Polyphony in the Biblical Text from a Postmodern Perspective

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Abstract:

"Polyphony in the biblical text from a postmodern perspective" analyzes the concept of "polyphony", specific to postmodernism. It speaks about encouraging the dialogue between different voices in the community. The author shows that polyphony is also present in the text of the *Old Testament*. The article mentions Walter Zimmerli who observes two contradictory positions regarding the establishment of the monarchy in *1 Samuel 8–12*. The paper also discusses the position of Walter Brueggemann, an important representative of *Old Testament* scholarship, whose concern was to show that dialogue is crucial for living in community, outlining the strengths and the weaknesses of his position. He agrees that different voices intervene in the dialogue, without considering the consequences of accepting some of them. But we have to be aware of the fact that some extreme voices may affect the other voices involved in the dialogue, producing confusion. The task of the interpreter, in this context, is to make a balanced interpretation. According to Ion Pânzaru interpretation is an art. It allows those who interpret the text to introduce an unlimited number of restrictions. Even though in postmodernism the so called "reality without quotation marks" is being questioned, we have to accept that this is a quest of the human being. It is stated that the interpretation of the sacred text in postmodernism, has the benefit of freeing the biblical message from the presuppositions of the hegemonic interpretation specific to the Rationalistic period. But along with the importance of the dialogue, there are other aspects of community life, decisive for our existence, such as: respecting the freedom of others and the values shared by the community.

Keywords: Polyphony, postmodernism, *Old Testament*, interpretation, Brueggemann, Ultimate Reality

Polyphony is a concept specific to musical art. It is defined as "a type of music based on the harmonic combination of several melodic lines (voices) within a musical work, without losing its individuality" (*DEX*, 2002).

The term, received new connotations in the postmodern period. It is used as a basic concept in the life of the community. Polyphony refers to the dialogue that is established between several voices in society, which

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demand to be listened and accepted. From the specific definition of musical art, we understand that a characteristic of polyphony is the coexistence of several voices in harmony.

Mihail Bakhtin helps us define the concept of polyphony from the postmodern perspective. He said that the truth needs a lot of voices in order to be articulated. It cannot be kept by only one mind, and cannot be spoken by only one mouth[1].

To an extent, we will agree with this perspective. Also, we must keep in mind that the world view embraced by a community, influences every area of human existence, including religion. This is also the case of postmodernism.

Arguments that support polyphony in the biblical text

Considering the above statements, we can talk about how the concept of polyphony is used with reference to the biblical text. An example of this is the biblical narrative concerning the establishment of the monarchy, from the latter part of the tenth century BC, in Israel.

Concerning the presence of several positions of Israel's society, towards the monarchy, W. Zimmerli referred to the section in 1 Samuel 8-12. There is a voice that supported the establishment of the monarchy, and another voice that opposed it.

He argues that "the two lights in which the monarchy appears in Israel demonstrate with particular clarity that this 'office' was not simply a natural outgrowth of genuine tendencies within Yahwism" (Zimmerly, 1984: 86).

The same perspective is supported by Rainer Albertz, who acknowledged the presence of pluralism in Israel's ancient religion. He speaks of an internal pluralism, which we discover by looking to the dissatisfaction of the characters or of the community described in the biblical text. "The internal religious pluralism is particularly clear in personal names and individual laments" (Albertz, 1994: 95).

Walter Brueggemann is considered a fervent supporter of polyphony in interpreting the sacred text. He is considered an outstanding representative of the *Old Testament* research at the end of the twentieth century. He argues that the Bible, also, includes more voices in its text.

Although he notes that even though there are presented more voices in the text, the *Old Testament* is not tolerant of the various voices trying to make themselves heard in the community. From his point of view, in

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[1] "Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by *a single mouth*". See "Bakhtin's Impact on Postmodern Sensibility", from https://literariness.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/bakhtins-impact-on-postmodern-sensibility/. Accessed on 01 nov. 2019.

the *Old Testament*, a single voice is favored and not polyphony. In the article "Bodied Faith and the Body Politic", Brueggemann speaks of the uniformity of the message of Scripture, as being caused by the existence of a hegemony of interpretation. "Only lately have we noticed that the single voice of the Bible was possible and credible, only because there was a hegemony of interpretation, a small, homogeneous community of interpreters who spoke from the same perspective and for the same vested interests" (Brueggemann, 1992: 67).

We will agree with Brueggemann that although the text presents a competition between several voices that have tried to enter the dialogue and impose themselves; in the end it had to win the voice that was recognized by the community, namely, the voice of Yahwism.

Factors that favored polyphony

Brueggemann states that in postmodernism we are witnessing a destabilization of hegemonic interpretation and an encouragement of a pluralistic interpretation. He presents several factors that have contributed to destabilization, which he considers to be epistemological and socio-political in nature. It reminds us of the close relationship between power and the process of knowledge. He mentions Karl Marx who believes that power and knowledge are intimately connected, in the sense that the ideas of the ruling class become the dominant ideas (Brueggemann, 1997: 707).

From his opinion, another factor that led to polyphony in interpreting the biblical text, is the destruction of the myth of Western male domination ("western males") (Brueggemann, 1997: 709). The general name of the term *postmodernism* presupposes an interruption of the general consensus about what we know and how we know what we know. Starting with this period no academic or ecclesiastical interpretive institution can impose a hegemonic way of interpretation.

Brueggemann argues that in the *Old Testament* there are many perspectives, which often are in conflict with each other. The testimonies in the canonical books "were often in profound dispute with one another, disagreeing from the ground up about the 'truth'... it is clear 'the final form of the text', in its canonizing process, did not feature a complete hegemonic victory for any interpretative trajectory" (Brueggemann, 1997: 710).

Speaking about Western Christianity in connection with the diversity of perspectives in interpreting the biblical text, Brueggemann states that with the death of Western Christianity and epistemological consensus, it is obvious that it is necessary to accept dialogue between different voices in the community, not only in the interpretation of the

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Old Testament, but also in other areas. "Other very different and very serious accounts of reality are alive in the world ... we may asses the shift from a hegemonic to a pluralistic environment" (Brueggemann, 1997: 712–713).

In his opinion, because the testimony of the *Old Testament* text is spoken and lived in the community of Israel, at the same time, Cartesian dualism, which believed that faith could be rationally analyzed, failed (Brueggemann, 1997: 715). Brueggemann defines in this case the term "reason" as having negative connotations – referring to the historical critical interpretation. On the other hand, we will agree that reason is necessary in interpretation. Brueggeamnn anticipates that the interpretation of the sacred text, in its concern to satisfy its polyphonic character, will need to consider the following: "the cruciality of speech as the mode of Yahweh's actuality", "the disputatious quality of truth", and "the lived, bodied form of testimonial communities" (Brueggemann, 1997: 716).

Evaluation of the voices in the biblical text

Regarding the importance we must attach to polyphony – to the different voices that intervene in the biblical text, Brueggemann argues that it is necessary to promote dialogue. He calls in support of his proposal, Mark Colleridge's article "Life in the Crypt or Why Bother with Biblical Studies" (1994: 139–151) where we read that any totalitarian meta-narrative, including the *Bible*, has long been removed from the contemporary world. But now the researchers are turning to the *Bible* again in order to seek a meta-narrative, different from the totalitarian one. From his point of view, the interpreter's concern should be directed towards highlighting the dialogue between the different perspectives present in the text (Brueggemann, 1997: 88).

The Bible supports a common meta-narrative, but one that includes a diversity of competing voices that connect with each other through dialogue. "God's story is both single and several. It also insists on a narrative which at times is most disjoined and the connectedness of which is perceived only by way of struggle" (Colleridge, 1994: 139–151, 148).

This feature makes interpretation of the *Old Testament* difficult, but at the same time necessary. Theologians must endeavor to make the polyphonic character of the text accessible. This approach is uncomfortable for both: historical and fundamentalist representatives.

Those who interpret the text have the responsibility to respect its polyphonic character, taking into account both the primary audience to whom the text was initially addressed, but also to subsequent audiences.

Interpretation must be "centered enough for its first listerning community ... (but also) open enough to be compelling for its second listerning community, which may be drawn to its truthfulness but is fearful of any authoritarian closure or reductionism" (Brueggemann, 1997: 89).

The interpreter is warned of the danger of dogmatism and reductionism in interpretation. But Brueggemann's concern not to go to an extreme dogmatism, led him to the opposite extreme. Although he argues that the authenticity must be sought, in practice, he accepts that different voices intervene in the dialogue without being interested in the message that these voices convey, from the point of view of its validity. He does not consider the consequences of accepting the voices that want to impose their point of view. We need to encourage dialogue in the light of this observation.

Speaking of interpretation of the *Old Testament*, Brueggemann acknowledges that it is not an easy concern to undertake a fresh attempt at Old Testament Theology (Brueggemann, 1997: 20).

We will argue that the interpreter must consider the participation of several voices in the text, if they are present in the community. But Bruegemann proposes unlimited tolerance for voicing in the text. It is necessary to consider the existence of false reports in the text, which we should listen to with a dose of suspicion. That is why the selection process is required in accepting the proposals made by the voices in the text. From Brueggemann's perspective, voices that have different points of view should be allowed to go on the same path. But if certain extreme voices affect the other voices in the dialogue, confusion and disorder may occur. In the context of polyphony it is necessary to maintain harmony in the community.

From his point of view, the reader should ignore questions like this: "Is my variant acceptable to others?", "Is the position of the other, k relative to the majority justified?" Such an interpretation proposes to go along the same path, disinterested in the fate of their peers, and without evaluating the consequences of this dialogue without any restrictions. For Brueggemann, the participants in the dialogue must be happy and satisfied with their choice, and they do not need to pose moral or aesthetic problems.

Types of texts and their interpretation

To interpret correctly a text, we must take into account that there are several types of texts. The interpretation will take into account the category to which the text belongs. Speaking about the polyphonic character of a text, Ion Pânzaru says that because interpretation is an art, it allows those who interpret the text to introduce an unlimited number

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of restrictions. For example, the legal literature is interested in reducing voices until a certain consensus is reached, which we call "*law*" – normative text. The law says what the judge asserts. It is true that in reality, even when this consensus is reached, there is the eternal possibility "of pragmatic relativism" (Pânzaru, 1999: 19) which can challenge the decisions made by the judge on a particular case. But from a legal point of view, it is not useful to carry out an unlimited investigation of certain cases because they would no longer be solved. The judge finds a variant of the reality he is analyzing, which falls within a certain law of the penal code – *legal text*. The situation analyzed by the judge complies with one of the laws from the penal code.

But there are also other types of texts. Compared to the legal literature, the interpretation of art is made from a different perspective, namely, narrow dogmatism will be avoided. The interpreter will express a certain skepticism about the voices trying to impose their point of view. Pânzaru states that there is a tendency for those who communicate, to impose their own perspective on reality, forming from their conception *a creed*, which they consider generally valid. In this case we have to carefully analyze any situation.

But we cannot generalize an endless situation. Pânzaru is aware of the danger that can occur in the case of unlimited generalizations. Accepting all voices regarding the interpretation of a text can lead to chaos. That is why the interpreter has the responsibility to find that harmonization that gives meaning to a text (Pânzaru, 1999: 19).

The relationship between text and reality

With the abandonment of the hegemonic method of interpreting the sacred text, specific to the rationalist period, the specialists argue that it is necessary to have a reserved attitude towards defining reality. Regarding the meaning of the word "reality", David Tracy proposed that it always appear in quotation marks. In his opinion, the search for an absolute reality has its pitfalls. "The dream of positivism was to discover a reality without quotation marks: a realm of pure data and facts" (Tracy, 1987: 47). Even though we have to recognize the subjective dimension of every human research, we have to agree that the search for a reality without quotation marks is one of the main objectives for the human being.

From his point of view, the definition of the word "religion" must also be revised. Tracy argued that "the belief that ultimately all religions are finally one is implausible ... There are many ways to be religious. No single definition of what religion is can master that variety. Perhaps

even the word religion itself, with its Western overtones, should be abandoned in favor of an expression like 'ways to Ultimate Reality'" (Tracy, 1987: 92). The biblical text is selective concerning the way diferent religions present the same path to Ultimate Reality. The assumption that all religions are viable ways to Ultimate Reality is put under question.

About this ultimate reality speaks Richard B. Hays, in his book: *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, (Hays, 2016) in which he shows that the main events from the life of Jesus: the birth, death and his ressurection, stand at the hearth of the *New Testament* message. The Gospels insist that they happened in conformity to this narrative.

The *Old Testament* warns the reader of the existence of wrong ways, which do not lead to the expected results. In the biblical text these are called: "false religions". Idolatry is defined as worshiping before foreign gods. Idolatry is strongly condemned in *Scripture*.

Disregarding these warnings had adverse consequences in the religious life of Israel in the *Old Testament*. For example, in *Judges 3: 7*, the author criticizes the Jews for worshiping Baals. "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs". There are even clearer commandments against idolatry. In *Leviticus 19: 4* we read: "Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God". We read also in *Leviticus 26: 1* "You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to worship at them; for I am the Lord your God".

Samuel told King Saul that occult practices, idolatry, are condamned in Yahweh's eyes, in the same way as it is disobedience. "For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king" (*1 Samuel 15: 23*). Reuven Chaim Klein, in his book *God versus Gods* (2018: XV–XXIII, 3–278) presents the istory of idolatry in the *Old Testament*, versus Monotheism.

The author of *Book 2 Kings* says that idolatry was the reason for the expulsion of the Jews from their country – the Babylonian Exile.

> Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets". They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false; they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them

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that they should not do as they did. They rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. They made their sons and their daughters pass through fire; they used divination and augury; and they sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah alone (*1 Kings* 17: 13–18).

Interpretation of the sacred text in the Church

By reading texts like those presented above, we have to ask ourselves: How do we have to interpret them? Brueggeamnn considers that we are at a crossroads in which we must re-evaluate the message of the Old Testament free of ecclesiastical or academic constraints ("apart from every heavy-handed enforcer, ecclesial as well as academic, confessional as well as rationalistic" (Brueggemann, 1997: 718).

In the preface to *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negociation*, Brueggemann expresses directly his purpose, namely:

> the liberation of the biblical text for the church in a new situation, for interpretation, proclamation, teaching, and practice ... .While this new pluralistic, postmodern situation is perceived by many as a threat to 'mainline' churches and to the long-settled claims of conventional text-reading, it is my judgment and my urging that the new situation is in fact a positive opportunity to which church interpreters of the Bible may attend with considerable eagerness (Brueggemann, 1993: VII).

Brueggemann considers that the change that has taken place in the interpretation, following the period of the historical criticism method, which he calls hegemonic, is beneficial for the Christian ministry, in the sense that the "speech" – the dialogue between the parties, receive the decisive role for existence. "This shift from hegemony to perspective, I shall argue, is an enormous opportunity for Christian ministry. The shift entails a recovery of recognition speech as decisive for our existence" (Brueggemann, 1993: 12).

On the one hand, we will agree with Brueggemann, who sees in the collapse of the biblical interpretation of the rationalist period a great opportunity for the discovery of the biblical message, entrenched by the presuppositions of the so-called hegemonic interpretation of the time in question. He intended to do something for the interpretation to move in this direction. Brueggemann was preparing the ground for his *Old Testament* theology book, where he argues that "speech" is everything in theology (Brueggemann, 1997: 714).

On the other hand, we consider that he should place besides the discourse, other aspects of community life, as decisive for our existence,

such as the restriction of the freedom of others, and the values shared by the community.

Brueggemann was joined by other researchers who prepared the ground for a free interpretation of Scripture, unconditionally by the dogmatism imposed by the various denominations. In the new situation created, the interpretation of the text aims to take into account the ecumenism. Hollenweger (1986: 29) proposes the writing of an ecumenical intercultural theology, which should operate with the following presuppositions: 1) All theology is contextually conditioned, 2) there is nothing in theology which would be contextually unconditioned, 3) it may be necessary for outside voices to tells us how our theology is conditioned from a parochial or ideological point of view. 4) Even if we could ignore such voices before, today we can no longer do this, 5) the point of contact between our traditions and the new theologies of the third world is the *Bible*. 6) Only in the context of the tension created, considering possible perspectives more broadly, we can develop appropriate theologies "to our particular situation". 7) Since the ultimate loyalty in the church is not the nation, the social class or the culture, the universal church is best suited to provide the context in which "the task of creative theologizing can take place".

Although Hollenweger's openness is to be appreciated, the proposed assumptions have to be careful evaluated. For example, to say that all theology is contextually conditioned is exaggerated. Theology operates with values such as: truth, goodness, beauty, which cannot be relativitivized endlessly. About this subject speaks David Baggett, Jerry Walls, in developing the history of the moral argument concerning the existence of God (2019: 136–138). The reality in which a community lives implies a limitation of relativization. For example, in religion, it is true that one can have his own understanding of the ultimate Reality, but the essence of this reality remains valid for everyone, not necessarily the perception about it.

We need to be open to the voices around us, in relation to the parochial or ideological influence, which strain a narrow dogmatism. The dialogue has the merit of attacking the wooden language of religion, removing the redundant content of the biblical message. In this way the biblical message becomes relevant to the community. The ideas, wrong presuppositions and even the wrong practices supported by a religious tradition can in this way be removed.

It is important to consider that the Bible is the reference in evaluating Christian theology. Without a common landmark recognized by the dialog parteners, the symphony of voices in society is dissonant. Let's remember what we said at the beginning, that the definition of

"polyphony" was borrowed from the music field, which implies the preservation of the general harmony – in the community, in our case.

Conclusion

Living in postmodernism, we are influenced by the world conception of life specific to this period, including in religion. In this article we have analyzed the term "polyphony" frequently used in this period - which speaks about the encouragement of dialogue , often divergent, in the community. Theologians argue that polyphony is present also in the Old Testament text. Walter Zimmerli observed two contradictory positions regarding the establishment of the monarchy in *1 Samuel 8–12*.

Walter Brueggemann, a prominent representative of the *Old Testament* study, asserts that the Bible includes several voices in its text. However, even though the text involves several voices in the competition, the voice that was finally recognized by the community, was the Yahwist tradition. From his point of view, in postmodernism we are witnessing a destabilization of the hegemonic interpretation and a favoring of a pluralistic interpretation. The factors that have contributed to destabilization are epistemological and socio-political in nature. Power and knowledge are intimately connected, in that the ideas of the ruling class become the dominant ideas.

Brueggemann argues that we need to foster dialogue, which helps us avoid the danger of dogmatism and reductionism in interpretation. A shortcoming of his position is that he accepts that different voices intervene in the dialogue without being interested in the message that these voices convey from the point of view of its relevance for the community. He does not take into consideration the consequences of accepting the voices that want to impose some perspectives which affect the values of the community. That is why when we favor dialogue we must take this observation into account.

Bruegemann proposes an unlimited tolerance for the expression of voices in the text. It is necessary to consider the existence of false reports in the text. That is why the selection process is required in accepting the proposals made by the voices in the text. If certain extreme voices affect the other voices in the dialogue, confusion and disorder appear. In a polyphonic context, it is necessary to guard for maintaining harmony in the community.

That is why Pânzaru said that interpretation is an art. It allows those who interpret the text to introduce an unlimited number of restrictions. This is indicated in certain situations, such as legal literature. It is not useful to generalize an endless situation. This can lead to disorientation.

The interpreter has the responsibility to maintain that harmony that gives meaning to a text.

Although in postmodernism the so-called reality without quotation marks, it is under attack, we have argued that searching for the ultimate reality is specific to the human existence. The lack of restrictions in dialogue can lead to misinterpretations of reality. This is true also in the case of religion.

Regarding the interpretation of the sacred text in postmodernism, we can benefit of the liberation of the biblical message from the presuppositions of the so-called hegemonic interpretation of the rationalist period. But besides the much needed dialogue, we will have to consider those mentioned aspects, at least as decisive for our community life.

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