daniel through the text of Aśoka's dreams suggests that the kings' dreams are indicative of a wider cycle of karma at work where it is their demerits that have led to such bad omens. Nebuchadnezzar is likely guilty of unbridled brutality and unconscionable indulgence in possibly ill-gotten wealth and Belshazzar, of his mishandling of other religion's artefacts and his wanton lifestyle at the expense of the exiles. Unlike Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar becomes enlightened through his own suffering and receives salvation that could possibly be genuine and true. Though Daniel stands out as the religious hero, what is troubling is his seemingly uncritical acceptance of wealth and status. What perhaps is the deepest contrast is between a Jewish God who intervenes actively in history and an impersonal universe controlled by the karmic forces of cause and effect.

Dreams of Empires?

The third locus of enunciation in this reading from Singapore is the film, *Singapore Dreaming* (Woo and Goh 2006). This choice to a certain extent would seem counter-intuitive to those who prefer to look at the text from a form critical perspective. This means that an analogous text from the Singapore context should follow the structuralist inclinations of these scholars and take the form of divine communication or fairy tale like production about the future of Singapore. As argued earlier, the place of dreams in the ancient worlds should be seen in its participation in shaping the social imagination within networks of ideological power. In other words, the chief concern is not so much finding another quasi-fantasy story of falling statues, uprooted trees or spectral hands to be read alongside the biblical text as it is about finding a resonance along the topos of desire. To a large extent, I am also responding to Smith-Christopher's (1996, 57-58) suggestion that these texts should be read alongside the dreams of the disenfranchised. Similarly, as I show later, this film performs the function of highlighting how the text can be read in terms of the themes of ideology and dreams.

In producing this film, scriptwriter, producer and director, Yen Yen Woo and Colin Goh began as social scientists doing fieldwork. They collected and compiled vignettes from a large cross section of Singaporean society, focusing particularly on the 'widely

accepted touchstones of personal success in Singapore, the so-called five C's: cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership' (Woo 2008, 322). The aim was to stitch different vignettes together into a form of collective memory avoiding as much as possible over-editing the stories or being judgmental of them. The main concern was to bring across 'lived realities' to both academics and the wider Singaporean audience (Woo 2008). The product was a 105-minute feature film that centred on the Loh Family: Pa⁷⁰ (Poh Huat), Ma (Siew Luan), their children, Mei and Seng and their respective partners, C.K. and Irene. According to Woo (2008), the story follows the traditional three-act structure⁷¹ which begins on a light-hearted note of the Loh family waiting eagerly for their son, Seng to return from North America who supposedly completed his degree in a university there. As the story unfolds, one fortune seemed to lead to another as Pa played the lottery and won the top prize of two million dollars. Pa was ecstatic over his win. He promised his son a car and would later on agree to sponsor his business venture. In keeping with the stereotype of a Chinese patriarch, he treated the family to a sumptuous Chinese dinner to celebrate his victory where he announced that he was going to buy a condominium. Later he applied for a country club membership. The story takes a turn in the second act when Pa suddenly suffered a heart attack while waiting his turn to be interviewed for the country club membership and passed away. The funeral process began to unearth many underlying tensions. Now Ma had full rights over the money that Pa won. Since he did not draft another will, she had the power to decide how the money should be distributed. The funeral was then marred by sibling rivalry over money. This was further complicated by Irene learning that Seng lied about completing his university education, instead squandering away the money she had given him for his studies. As the story draws to a close in the third act when a few months had passed since the funeral, we find the two siblings, Mei and Seng in the lawyer's office. The lawyer announced to them that their mother had decided to pay off the debt accrued because of Seng's overseas education which left \$800,000 to be distributed. Mei inherited \$300,000 while Seng only received \$1,000. The story ended with Ma going back to Muar which was her hometown in Malaysia.

The story is a complex multi-layered narrative that implicates other motifs in society such as the foreign domestic helper whom Mei employed, workplace dynamics,

⁷⁰ 'Pa' and 'Ma' are more affectionate terms of addressing the characters which Woo (2008) also used in her journal article about her film. Thus I have chosen to henceforth refer to these characters using these terms.

⁷¹ According to Robert McKee (1998), the traditional conception of a film begins in the first act by getting the audience to be familiar with the main characters and the supporting cast. Once that is established, it moves into the second act where there is mounting conflict leading to a crisis point. This then concludes in the third act when the crisis is resolved.

issues of status and recognition in society and so on. For the purposes of this reading, I have decided to look at the stories of Daniel through the eyes of the mother or Ma. This is mainly because she is the only non-English speaking character in the whole story who has given up her own aspirations in order to become a housewife so as to support her husband and children in a rapidly modernising Singapore as it moves from a Chinese-educated system to an English one. She is profoundly left behind on many fronts, namely in terms of language, gender, technology and cultural change. Thus, as the following discussion seeks to show, she represents one of the most productive perspectives of the 'other' that is important to the proposed Singaporean reading. I begin by detailing the scenes that contribute to my construction of how she views the world before applying her standpoints to the text.

We find the character of Ma most fleshed out when she responds to her son's girlfriend's shock that all the money she put into Seng's education was all for naught because he did not even graduate. This was the moment when she was most transparent as a character as she shared intimately about her own 'Singapore Dream':

年轻的时(候),我在麻婆读书.在学校,我真爱唱歌.我也参(加)唱歌比赛,也得到头前名.后来,我来Sin-ga-pore工厂找工.也就那时我跟阿发遇见,我还记得,他那时梳一个猫王的currypok头,每天我放工,他都来接我,带我到处玩耍,去跳舞,我们去Punggol去捉(螃)蟹,去玩沙.皇家山脚,五棵树下,吸冰球,吃Satay.他说他会照顾我到我死人,就是因为这句话,我才嫁给他.也不知道接怎,自从结婚后,我每早上起来,只知道擦桌子,抹地,买菜,做吃,补凉茶.我不认识唱歌.真的!连一句也没唱过!简直像我死人从来就不会唱歌这样.

'When I was young, I studied in Muar. In school, I loved to sing. I even joined the singing competition and won the first prize. Later, I came to Singapore to work in a factory. It was then I met Ah Huat (Pa). I can still remember then he still had Elvis' hairstyle. Everyday after work, he would come and fetch me, bring me around, go dancing. We would go to Punggol to catch crabs and play with sand. It was at the foot of Fort Canning Hill, under the trees, while we were eating ice balls and satay, he said he would take care of me until I die. It is because of what he said, I decided to marry him. Before I knew it, ever since we were married, every morning I would get up and all I know is to wipe the table, mop the floor, cook food and make cooling tea. I never sang again. Really! Not even one verse! It is as though I never knew how to sing in the first place' (my translation).

Together with the above sketch of the movie, this soliloquy highlights several of the dominant tropes in the movie that I use as my main heuristic lens in reading the texts at hand. To summarise, it reveals the place of women in the family in terms of the self-sacrifice made during a time of rapid industrialisation in Singapore. They readily give up their own interests and dreams for the greater good in hope that their children would have a better life than them. More than that, it reveals the desire they have for their families

to be whole and be at peace. This is summed up at the conclusion of the movie when Ma asks Irene, 'Have I been a good mother?' And Irene replies, 'You have done your best'.

Dreams of the Disenfranchised

So what kind of insights can we glean reading the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and the vision of his son, Belshazzar through the eyes of Ma? Since she is someone who treasures relationships, I look at the different characters portrayed in the various narratives. I begin with the kings. Nebuchadnezzar to Ma would be more of an authority figure, someone who represents the government. The kind of luxury that both Nebuchadnezzar (especially in Daniel 4) and Belshazzar enjoy is not far from what the present high officials in her country are also like. Even if she hopes that the leadership would take care of the citizens better, she still fears if they receive dreams like that of Nebuchadnezzar or the vision of Belshazzar. She would instinctively ask what would happen to her family if the current status quo is upset. This is especially in chapter 4 where we see the fulfilment of the dream entailed the robbing of the king's mind. What is going to happen to Babylon with the king insane? Moreover, all she ever knew is the circumstances she has lived with all her life especially now as someone who has been living in diaspora for a long time and hardly steps out of her own home. At the same time, for Belshazzar, she would feel a special bond. Like her son, Belshazzar is able to enjoy life better because of his father's achievements. The wanton revelry that Ma reads would remind her of her own son squandering away the family money. Yet she is in a dilemma just as she is with her son when she inherits her husband's wealth. She agrees that Belshazzar needs to be punished for taking for granted what he has been given through his father but to kill him would be taking it a step too far. Hence those are the two main connections I submit she would make when she reads about Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Thus, does this suggest that Ma's reluctance is a result of her unwillingness to face up to the realities of the issues of capitalist transformation of Singapore and chooses instead to ignore them?⁷² It seems to me that it is both a yes and a no. Granted that she is not well-educated and spends most of her time at home, yet through her family, she does appreciate the problems of capitalist wealth even though she may not fully comprehend the exact inner workings. Yet at the same time, she does have the right as a mother to care about what would happen to her children should the government be subject to any

⁷² Slavoj Žižek (2008, 50) has argued that one key problematic with Marxist thought is the failure to see that it is the fantasy of what reality ought to be that sustains current power structures rather than a 'partial gaze overlooking the totality of social relations'.

radical change. What is perhaps limiting the transformation of this view of the world is not so much the lack of knowledge, but rather she is unable to envision another reality. It took the death of her husband and the disappointment with her two children to move her to venture into the unknown by rediscovering life anew in Muar. Thus, I submit when she reads the visions of falling statues, felled trees and disembodied hands, why she still fears the change in status quo is that she hardly senses an alternative other than an intangible call to trust that this Jewish God can make all things new which seems inevitably accompanied by pandemonium and chaos.

Coming to the chief protagonist Daniel, he is likely the son she wished she had. He was successful in his career in the court and enjoyed the favour of the government. Not only that, he had not forgotten his gods. At one point in the film, Ma tried to get her son to thank the gods only to meet with reluctant compliance from him. Daniel's prayer would make her heartened if her son, too, remembered his gods and the indispensable role they played in securing success for him. More importantly, Daniel was safe with the gods looking after him as the gods brought him through difficult trial after trial, such as meeting the next to impossible task of interpreting the king's dream without any prior knowledge of it.

However the character that would strike her the most I believe is the queen in Daniel 5.⁷³ She notices the queen was outside the banquet hall when the king and his lords were discussing furiously about what to do with the sudden appearance of writing on the wall. This reminds her of how when her husband would talk with the children about careers and politics, she is always left out.⁷⁴ She wonders if the queen was left out because being a woman, she did not know better. Yet despite knowing that her husband did not value her as someone who could contribute to what was perceived as important discussions, the queen courageously offered advice to solve the woes of her husband. Ma recognises the courage of the queen and admires the confidence she possessed to be able to speak authoritatively on matters pertaining to the state. The queen had carried herself well and earned the attentive ear of her husband. At the same time, Ma would feel the silence of the text. All the queen had left was the quiet satisfaction that her husband had done what she suggested. After the queen had played her role to introduce Daniel, she

⁷³ There are discussions within biblical scholarship as to whether this is truly his queen (see Collins 1993, 248). In this reading, I take it as it is written in the NRSV.

⁷⁴ There are many instances in the movie where the isolation of Ma is emphasised. To name a few, her husband bought her ear-rings with his lottery money without realising that she never had ear-holes for them. To deepen the irony, when she finally had the ear-holes done, the husband still did not notice that she was wearing the ear-rings he gave her. Her daughter, too, was insensitive to her. She told her mother that the reason why she hired a Filipina maid is because she could speak English and she wanted her unborn child to learn English and not Chinese dialect from her.

was no longer remembered. Belshazzar was too caught up in his own worries to even appreciate what his wife had done for him. Ma knows this silence all too well because her husband never notices her. He seems to only belittle her. She feels the estrangement of the queen as the text glosses over her and writes her out.

With regards to the troubling dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, they seem distant to her. She cannot appreciate eschatology because all she wants is peace for herself and her family. She does not cherish any dream such as the downfall and rising of empires. What she dreams of is to do the one thing she enjoys, and that is to sing. It is the familial relations that matter to her and families are kept together in peace and harmony. Thus she searches the dreams. She finds no peace. It is about empires being destroyed and superseded. The stone that is cut from the mountain seems to crush the other empires like they crush one another. She wonders if such violence would bring about the peace that she yearns for, or is it yet another imperial empire replacing the old one? In Daniel 4, the tree that is meant to protect and feed its inhabitants is cut down and the animals are scattered. Ma wonders if the Most High is someone she should herself worship because in his punishment of the king, the animals and birds are also implicated. She likely numbers herself as one of those animals and birds. Such lofty ideas of truth and justice only matter to her if it brings about peace. All she is asking is just some space to sing. Would the fight for truth and justice give her the very desire of her heart or would it be another form of imperialism?

In sum, the stories of Daniel are met with a significant degree of ambivalence through the eyes of Ma. On one hand, she yearns for truth and justice to prevail and that God 'bring[s] low those who walk in pride' (Dan 4:37). This is especially so in the light of her own difficult decision to be hard-hearted towards her recalcitrant son. Moreover she yearns for the 'Holy Watcher' to watch over the people and do what he must to ensure the just rule of the king (Dan 4:13, 23). On the other hand, she wonders if the price for punishing the king is worth the scattering of the animals and birds and the suffering that comes with a deposed sovereign and his government. After all, she yearns for peace for her and her family. And perhaps just as importantly, a small space to do what she enjoys most – sing. The character she likely relates the most is neither the king nor Daniel but the queen. She recognises in her the willingness to stand behind her husband and risk being vilified for stepping out of place so that she can help her husband in his time of trouble. At the same time, she readily feels her pain of being neglected as a woman as the text uses

her only as a mere instrument to introduce Daniel without Belshazzar thanking or even thinking of her when Daniel succeeded in his task just as she had recommended. Through the eyes of Ma, perhaps these dream texts are nothing more than a hyper-masculine battle for power and dominance between the empire and the writers of the text.

In the final section of this reading, I bring together these very diverse readings from three different loci of enunciation in conversation on the possible meanings of these dream narratives.

In Conversation: Biblical Scholars, Buddhist Interpreters and Ma

In this final conversation, the locus of enunciation that comes from the *Asokāvadāna* will be referred to as 'Buddhist interpreters'. As for the film *Singapore Dreaming*, 'Ma' remains the main referencing point.

Perceiving Empire

There are at least two distinct perceptions of empire by biblical scholars. The more common position is held by those who belong to a more traditional form critical persuasion. They tend to read the portrayal of empire in Daniel 2 and 4 as overall positive while heavily caveating its rule is still contingent on divine prerogative. Such readings discursively reinforce earlier conceptions of praxis as quietist piety. The other more radical, less commonly held position is to think of empire as a socio-political evil that needs to be removed as quickly as humanly possible. Smith-Christopher (1996) stands out in this regard as he argues that there is no schizophrenia between the first and second halves of the book of Daniel. It is resistance literature through and through. He picks up subtle hints about the corruption of the king and emphasises the defiance in the replies of Daniel to play up his agency and participation in destabilising imperial power. While their conclusions differ, it is possible to see how the logic of purity is applied similarly. Empire and God's kingdom are autonomous and to a great extent, mutually exclusive entities. God and his people are similarly separate from empire and can choose to act autonomously for or against it.

Empire, in the eyes of Buddhist interpreters, is more ambivalent. On one hand, they acknowledge through the law of karmic consequences that the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and vision of Belshazzar are the result of earlier sins in their lives to which the narratives reveal several clues such as possible exploitation of the masses and disrespect for religious artefacts. On the other hand, even predictive dreams are not considered completely

determinative in Buddhist dream traditions. There is always a possibility to rehabilitate the king which is supported by Nebuchadnezzar regaining sanity and his kingdom at the end of Daniel 4. This ambivalence deepens with Ma's standpoint as she is on one hand, constantly driven by fear of anarchy and prefers status quo even if it works against her because she desires peace and harmony. On the other hand, she does hope for something more especially since she can relate to the indulgent excesses of the government who has used money to take away what is dear and important to her. Much of the ambivalence comes, in my view, from a perception that moves away from the individual as purely separate from the communal, which in this case is empire.

Thus the foregoing discussion opens up more questions than leads us to answers about what the text is really saying. Empire through the lens of western biblical scholarship is kept at arm's length, if not for the fact it is irredeemably evil, at the very least because of its latent potential for it. This is enabled, as I argued, by dichotomising between empire and Daniel. Reading through the stories of Aśoka and Ma, Asian ideas tend to think of the individual as part of empire through stressing that there needs to be harmony in the system. Thus, disruption and discontinuity are not the only variables one considers in formulating one's actions towards authoritarian rule. Moreover, Buddhist interpreters emphasise that since the story is not foreclosed in Daniel 2, one should always be open to reversals and deeper significances, particularly looking closer at the relationships of cause and effect in society. Furthermore, there is need to take into consideration the needs of the disenfranchised and their abilities to accommodate change. It would seem more often than not, they prefer gradual change as much as it is humanly possible. I discuss this later more intimately in a Singaporean frame but for now, taking into consideration an Asian frame of understanding change and the sentiments of the everyday people, there is need to be cautious of texts which seem to demand a confrontational form of negotiation for change. This does not necessarily completely exclude overt protest or challenging of the state but it does call into question the desires of the rest of society especially those who share in the kind of marginalisation such as Ma.

In Search of Dreams

On the ideological plane, are these dreams the dreams of the disenfranchised as Smith-Christopher (1996) has argued? This is most probably the position of historical critics who prefer a sociological reading of the text. Buddhist interpreters would disagree on the basis that the cycle of karma is evidently working itself out in the dreams. The

dreams belong primarily to the dreamer. As for Ma, it is hard to imagine how the dreams of falling empires would be congruent with her cherished hope to sing again. Yet does it mean that the dreams hold no value for Asian readers? I submit that the eschatological vision in the falling statue of mixed materials, the cutting down of the cosmic tree and the dismembered hand may not be the dreams of the disenfranchised but they can provoke and interrogate their desires – both the tendency towards privileging harmony above everything else for Buddhist interpreters (and Confucianists as well!) and the fear of disorder disrupting the peace of the home on the part of people like Ma. Yet at the same time, I think there is still a need to read against the grain of the text because as pointed out in the first chapter, social change has to take into consideration the positions of all parties involved.

Incidentally, reflection on the issue of identity need not be restricted to the question of dreams. Our exploration has opened up a closer look at the person of Daniel. Biblical scholars are almost unanimous about Daniel being the exemplary Jew, albeit emphasising different aspects of it. One thing they all applaud is his courage to stand before tyrants and speak truth to power. While Buddhist interpreters are not against protagonists standing up for truth and justice, they emphasise forgiveness especially in the manner that Kunāla was pleading with his father to spare his step-mother. Thus they may question the text on the place of forgiveness as Daniel seems no more than a person speaking from a moral high-ground rather than someone who empathises. Ma prefers to look at the queen in Daniel 5 who has been overshadowed by the towering figure of Daniel in the texts. Her quiet support and perseverance is what strikes her. In fact, she feels distant from Daniel and would most likely find it hard to see in him a role model for herself.

Having explored the varying treatments of empire in the dream texts of Daniel through different epistemic lens and pondered on the extent these dreams truly reflect subaltern desire, I bring in the previous two conversations in the following section to plot out how reading Daniel through a multicentric biblical hermeneutic engage with the key problematics raised in chapter 2.

Daniel: From the Ancient Near East to Singapore

In this final section of this chapter, I draw together the three conversations around the stories of Daniel in closer approximation to the Christian located in the Singaporean context. I beg the readers' indulgence as I have left these conversations relatively open-ended. This is because as I hope to show later, the conversations are intimately inter-related as they supplement and also dispute one another. Thus, I engage more closely with these conversations through the two (un)problematics identified in chapter 2, secularism and capitalism so as to determine the discursive effects this reading would have on Christian communities in terms of praxis. This leads me to the second concern of identity formation beyond identity politics. Beginning with my own subject position as outlined in chapter 1 as part of the Christian community in Singapore, I evaluate the discursive effects of the different perspectives on the text while being mindful of my own folding together with privilege in terms of the different social identities I have access to. By mapping out various coordinates that are derived through the three conversations, I propose how this reading can help in pluralising my own consciousness.

(Un)Problematic Secularism: Revisiting the Question of Religion and Politics

One key feature that comes up repeatedly in the three conversations is how (un)problematic secularism articulates with (un)problematic capitalism. To put it more sharply, what role do the stories of Daniel play in negotiating rich and powerful empires when the actions of the protagonists seem to the modern mind to be explicitly religious? In other words, what has religion to do with empire?

With notable exceptions like that of Fewell (1991; 2003, 117-132) who reads the stories as both a solution and problematic for political transformation, the majority of biblical scholars would think of the stories of Daniel according to what Newsom (2014, 15-18) has identified as accommodationist or resistance literature. This naturally gives rise to two fairly distinct modes of praxis – quietist practice of religion that upholds personal convictions of morality and rights and a socially engaged protest against authoritarian empires. For the court conflict tales of Daniel 1, 3 and 6, the protagonists are either viewed as upholding their own personal piety against the incursions of the empire or resisting politically its power over the people. As for the court contest tales of Daniel 2, 4 and 5, empire is either seen to be an entity to be tolerated until the final eschaton or intentionally subverted through dreams and visions that expose its hubris.

It seems to me that the differentiation of religion and politics are upheld by both sides who contest the meaning of the stories in relation to praxis.⁷⁵ As I highlighted constantly in the three conversations, there seems to be a logic of purity in operation. Allow me to sum up according to Newsom's (2014) analysis. Those who are of an accommodationist persuasion think of the stories as delineating domains for human action in terms of the private and public. Barton (2003) writes this most succinctly and clearly when he argues that one of the central theological ethics of Daniel is that God has already pre-determined the fate of human kingdoms. All that is left for his people to do is *not* 'stand on the wrong side when the end comes' (Barton 2003, 159). What constitutes being on the 'wrong side' is the failure to obey the law as encapsulated in the refusal to bow down to idols and perseverance in prayer even at the cost of one's life. Thus in this synthesis, the Jew is to be separate from the human empires just as God himself is apart from human creation. Even though the public arena is still under God's actions, the place of praxis for his people remains within the private realm of food practices, prayer and worship. In fact, the assurance that God acts is used as a justification for his people to stand by and faithfully wait.

At this point, it is worth raising that this separation between the religious and the political is ironically intensified in fellow Singaporean biblical scholar, Gordon Wong's (2006) reading. Much of his reading follows closely scholars of the accommodationist persuasion. So in the interest of space, I focus here on how he has applied these exegetical products. In thinking about how to read Daniel pastorally by which he means, 'for life in today's world', it seems curious that the points of application seldom depart from the middle class nuclear family (Wong 2006, xiv). This includes anxieties about relationships at home, work and school, personal problems like health, cultivating spiritual disciplines like prayer and not forgetting the personal right to worship and propagate one's faith (see for example Wong 2006, 18-19, 44, 60, 72, 74, 89). There is concern for holding the king accountable for social injustices but it concluded on the exhortation to be 'kind to the oppressed' and 'show mercy to the poor' (Wong 2006, 57). While there is no explicit engagement with secularist ideologies in his commentary, it appears to me that it follows closely that the religious belongs to the private and the political to the public.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ To be clear, I do not think in any way that the various commentators I have surveyed think of religion and politics as dichotomous spheres. The concern here is not about abstracting from the stories some overarching framework of religion and politics but determining the meaning of the stories themselves insofar it informs praxis in material reality.

⁷⁶ That said, I do not wish to downplay the need for virtue which is a central thesis of Wong's (2006, 26-28, 34-36) reading – upholding one's religious piety, guarding against pride and also against compromising one's character on account of fear of human authority.

This clear distinction between religion and politics could also be argued for those who think of Daniel as resistance literature. Even though it is disputed if indeed the texts endorse a wait-and-see attitude, there is also little problematising of the binary depiction of the Jews and empire. Instead, religion is now pitted against empire. It is no longer about defilement by Gentile food, but about political allegiance. It is not about refusing to bow before religious idols but opposing monuments of economic exploitation. It is not about persevering in prayer but practicing civil disobedience. These are not just terrifying dreams and visions directly from God but the embodiment of subaltern desires for the downfall of kings. While it opposes secularist logic that prohibits the participation of religion in the public square, the confrontation of the secular with the sacred *requires* that religion and empire are separate. Daniel and his three friends remain apart from empire as they challenge it as unequivocally evil. In fact, it appears that they are above it all like their God.

Conversely, while the different ways that Daniel and his three friends are folded together with empire are sometimes addressed, they are often overlooked in the final analysis when it comes down to negotiating what the text means. More pertinently, there is deeper secularist logic at play which I identified earlier with the help of Lugones (1994) as the logic of purity. To reiterate, Lugones (1994) argues that the logic of purity requires neat categorisation of the world into right and wrong so as to achieve control over social structures and order the social imagination. It could be argued that (un)problematic secularism follows such a logic – where the secular and sacred are divided and given, as it were, its rightful place in society. Similarly, I find that there is a desire within western biblical scholarship to see the Jewish protagonists as separate from empire, be it religious or political. This desire, under the cover of traditional historical criticism or emancipatory reading strategies, then projects Daniel and his three friends as devout religious Jews as radically separate from the evil, corrupt empire. So if this were true, then while western scholarship challenges the division between the secular and sacred held up by (un)problematic secularism, it appears to (subconsciously?) reinscribe its logic at the level of response. Religion opposes empire. It is just the question of how.

This division between religion and politics receives a different treatment through the Asian standpoints I have selected. What is shared among the three of them is that there is no real dichotomy between religion and politics. Confucius thought of harmony and order as comprehensive and all encompassing. The satyagrahi see religious acts of

fasting and prayer as weapons of those disempowered by empire. Aśoka was both a Buddhist and a king. Abstinence from potentially ritually impure foods, refusal to bow to idols and persistence in petitioning one's gods despite its ban have *both* religious and political connotations. That being said, there is a high degree of resonance with politically conservative camps of biblical scholarship as there is a general aversion to any form of violence, especially to the king. Those in authority need to be persuaded and reprimanded if need be, but never usurped in any violent way. Confucius saw the royal courts as the place where social transformation ought to be orchestrated. Gandhi in his manifesto argued for the transformation of the oppressor through the practice of *satyagraha*. Buddhist interpreters while keeping their distance from kingship maintained that the king can be changed through Dharma. So while my various Asian interlocutors may be apprehensive as to how the text deposes and vilifies the other royal courtiers, they warm to the idea that Daniel and his three friends work their level best to change the hearts and minds of the king. In other words, they would think of them as using 'religion' to reform 'politics'.

What emerges here is a tendency that undergirds Asian perspectives – that is the respect of human order of authority. While in the western imagination, the king is seen unitarily as the representation of the empire, be it for better or for worse, in the Asian mind, there is differentiation between the position the king occupies and the person of the king. Though Asian perspectives used here agree with the need to resist corrupt kings and officials, it maintains a respect for the position of the king because it situates the position of leadership in a different plane from that of the person and in some way, confers a transcendental quality to it. In other words, hierarchy in society is not purely a man-made construct but there is also an element of divine ordering which as it were, calls for respect and honour. What the text means in terms of resistance when read through Asian eyes, needs to take into consideration honour and respect for the position of kingship and the order it represents. The issue, however, is that in sacralising a particular social order, it more often than not preserves the status quo. So by approving of Daniel and his three friends for seemingly working within the system albeit with certain reservations, the discursive effect of such readings on the Singaporean context is to tolerate the current status quo of (un)problematic secularism because honour and respect for state authority has to come first.

When it comes to various Singaporean standpoints, the issue of (un)problematic secularism appear to resist resolution as their readings of biblical texts are often directed

elsewhere. For Malay Muslims, since Malayness is intertwined with their religion, their religion is already politicised when the state continually reiterates the Malay problem. Thus it would not be instinctive to think of abstinence from royal food and wine either as religious or political but rather both *and* more. Political prisoners, in the face of powerful state machinery, need all the resources that they can muster including religion. The disobedience of the three Jews and Daniel's act of prayer would immediately resonate as both religious and political. To Ma, it is no longer a question of whether one's religion should be private or public but the bigger questions of the necessity of change be it by God's direct action or through his people. What is emerging here I shall tentatively follow Lugones (1994) by calling it the logic of impurity where the categorisation of reality by logicians of purity is being problematised. I return to this later when I engage the conversations with the issue of (un)problematic capitalism.

Thus as we move from the centre which in this case I see as the synergy of western secularist ideals with Singaporean state agendas that separate state from religion to the different peripheries, it becomes apparent that the question of (un)problematic secularism is no longer *whether* one should alienate one's religion when entering public square but *how* one's religion can be renegotiated into a space that is hostile to it. Thinking of biblical texts as accommodationist or resistance literature while breaching the barrier set up by secularist ideologies, reinstalls the division of religion and politics in a different way. Religion displaces politics either by divine action in history or instituting a new sacralised order of justice. Asian loci of enunciation would read Daniel not as a spiritualised or social revolutionary, but rather as a conscientious official trying to reform the sovereign out of an innate inclination to respect authority. Religion now reforms politics. The Singaporean Others I have enjoined would find the categories of religion and politics unsettling. Their lived experiences tell them that these are categories bequeathed on them by dominant powers who abide by the logic of purity to control the domain of knowledge production. They read Daniel and his three friends as operating between spaces of marginality and spaces of intelligibility. One has little choice in engaging religion with politics when you are negotiating from a place of relative powerlessness. I do not however wish to fully resolve this matter here as it would require further work at mining the perspectives especially of those engaged in the borders of religion and power. Rather in moving outside the domain of secularism which could be traced to western experiences such as that of the Enlightenment, perhaps an(-)Other starting point in thinking about biblical texts in this regard is to destabilise categorical distinctions of empire and religion. Alternatively, one

could be more attentive to how powerlessness is negotiated. This then brings us to the issue of (un)problematic capitalism.

(Un)Problematic Capitalism: Logic of Purity to Logic of Impurity

In this section, I move from conceptions of the relations between religion and state to tangible actions in material reality. Those who view Daniel as accommodationist would follow their historical critical inclinations to seek out the historical basis of elements in the text that they deem most determinative in other historical manuscripts. As pointed out earlier, the selection is curiously religious in the narrow, modern sense of the word such as religious practices, potentially idolatrous icons and imageries that portray the theological battle between God and empire. This is often bolstered by finding common features in similar stories along the lines of 'The Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister' which then consolidates Daniel as the Jewish hero that embodies these religious and theological elements. If what I surmise here were correct, then their readings of Daniel often lead us into thinking of praxis in terms of personal morality and individual human rights especially the freedom to practice one's religion.

In a similar manner, I find that Wong's (2006) reading manifests this form of praxis in a concrete way in the Singaporean context. He foregrounds both Daniel's faithfulness to his Jewish identity that is similar to the assertions of those who support that the stories are accommodationist. His particular contribution, as I see it, is to show how it does not in any way seem contradictory to his monumental success in the royal courts of empire. In fact his reading comes uncannily close to what Weber (1930, 120) highlighted to be the 'specifically bourgeoisie economic ethic' which espouses that wealth itself is not questionable so long as it is accumulated and used within the confines of the law and personal morality. I highlighted how he positively understood Daniel 1 as a model of job excellence under the first case study. This theme of success as a product of one's conscientious hard work is also prominent in his readings of Daniel 3 and 6 (see for example, Wong 2006, 36, 83-85). The only times that material success becomes questionable is when it compromises one's commitment to worship, prayer and publicly demonstrating one's faith (see for example, Wong 2006, 37, 85-86).

On the other hand, those who think of Daniel as resistance literature, would often focus on the sociological and political backdrop to the tales by tying various elements to exploitation of the peripheries by empire. This would include investigating the means by which food or gold is obtained and casting the actions of Daniel and the three Jews as

antagonistic to their masters because of the suffering and harm they have inflicted on the Jewish people. Dreams of overthrowing human empires are thought of as the dreams of disenfranchised violently imposed on the king. Kind words for the sovereign are seen as nothing more than the obligatory part of court etiquette. Thus such readings encourage a conscientisation to the excesses of empire and its authoritarian rule and spur readers to search for more sustainable and lasting social transformation.

Therefore, it would stand to reason when engaging biblical texts with the issue of neoliberalism in Singapore, one would be inclined towards readings that investigate the social, political and cultural milieu of the texts. Yet it is not entirely clear what kind of political change had Daniel and his three friends brought about. Other than the case of Belshazzar which only gave way to another tyrannical empire, the empires that the protagonists operated in remained largely intact. As Fewell (1991) has duly noted, they are the ones who profited unambiguously from the battle between human kings and the Jewish God. Even the Jewish God continues to be entangled with the rule of the sovereign. The greater irony of course is that their success is contingent on the existence of empire. The shadow over these stories become more ominous if Davies (2001) were correct in arguing that these were the writings of elite scribes in the employment of the empire.

Such difficulties in determining the positive political effects of the text beyond sheer bravado find resonance with Asian perspectives. Confucius would be baffled by the extent of compromises that Daniel and his three friends endured in order to continue serving the king. As Chia (2006b) has noted, many Asian cultures would find the erasure of one's family name deeply offensive. The satyagrahi who thinks of Gandhi as a model of devout asceticism, would find the excessive wealth and power that Daniel and the three Jews accrued disconcerting. This is all the more so for Buddhist interpreters who compare revered monks such as Samudra who have devoted their lives to simplicity and pursuit of the Dharma with Daniel. Their greatest departure from western biblical scholarship is that in the face of empire that is resistant to one's attempts to change it, the response is neither revolution nor tolerance but withdrawal. Confucius exemplified this in his life. The base doctrine of the satyagrahi and Buddhist interpreters is non-aggression.

In sum, the text offers two potential options by way of western biblical scholarship: accommodate or resist. If we allow resisting the text by Asian perspectives as part of determining praxis, then there is the additional possibility of withdrawal.

It is here I bring along the perspectives from the margins of the Singaporean context. As I argue earlier, Malays in revealing the secrecy of Daniel and his three friends point to a different logic of resistance which I allude to as the logic of impurity. This holds in tension resisting and being oppressed at the same time. In this sense, Malays receive assurance that God understands the struggles of minorities under imperial rule as he grants Daniel success *in spite of* the compromises made. Yet with regards to the monumental success of Daniel, Malays bring a sensitivity that is different from Asian apprehensions about the lure of wealth. Rather it is the impossibility of achieving any significant success without changing the terms that have been determined by structures of domination. Thus the logic of impurity here complicates the idea of accommodation. In the eyes of the dominant, it would seem that Daniel and his three friends were playing by the rules, knowing that one has to survive this in order to change the rules. Changing the rules may require the role of the trickster. Resisting subjects are cognisant of the liminal space between what the dominant order has determined to be under and against its rule and use it as a productive place of creatively devising change. In this case, creativity also demands deception. Above all, it realises that departing from an oppressive, authoritarian regime is a gradual process. Such a sentiment is arguably shared by Ma who values stability because it grants peace for those whom she loves. She withdraws into her own home and makes the best she can of the difficult situation she is in. However, it is important that her desires are not overlooked. Her withdrawal should not be taken as tacit endorsement of eschatological battles between kingdoms, both divine and human. Such battles do not seem to respect her desire to sing. Rather it should grant pause in our debates over whether the stories are instructing us to withdraw from, accommodate or resist the rule of empire. In the eyes of the political prisoners who flesh out the dehumanising, profane place of the fiery furnace and the lion's den, resistance is stripped of its romanticised notions of future hopes of utopia and replaced with the pain and suffering of condemnation, betrayal and self-debasement. Withdraw. Accommodate. Resist. These options no longer seem as straightforward when praxis meets material realities of marginalised peoples.

This raises a different question about texts and praxis. What conditions of possibility exist that enable biblical scholars and religious specialists to articulate what seems to be commonly accepted modes of praxis? This question became increasingly clear to me as I read the stories of political prisoners. How is it possible for me to live through this period of Singapore in the 1980s with so little consciousness of this? Thus, I claim no innocence in asking this question as highlighted in the first chapter, I am folded together

with the privilege of elites. The social identities I inhabit – bourgeoisie, male, Chinese, professionally trained, able bodied – enable me the luxury to neatly dichotomise politics and religion, social justice and morality, personal and public, sacred and profane. Such binaries form the foundation of the options before me: withdraw, accommodate and resist. If I were to confer epistemic advantage to marginalised standpoints and practise epistemic virtues as laid out in chapter 1, then I am obliged to rethink these categories – to muddy the logic of purity that undergirds withdrawal, accommodation and resistance. In other words, I need to reread the biblical texts with as it were, a logic of *impurity*. This means keeping an eye out for potential deception, granting ambivalence to success and resist the finality of texts to foreclose what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’. What this means in the Singapore context is that it calls for attention to particularities of the context calling for action together with creative and innovative playing around with the options of withdrawal, accommodation and resistance. It is to celebrate the polyvocality of texts that enable such a plurality of options while complicating the boundaries around each option all at the same time. Yet I do not wish to forget that the biblical text is as Carroll (1991) puts it, a wolf in the sheepfold. I am of course gesturing towards the third (un)problematic of the text itself. This issue implicates more than this reading of Daniel and thus I take up this discussion in the conclusion as I reconsider again the nature of the Bible and how that should shape our reading of it. For now I turn to the concluding issue of identity formation through this short reading of Daniel.

Who is the Christian?

As I have argued in the first chapter, identity formation through reading the Bible has to enable readers to move out of identity politics that control their interpreting communities through pluralisation of their consciousness. Here, I need to qualify that the following is not meant to be representative of all readers of the Bible, nor do I claim it is for Singaporean Christians in general. Rather using myself as a discursively formed identity, this is a reflexive exercise to demonstrate the potential discursive effects of such a reading on Singaporean Christian communities.

As raised in chapter 4, our social identities interact with our interpretive horizons when we read texts. Furthermore, much of our social identities are formed in context between spaces of intelligibility and spaces of marginality. Lugones (1994) argues that the logic of purity produces a subject who imagines self to be abstract and unified, capable of being free of the threat of fragmentation posed by the entrapments of one’s class,

race and gender. This allows the subject to take on what she calls, the 'privileged vantage point' (Lugones 1994, 466). Operating within the confines of the modern/colonial world system, such a subject's actions receive validation precisely because he or she is comfortable operating within spaces of intelligibility. However, this freedom is often (mis)understood as emanating out of an inner essence of true being rather than enabled through a hierarchical social order. In other words, the lover of purity institutes a world order that is a transcendent one which is patently accessible to those who are 'pure'.

So if spaces of intelligibility favour the logician of purity, the rhetorical force of a reading would depend on how such spaces are structured. Thus in the context of Singapore, readings that do not upset the desires for knowledge produced in an objectivist manner while avoiding as much as possible engaging the issues of (un)problematic capitalism and secularism, would undoubtedly receive greater discursive legitimation. In this regard, traditional historical critical readings of the text would naturally cement further social identities mainly anchored to private morality and conscientious religious practices. Identities become intensely religious and personal. This is to the point that it almost eclipses the fact that constructions of identities are contingent on vilifying the Other as the interloper who seeks nothing more than our destruction like conniving royal courtiers or self-serving kings. Therefore what issues from this fountainhead of defilement – food, statues, edicts, dreams – converges to show us what a true Jew is, and by extrapolation, who the true Christian is. By contrast according to this logic, the texts are meant to tell us that those who do not abide by are therefore false.

In this regard, reading the stories as resistance literature would unhinge middle class privilege and raise awareness of the need to help the Other. Nonetheless, the Other is still constructed as different from me, as someone whose role is to receive my benevolence. The dangerous Other remains but the helpless Other emerges. Thus I am enabled like my white saviour, as Spivak (1988) puts it, to rescue the brown woman from the brown man. However, as highlighted in the posture of reading *for* in chapter 4, polemically couching Daniel and the three Jews as acting out of a binary understanding of empire as evil again polarises readers to take sides. Are you like Daniel and the three Jews? Do you resist empire? I return once again to the logic of purity. The true Jew stands against human empires, as should a Christian who inherits the Hebrew Bible as part of his or her Christianity.

Such univocal notions of identity almost devoid of internal dilemmas begin to

unravel under the light of Asian perspectives to the text.⁷⁷ This is apparent from the agreements and *disagreements* with the text. One constantly highlighted reservation is that of success. Confucius, Gandhi and to a significant extent, Aśoka, are in many ways uncomfortable with excesses of wealth and status which stem from an almost uncritical embrace of success. Furthermore, it is unsurprising that Gandhi's apprehensiveness about the exclusivism of the Jewish religion in the text where a further burden is added to the peoples of the land to be careful of offending the Jewish God as well as the questionable morality behind massacring innocent families with the conspirators seem to do little to problematise this separation. In order not to compromise the conception of who Daniel is, especially since he needs to fulfil the hero subtype in so-called folkloric tales, it would be wise to overlook them. But I cannot afford to ignore such Asian consciousness when reading Daniel, especially if I hope to read it in context. That said, this consciousness that is generally hesitant of violence of any kind to current structures of power resonates with socially conservative readings of the West.

Singaporean perspectives contribute to reading texts beyond agreeing and disagreeing with how the central figure of Daniel shapes my identity. I focus instead on actions unsaid and characters overlooked. What does hiding one's food practices say about Daniel? How about his moments of deference to the king? Did Daniel or the three Jews struggle at all? What about non-Jewish peoples? Of course I cannot forget Ma's preference for the character of the queen. In doing so, I am compelled to think of my identity in the light of the silences and gaps in the text together with the excluded in my own society.

Being folded together with the elite ranks of society, I have been educated in all three publics to readily accept conceptions of the world that makes right and wrong unambiguously clear. My desire is for purity of identity. I am conditioned to think of multiple as always fragmented. In reality, the Singapore context celebrates that I am male, financially independent, ethnically Chinese but English educated and perhaps to a lesser extent, Protestant Christian. I have to read texts in a manner that does not challenge the givenness of these identities and the privilege I enjoy through them. It is here I am reminded that socially conservative readings of the stories of Daniel are not necessarily off the mark. The surface rhetoric works towards consolidating these identities and

⁷⁷ Of course I am not saying that Asian perspectives on identity are inherently dialectical. In fact, if we were to read the authoritative texts relating to Confucius, Gandhi or Aśoka on their own, it is entirely possible that they would be like how biblical scholars have been led to see identity as coherent and unitary hidden in the pages of history and tradition.

keeping them 'pure'. However I must not forget it is *also* enabled by epistemic arrogance where my cognitive dominance allows me to ignore the Other in my context, epistemic laziness where my curiosity is constantly superseded by my desperate need to maintain my privileged position and epistemic close-mindedness where despite these realities that constantly surround me in Singapore, I *can* choose to close both eyes to them. Reading with the Other, be it Asian or Singaporean, destabilises the surface rhetoric, transforms closure into ambivalence and exposes the underlying order that legitimises me but delegitimises the Other. Then the self is not seen as static but in constant negotiation. The notion of the univocal and unified self is woefully insufficient to deal with the needs of minorities trying to survive in a majority environment that is constantly suspicious of them. Running the risk of fragmentation, it pluralises itself in hope of becoming what I mentioned in chapter 1 borrowing Medina (2012) a 'kaleidoscopic consciousness'. For resisting subjects, they do not have the luxury of choice but begin in the place between spaces of intelligibility and of marginality. In this regard, the Jew in Wong's (2006) reading is too assured in an identity that reflects closely the North American Protestant Fundamentalist ideal I raised in chapter 2. I need to resist that if the Other is to be included. Thus reading the stories of Daniel through holding the unbearable tension of compromise and resistance together creates the possibility of moving away from narrow identity politics to a more inclusive and plural identity. More importantly, it calls attention to my privilege and seeks its undoing.

Thus, in terms of using text to chart one's Christian identity in Singapore, the co-ordinates that western biblical scholarship supply are by no means rejected but embraced within a wider set of co-ordinates supplied from Asian and Singaporean perspectives. In this reading alone, we have generated several of those co-ordinates – personal piety, resistance to materialism especially in its political and economic dimensions, and suspicion towards social notions of success and subaltern desires. At this point, it is important to state that much as the text is able to plot various co-ordinates of identity, the individual remains autonomous in forming his or her identity. Perhaps the only constant is that it is a continuously negotiated process.

By way of concluding this chapter, I wish to give as it were, the final word to the Singaporean Other. I pointed out that one way to avoid discursive imperialism is to think of the discursive effects that this reading would have on those whom I deem as Other to myself. With respect to Malay minorities in Singapore, my reading has compelled me to

recognise that I likely embody the role of Ashpenaz in relation to them as the displaced Jews.⁷⁸ Realising that I may be standing on the 'wrong side' of the narrative would conscientise me to re-evaluate Christian-Muslim relations in Singapore and think about how bourgeoisie Chinese communities have been constructing norms more reflective of our own cultural preferences and values. In doing so, I hope I have returned some degree of agency to Malay communities if they were to think of themselves as Daniel and his three friends. At the same time, I tried to avoid over-conflating the Malays with Daniel and his three friends through raising the former's apprehensions about the latter's success.

Thinking of the three Jews in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lions' den in the light of experiences of political prisoners, I tried to resist the potentially triumphalistic overtones of the stories from eclipsing their trials in the detention cells. It may have the unintended consequence of making it difficult for them to claim those stories for themselves which could be a form of catharsis. In this regard, I concede that I did not want to compromise the text's Otherness by allowing the alternative of Daniel and the three Jews to be fully embodied by political prisoners. That said, I do acknowledge that their lived experiences approximate the protagonists a lot more than mine and thus have much to teach me about the biblical text.

By placing Ma as directly dissenting what Smith-Christopher (1996) claims to be the dreams of disenfranchised, I raise the issue that scholarship tends to think of the marginalised as a relatively homogenous group especially when it comes to issues of emancipation. By problematising these visions of the future, the lament is that this reading, by virtue of the texts I have chosen, offers little by way of an alternative. The counter-effect is that now Ma is left with no other concrete ideal of what that future would be, especially since I do not wish to deny that she still searches for hope. This limitation of the reading perhaps can only seek better resolution when structures governing the reading of the Bible would allow these important Others and many more to read together with me as empowered individuals respected for the standpoints they can offer to the text.

Overall, it is not my intention to over-romanticise spaces of marginality, nor contribute to their permanence just because they have resources that I, as an academic, can extract from them. I do not deny that it is very difficult to avoid some degree of extraction. Whether I have been successful in bringing about more positive discursive effects on these Others through reading texts that likely embody some of their aspirations,

⁷⁸ This echoes Smith-Christopher's (2002) own reflections on whether it would be better for white Canadians to think of themselves as Ashpenaz.

struggles and experiences, I have to ultimately leave it to my readers to decide, especially those whom I have consulted here. The best I can do is to be as transparent as I can about my awareness of the effects that this reading would have on them.

The question I have suspended thus far in this chapter is that of the nature of text, or what I have identified as the (un)problematic text. This would be the centre of our inquiry in the concluding chapter as I reflect on how this reading engages with the theory of reading I am proposing.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: From Reading to Theory

In this concluding chapter, I use the (un)problematic text as a bridge to discuss the object of desire, the Bible that both those in the academy and church lay claim to. This would then lead me to a more reflective note where I bring back the reader and the context to conclude what it means to read the Bible in the Singaporean context and the possible futures such an option holds.

Defamiliarising the Familiar

The (un)problematic Bible I raised in chapter 2 is about how the Bible does not trouble the intentions of those who see themselves as its guardians. Such a role includes a darker side of weaponising the Bible against their enemies such as deploying the Bible against other religions when it entered many Asian contexts. Very often the domestication of the text happens at a subconscious level because apparent debates among people of similar factions give the appearance that the text is still being robustly treated. This is of course not helped along as I showed in chapter 3 by patriarchal inclinations of scholars and pastors alike and the tendencies of scholarship to defer to objectivist ideology that discourages any linking between privilege and knowledge produced. If I were to refine what I raised in chapter 1 about the Bible being a dangerous text, it could be better said that the Bible has become a domesticated guard dog – it is only a danger to one's perceived opponents but never to oneself. This guard dog belongs to different social enclaves, especially churches with fundamentalist inclinations and academic guilds with strong reading *without/for* tendencies.

This is further shown in my analysis of form critical studies of Daniel. The most commonly used classification is that of the 'Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister'. No doubt historical critics are willing to concede that the text is inconsistent on grounds of dating, authorship and even historical linguistics. In fact, it could be said that traditional biblical scholarship makes a living out of ensuring these problems remain central. Yet they are reluctant to compromise on the fact that Daniel and his three friends are far from ideal heroes. This is possibly because the genre classification of court contest and court conflict tales or subgenre labels such as the one stated above inevitably valorise

Daniel as *the* role model for a Jew under foreign rule. It is curious that although it has not escaped the attention of critics that the stories project a two-dimensional view of reality, it is often overlooked by calling the tales 'folkloric'. Why the notion that folklore makes such a binary understanding of good and evil acceptable is often left unsaid. In the end, as I showed in the final section of the last chapter, this ends up consolidating social conservatism without any recourse to alternatives.

That being said, this could be similarly argued for those who see the stories of Daniel as 'resistance literature'. Inquiries into the social histories that form the background of these texts do not necessarily insure that the discursive effect of one's reading is not another idealisation of the text. This is a problem I have already highlighted in chapter 3 with liberation hermeneutics. In a similar vein, I find that scholars who are seemingly left leaning would not find trouble portraying Daniel and his three friends as the almost perfect nonviolent resisters. Their continued participation in empire, unquestionable rise in power and vast accumulation of wealth, lack of empathy for innocent parties and inconsistent displays of resistance to empire such as hiding one's religious food practices do not seem to problematise their conception that the stories of Daniel are unequivocally compelling their readers to make their stand before hegemonic empires. This is not to mention that time and again, with the possible exception of Belshazzar, the empire is left intact at the conclusion of every story with the protagonists profiting from that.

The issue here, anticipating Barton (2007), would seem to be the failure to divest one's reading of any prior commitments. As I have argued throughout this thesis, there could be better explanations for this. Coming from the perspective of contextualism, I claim that the central issue here is what I alluded to in chapter 1 as cognitive dominance that very often lands up in the precipitous path down to epistemic vices of arrogance, laziness and close-mindedness. This is obscured by recourse to objectivism which I argued in chapter 3 that often produces a monotypic lens to read the Bible (see chapter 4). Such issues of epistemic dominance are not far off in the West but very much alive in its distinct forms in Singapore as I have mapped out in chapter 2. Our readings are unavoidably conditioned by our lived experiences in our socio-historical locations as subjects who by virtue of becoming biblical scholars would very often occupy privileged social identities. The (un)problematic text then becomes a tool or even a weapon to defend our agendas of scientific inquiry and programmes of political change. In other words, idealisation is not the same as saying the Bible is perfect in every way but rather for a certain ideology, it fits

perfectly.

If the concern I identified as the monotopic lens that constructs the (un)problematic text is of crucial significance, then what is needed is a pluritopic lens. This is facilitated by bringing along dialogue partners that occupy different social identities from those who read the texts primarily from western contexts. These interlocutors do not share in similar interests as biblical scholars brought up in environments saturated with Christian traditions and histories. It is precisely because of this that they help me see the Bible in a different light. In other words, it appears to me that the two-step process I highlighted through Barton (2007) in chapter 3 could be more realistically said that the task of the biblical critic is to elucidate the rhetorical commands of the text and what is left for the rest of the readers to do is to ponder how to apply them. If that were true, the configuration of colonial powers deciding on the law of the colonies and appointing the colonised to implement them would be uncannily reflected in this endeavour. Pushing this assumption a little further, then, nonwestern biblical scholars trained in the West like myself would become the deputized 'indigenous' elites tasked with promulgating the master's knowledge, thus entrenching the modern/colonial world system. What seems all the more disturbing is how many of the readings in the West resemble globalised discourses of human rights such as the freedom of religion and values of liberal democracy. I am not saying that these do not in themselves harbour merit and most certainly have currency in many nonwestern contexts. What I am raising here is if the Bible blatantly supports them and more crucially if the Bible is now used as a weapon to enforce them. In that case, the Bible runs the danger of now becoming a *neo*-coloniser's text.

Granting epistemic advantage to the Other unsettles these conceptions of text. I have argued how Asian Others I have chosen destabilise the surface rhetoric of the texts claimed by western biblical scholars by problematising the boundaries between religion and politics and call into question the ethical nature underlying its call to witness before empire. The Singaporean Others I have mobilised try to shift the focus to parts of the text that may not seem at first blush the most important. The vilified Other like the Malays draw attention to the struggle of hiddenness. The dangerous Other like political prisoners fill in the gaps of being detained in the fiery furnace or the lion's den. The helpless Other like Ma wonders how the queen feels as the king meets God in a hypermasculinist battle for power. I suggest this has two important effects on the understanding of biblical texts. First, it transforms the text into what Ukpong (2002) had argued to be a 'site of struggle'

that resists foreclosure on the meaning of the text and keeps it open to future struggles of peoples in the face of hegemonic forces. This thus goes beyond traditional historical critical considerations when determining 'valid' texts to read with. By seeing the biblical text as a site of struggle, it invites those with similar experiences of marginality and oppression to make a contribution. Recognising such experiences as both cognitive *and* affective in nature helps determine the type of cultural resources I should use. As argued in chapter 4, social identities and lived experiences especially that of the subaltern should not be uncritically assumed to contaminate a reading process but ought to be examined for its potential to yield useful standpoints to be brought to the text. At risk of belabouring the point, this is the result of epistemic advantage which is differentiated from privilege (see chapter 1).

What I wish to venture further here is to consider if the authors of the biblical texts such as Daniel were *like* Malay Muslims in Singapore in terms of discursive production. They were minorities in a potentially totalitarian empire. Therefore, the text could arguably be written in between spaces of intelligibility marked by the language and literature of the dominant culture, be it Babylonian, Persian or Hellenistic and spaces of marginality which is their own Jewish histories, traditions and values. If that were true, then there would be limits to what could be written if these minority communities wanted to continue to survive. Such limits, I propose, are not necessarily only what the empire would allow one to get away with writing but also that of the social imagination. Having lived in a certain system for so long, it is hard to envision a different way of thinking and seeing the world. Such struggles do not belong only to the Malay minorities, although it is more acutely felt because of the context of Singapore. Similarly, I struggle against the white male imaginary that has locked reading the Bible into certain acceptable modes and find it hard to imagine what other ways the Bible can interact with my own context in Singapore. Let us say that if there is any measure of possibility in what has been said, then I would submit that the stories were inevitably incomplete, thus constantly seeking future generations to complete the task that it originally started. If I were to push this further, then it not only legitimates the role of future readers to participate in meaning production, but also *requires* it. In other words, the Bible is not so much a gold mine of data where prospectors dig to see whose historical constructs would strike gold. Rather it is a third space of negotiation or as it were, a site of struggle.

Here I invoke again the notions of 'danger', 'scandal' and 'uncanny' which

I raise in chapter 1. Struggle, as the accounts of political prisoners show, entails risks that sometimes exceed our own expectations. Reading the Bible with these Others in my context enlivens the dangerous quality of biblical texts – hiddenness and deception, vengeance upon enemies, elision over suffering, visions both liberating and threatening and not forgetting, prospering (in) empire. The biblical text is not that separate from the world of its production, nor even the characters it portrays. Like us, the text is folded together with its material realities. As such, it supports and undermines resistance or more precisely resistance in the manner that logicians of purity would have it. Hence I would like to propose that it offers up a space especially for those who share in similar lived experiences to come and dialogue.

This leads me to the second point. As readers of any text, we read the Bible with other ‘texts’, both explicit and implicit. Taking biblical scholarship as an example, biblical scholars read explicitly the biblical text not only with other texts in the same corpus, but also implicitly with the writings of their fellow academics. In fact, this is institutionalised in many ways such as how the Bible is taught, what counts as ‘proper’ knowledge about the Bible and systems of referencing. As I have tried to show, it is important to remember that there are also other implicit ‘texts’ which includes lived experiences in the West that values Marxist conceptions of liberation, liberal democracy and freedom of religion. This is not to say that this is wrong (which would mean I subscribe to objectivist logic), but more that it is inevitable. What is needed is not further denial of subjectivity but more robust reflexivity and transparency. In this regard, I, too, am educated to ‘naturally’ read the biblical texts explicitly with western biblical scholarship and implicitly in line with evangelical traditions of USA that have strong elective affinity with the capitalist and secularist logic of Singapore. Thus, given that it is unavoidable to read the Bible with other texts, the question then should be what texts have been excluded. I have proposed a way of determining this through contextual reading in a multicentric frame in chapter 4. In short, I need to deliberately draw in texts from the spaces of marginality in the context I have chosen to read the Bible. The implication, therefore is that I, as a Singaporean reader training as a biblical scholar, would need to include as part of the so-called ‘canon’ the stories of those who are tethering at the edges of the space of intelligibility so as to read the Bible with them as well.

In sum, reproblematising the (un)problematic text with the help of the Other in Asian and Singaporean contexts helps me to reconceive the nature of text in two different

ways. First, the text enters into a particular context in solidarity with the struggles of marginalised people by bringing in their struggles rather than a perfectly crafted solution to their problems. It is, in other words, also a site of struggle. Second, the text upon entering into any single context needs to recognise other pre-existing texts and intentionally incorporate into its collection those that occupy the spaces of marginality. It is in this sense an 'open' canon.

Biblical Hermeneutics and Contextualism

Taking the cue that re-problematism of the Bible is a necessary part of bringing this ancient religious text into a particular contemporary context of Singapore, I draw out in this section the salient points with regards to Bible and contextualism. I reflect first on my entanglements in the modern/colonial world system before considering my positionality within epistemic structures of Singapore itself. Furthermore, the reading of the stories of Daniel has led me to think of the text as gesturing beyond itself. In a similar vein, I wish to see this thesis as also pointing beyond itself to other horizons where I consider possible futures that such an endeavour would create.

In thinking of myself as a subject within the modern/colonial world system, I view my privilege as being part of the dominant Chinese majority as analogous to whiteness in the West. Since I am not discriminated against in terms of gender, race or class in the particular context of Singapore, my cognitive dominance would lead me to think of myself as a transcendent reader. In reality, it is more because I am not marginalised that makes it easier for me to leave questions of relevance posterior (which usually ends up almost non-existent) to my inquiry into the Bible. Mainstream scholarship in biblical studies, especially those of traditional historical criticism but more generally those who continue to subscribe to an effacement of the reader as necessary both explicitly and implicitly to the reading process, would sit comfortably with me because I have been indoctrinated into what I argued in chapter 3 to be the ideology of objectivism. In this regard, much of emancipatory scholarship on the Bible may also fall prey to transcendentalising their readings of the text. More importantly, it is how reproducing such methodologies in contexts outside the West without critical adaptation at the epistemological level that would inevitably reinforce the modern/colonial world system. This is not to say that there is no merit in western scholarship, nor do I claim the questions raised are unimportant to a nonwestern context. But as Schüssler Fiorenza (1988) has highlighted, it is to decentre western dominant scholarship so as to democratise the discursive space of biblical

interpretation. Particular to Asian contexts (and possibly African and Latin American as well), as Chen (2010) has argued, we cannot ignore that western modernity which includes biblical scholarship as one of its products, has become an integral part of who we are. In other words, the West is part of the formation of what we know as Singapore. A contextual reading of the Bible would require us to provincialise western loci of enunciation within the Singaporean context so as to engage with it rather than to reject it in a nativist and/or nationalist like fashion.

Much as it is needed to think of global structures of knowledge production that a particular context cannot help but partake in, it has to be held in tension with intra-contextual relationships between spaces of intelligibility and spaces of marginality. Here I augment Chen's inter-referencing with the help of Medina's epistemic friction to argue that the standpoints needed to read the biblical text in any context requires a careful examination of how dominant discursive formations have institutionalised ignorance. Of course, the voices that have fallen victim to epistemologies of ignorance are an immense diversity and thus call for a more systematic sorting. My proposal begins with the particular subject location of the reader who is myself and works through identifying the possibly hegemonic norms that converge in a single context in the area of biblical hermeneutics. The negotiation is not just with problems within a context but also how context shapes and informs the way we read the Bible. It is here I use my position in between the publics of the academy, church and society as the primary heuristic lens to understand this. The aim here is to pluralise the consciousness of the reader and incorporate standpoints from spaces of marginality. This is a pragmatic process of identifying possible marginalised subjects because of prevailing epistemic norms and gradually incorporating their insights. Reading the stories of Daniel with these significant Others in the context of Singapore and Asia have shown that such a process not only raises questions about biblical texts that are not intuitively asked by privileged readers, but also demonstrates the diversity of interests in a single context. Even with three standpoints each from Singapore and Asia, it is hard to generalise the Other in any systematic fashion. Therefore, I can only claim that the theory of reading I proposed helps insofar that it undermines the privilege of specialist readers and resensitises us to the blindspots that manifest primarily because of the social identities we inhabit. I have only begun to learn to learn from below (Spivak 2003, 100).

Given that I am folded together with the West, I need to be careful that the

discussions within the metropolitan centre neither exhausts all the options of praxis that one can elucidate from the text nor fully determine the boundaries of the discussion on identity. Such debates include differences of opinion between scholars within the *critical-scientific-modern* paradigm such as traditional historical critics and those within *emancipatory-radical democratic* paradigm like liberation and postcolonial readers. More particular to Daniel, praxis is often divided between those who think of the stories as accommodationist literature and those who view them as resistance literature. More pertinently, such discussions of text have much resonance with the politics of religion and state within a West that is undergoing secularisation. Thus it could be said that these questions do not come from a disembodied view of biblical texts but from particular local histories. If that were true, then reading in Singapore needs to be cognisant of this. I showed in the previous chapter in reading the stories of Daniel that the appropriation of the Other reveals this relationship through contrasting western with local struggles.

That said, I have refrained from committing to any systematising of the Other in Singapore. Whether such an endeavour would be ethically possible in the light of Spivak's question: 'can the subaltern speak?' is beyond this thesis and thus remains to be seen. I submit that it would require further readings of other biblical texts that both prioritise reading *from* lived experiences of marginalised Others *together with* an attempt to incorporate a robust reflexivity. This is in order to better understand how we who belong to the elite ranks of society ought to think of the subaltern in our reading strategies of the Bible. I cannot stress enough the importance of better theorisation of context and conscientious practice of reflexivity as anterior to any effort to conceptualise the Other for biblical interpretation.

With regards to Asian contributions to the reading strategy, they are demonstrated during the formulation stages and the actual reading itself. Singapore shares many experiences with different parts of Asia that do not significantly overlap with the West. The most obvious would be the experience of western colonisation as the colonised which was followed by the rise of authoritarian governments as part of decolonisation that was in full force in the 1960s. This is not forgetting that it was often accompanied by potentially nationalistic and nativist discourses like that of the Asian Values Discourse I reviewed in chapter 4. Following the call of Chen (2010) for inter-referencing which addresses the need to recover Asian identities and at the same time avoid the dangers of identity politics, I have chosen prominent Asian figures that still have lasting impact in

Asia today. In keeping with the diversity as a core characteristic of Asia, I have tried not to limit Asian-ness in my thesis as far as I could by interacting with some of the legacies of dominant world-religions in the region – Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism. To a limited degree, I have tried to place the wider Asian traditions in conversation with local cultural production. There is much more that can be explored which cannot be done in the interest of space. Even with this brief interaction, we find that expectations of ancient heroes differ, questions about religion and politics veer away from the assumption of their distinctiveness and separateness, and their understanding of dreams and visions do not cohere so much with western conceptions.¹ More pertinently they upset my initial conceptions of what the text means and contrast for me assumptions that have been nurtured in western ways of thinking. This is not to say that Asian perspectives are always radically different or for that matter superior to the West. For instance, I have highlighted several times how Asian intellectual traditions tend to acquiesce to status quo. They resonate with socially conservative quarters of the western academy but also differ in their preference for withdrawal rather than accommodation. Again we return to the notion of epistemic friction and how it serves to understand what the Bible means in a contemporary context. In short, reading the stories of Daniel, both in terms of inter-contextual and to borrow Lee's (1993; 2008; 2014) term, cross-textual interactions, has facilitated a richer discussion that has raised other questions that are relevant to Asian audiences for consideration.

In drawing closer to the Singaporean context, the main contribution of this thesis is to decentre dominant discursive formations of specialist readers like myself and to a certain extent, subvert them by calling into question the sociohistorical locations that have constructed them. The strategic move that is central to the entire process is performing reflexivity while being conscientised to the structures of knowledge production. This reading has also opened up opportunities for further exploration. In pushing past current global debates among international elites, Spivak (2003) proposes the planet. This represents a further advancement of her work on the subaltern where she argues that the humanities together with the social sciences have to endeavor towards a re-conception of the world that is in line with its alterity. In response, a Theological Colloquium held in Drew University in 2007 which was subsequently published into a volume, *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (2011) edited by Stephen

¹ To a certain extent, one is reminded that if UN boundaries are to be trusted, the Bible is itself an 'Asian' text that in some ways like Daniel in Babylon had to settle in the foreign lands of the West and make a home there. Perhaps, just maybe that is why western readings do not seem as intolerant of the concessions he has given to a foreign domination as my Asian interlocutors are pushing me to be.

Moore and Mayra Rivera, highlighted the need to move from postcolonial to planetarity in order to reconceive a new ethic of resistance to global capitalism. The impetus for this conference comes from the highly suggestive proposal of Spivak (2003, 72) for 'the planet to overwrite the globe' by which she means:

The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say 'the planet, on the other hand'. When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition.

Thus the conference represents an attempt to read texts in such a manner that falls in line with the visions of liberation but yet being vigilant that it does not lapse into another form of hegemonic discourse that Christianities in the past have mostly been prone to. In the light of this, how can a localised biblical hermeneutic that compulsorily enjoins the perspectives of its own subalterns participate in such planetarity? This inevitably implicates theology which although does not exclude, but nevertheless is still beyond biblical hermeneutics. However, in situating this thesis as a venture in biblical hermeneutics, I have largely constrained myself from being overly entwined with theological discussions so as not to distract myself from attending closely to the text. Having said that, this remains a potentiality that ought to be exploited and I dream of the day that fellow Singaporean Christians would participate in multiple readings and in so doing, build up to some form of contextual theology that engages closely with alterity. Furthermore, the method, as it stands, cannot be considered a vernacular hermeneutic. Further experimentation and exploration is still required to allow more direct and meaningful participation by nonspecialist readers.

Conclusion

I begin this thesis by outlining the concept of contextualism that enables me to locate the Singaporean reader in an inter-contextual network of the modern/colonial world system as well as in an intra-contextual position between spaces of intelligibility and marginality within a geopolitically defined space. Based on this understanding, I argue for the main goals of a Singaporean reading strategy to be transformative praxis and identity formation. I then survey the three publics of academy, church and society to identify three discursive norms that control reading the Bible in Singapore, namely (un)problematic Bible, (un)problematic secularism and (un)problematic capitalism. In order to better construct this biblical hermeneutic, I consult the work of biblical hermeneutics both in

the West and Asia with the help of paradigm criticism. The main considerations I find are the need to detect ideological distortion, engage with complexities of struggle against class, gender and racial discrimination and prioritising dialogue with Asian realities of 'many religions' and 'many poor'. In the light of the above, my proposal of a Singaporean way of reading is a multicentric dialogue that is undergirded by two frameworks. The first is a conscientisation framework which is a reflexive tool to check my posture towards nonspecialist readers in my context. This highlights the need within the Singaporean context to draw on standpoints which come from collectivities of epistemic agents that are outside the reading communities. The second is a conversation framework that helps me better understand what it means to use contexts that are geocolonially determined and elucidate standpoints from the Other. This reading strategy is then put to work on the stories of Daniel by first outlining the key questions through a comparative analysis of the ancient contexts of Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic empires with the modern day context of Singapore. The focus is on the Bible as a cultural product that mainly participates in ideological networks of power. This is followed by reading the text through an interaction of loci of enunciation drawn from the West, Asia and Singapore. I then engage the products of this reading exercise with the key (un)problematics identified. With regards to (un)problematic secularism, I find the need to re-evaluate the rigidity of the categories of religion and state which opens up the question of powerlessness and resistance. In dealing with (un)problematic capitalism, it would seem that there are three modes of praxis: withdraw, accommodate and resist but yet it is not possible to hold to the purity of each action when engaging with the material realities of social, economic and political injustices in Singapore. In re-thinking the (un)problematic text, I discover the need to shift the understanding of texts from rhetoric to sites of struggle and from a closed canon locked in history to an open canon that is hospitable to social texts of the marginalised. This leads me back to reevaluate the Bible and contextualism which I argue in the opening of the thesis. I find new vistas of exploration, chiefly the need for vernacularisation of the method and further transformative dialogues that would develop into a form of contextual theology that is planetary in outlook.

Finally, I return to the idea of 'home' in contextual biblical interpretation. What I have shown is that building a home through the Bible in Singapore is a complex endeavour. One of the key struggles is that we are constantly faced with the Other – those whom we perceive to dominate and assimilate us like the West or even the state of Singapore, those whom we regard as dangerous and in some ways inferior and those

whom we see as the recipients of our pity. There is a seemingly uncharacteristic passage in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967, 173, emphasis his) that is out of place with the overall tenor of the book that advocates the emancipation of black consciousness from the shackles of white colonialism and slavery:

On the field of battle, its four corners marked by the scores of Negroes hanged by their testicles, a monument is slowly being built that promises to be majestic.

And, at the top of this monument, I can already see a white man and a black man *hand in hand*.

The erection of this monument follows after the abolition of slavery in France where now the French Negro had become free. While Fanon is wary that black slavery continues in spite of constitutional changes, he also does not desire, as it were, a flipping on its head where now the Negroes are the new white colonial masters. It is my hope that my reading strategy reflects this radical vision of reconciliation by bringing together the once colonial masters with the postcolonial people, the elitist scholar with not only the everyday Christians, but also the subaltern (not necessarily Christians) of society. Ultimately it is about building a home that is inclusive, yet respectful of difference but more crucially seeks transformation of self and environment through reading the Bible with (in)significant Others. At bottom, it is recognising that familiarising the strange cannot do without defamiliarising the familiar. That said, I do not profess this is anything more than a meagre contribution and hopefully a beginning of more transformative dialogues to come. Hopefully at least in some small measure, I have shown both theoretically and through various reading exercises, that such engagements are potentially productive but more importantly relevant for informing ethical praxis both globally in the contemporary world and also locally in the particular context of Singapore. The role of the subaltern is indispensable to the task of hermeneutics especially one that espouses to be contextual in nature because to me, contextual work, be it theology, biblical studies or hermeneutics, is ultimately not only about being able to relate, understand and empathise with the context but also transforming for both the reader/scholar and the context that he or she is in.

As I bring this thesis to a close, I become more and more (painfully) aware that the ground on which I stand is shifting. It is, of course, not in the magnitude of tectonic disruptions that caused the Asian Tsunami in 2004 but more in the slow yet inexorable way that Pangaea shifted into the continents we know today. The development of a Singaporean hermeneutic is ineluctably drawn into these major shifts of global economies from Europe and America to China and India and the unseating and unravelling of

modernity paving the way for a time after it to slowly take shape. Yet at the same time, I do not wish to delude myself into thinking that the power of old colonialisms, entrenched western (Christian) traditions, the old adage of (scientific) knowledge is power and popular USA culture has become all bark but no bite. This is not least in biblical studies, which if Moore and Sherwood (2011) are to be believed, continue to resist any internal innovation that threatens the long-held (and largely socially constructed) traditions of history and philology. What I am trying to highlight here is the seemingly innocent word 'towards' in the title of the thesis that is common parlance on the part of academics to signify a form of intellectual honesty. This is, of course, not about maintaining appearances, at least not to me as I am convinced of the very tentativeness of this research project as part of an ongoing business of dabbling in the messiness of what is called 'religion' and 'identity', 'texts' and 'histories'. As we read the Bible, we need to practise a form of conscientious listening - attentive to the voice of the text and the voices of those slowly emerging out of the shadow of their subalternity and finding that strength to speak. Indeed, let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

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Appendix 1

The Postcolonial and the Decolonial

In a recent essay published by Gregory A. Banazak and Luis Reyes Ceja, *The Challenge and Promise of Decolonial Thought to Biblical Interpretation* (2008), they argue that a new turn in Latin American studies called decolonial thought which is an emerging paradigm seeking to challenge the current modern way of thinking holds significant potential in transforming biblical interpretation. According to them, decolonial thought ‘criticizes both the intellectual distortions of modernity and the concrete oppression brought by five hundred years of colonial domination’ (Banazak and Ceja 2008, 114). Therefore they propose three main contributions that decolonial thought can make, namely recovering a communal way of interpretation that brings together readers from both western and non-western contexts, relating empire in Scripture to the contemporary global situation and challenging the tendency to isolate biblical studies as a secular, academic discipline. The relevance this holds to the present thesis is that one of its foremost pioneers, Walter D. Mignolo has argued for the use of geo-political locations as a key ingredient in understanding epistemologies. The concern of this appendix is to clarify how decolonial relates to the postcolonial.

Mignolo (2011) points out the differing genealogies of both strands. Decolonial thought emphasises traditions of Fanon, Césaire, James W. H. James and others postcolonial studies owe more to French poststructuralism and neomarxist traditions especially in ideology such as Gramsci and Althusser. In terms of language medium, decolonial thought attempts to incorporate different linguistic traditions, albeit it seems to me more of the Spanish language more than any other language, while postcolonial studies have been mostly in colonial English. Furthermore, Banazek and Ceja (2008) points to differentiating coloniality and colonialism. Colonialism is taken to refer to the historical experience of domination that coincided with the colonial enterprise, typically traced to the period of 18th to 20th century CE. Coloniality on the other hand is an epistemic concept that finds its origins in the 15th century discovery of the ‘New World’ which dominates and controls subsequent modes of knowledge production through codifying differences between the civilised West and the underdeveloped Rest. Furthermore, they point out that colonialism is constitutive of coloniality but it does not mean that coloniality can be

reduced to colonialism.

Therefore, one key concern of decolonial thought is delinking from western epistemology which expresses itself in the rhetoric of modernity (first as conversion, now as development). The concern is seeing the phenomenon of colonialism and the consequences from below. As Mignolo and Tlostanova (2008) argue, postcolonial largely remains within the subject/object dichotomy that typifies research of much of the social sciences and humanities. Decolonial is concerned with what they call the corpopolitics and geopolitics of knowledge. It is constantly conscious of the limits of academic institutions and their methods and lean heavily towards engaging the market not only for data or information but also for standpoints and epistemologies. Therefore it is not difficult to see that postcolonial studies tend to privilege history, western colonialisms and deconstruction. Decolonial, on the other hand, is concerned with the present, how current systems of knowledge production are structured and recovery of subaltern epistemologies.

While both are concerned with emancipation, there is a tendency within postcolonial studies to map ethnicity onto Marxist theories of emancipation while decolonial maintains critical distance and unearths the whiteness of Marxist traditions (Mignolo 2011). Decolonial thought, on the other hand, emphasises that struggles for independence from (western) globalisation mandate the participation of local traditions and cultures as critical hermeneutical resources.

That being said, postcolonial and decolonial ultimately share common concerns: 'colonialism, colonial legacies and above all for decolonial thinkers, coloniality' (Mignolo 2011, xxvii). Decolonial desire welcomes the postcolonial and seeks its partnership in a pluriversal project of undoing what colonialism and modernity has done especially to subaltern knowledge systems. It is a reproduction of colonial desire to pit the two against each other and demand that they compete for superiority. There is an intentional disrespect for disciplinary territorialism since both are victims of such western constructions of knowledge.