

Biblical hermeneutics in Africa

Gerald West

Ujamaa Centre

School of Religion and Theology

University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

The three key elements of African biblical interpretation are the biblical text, the African context, and the act of appropriation through which they are linked. The biblical text and African context do not on their own participate in a conversation. For dialogue to take place between text and context a real flesh and blood African reader is required! This reader moves constantly back-and-forth between the biblical and African context, bringing them together in an ongoing conversation which we call appropriation. How the reader moves between text and context is determined by a range of factors, including their ideo-theological orientation, their ecclesio-theological missionary heritage, their engagement with ordinary readers of the Bible in the church and community, and the important issues that require attention in the African context. In this essay, each of these elements in African biblical hermeneutics is explored.

Introduction

Biblical interpretation in Africa typically consists of three poles: the pole of the biblical text, the pole of the African context, and the pole of appropriation. Jonathan Draper has referred to this as a “tri-polar” approach (Draper 2001, 2002). What is helpful about Draper’s analysis is that it brings to the fore the often hidden third pole of ‘appropriation’.

Most characterisations of African biblical hermeneutics tend to portray a bi-polar approach, referring for example to “the comparative method” (Anum 2000:468; Ukpong 2000:12; Holter 2002:88-89), in which African context and biblical text interpret each other. Knut Holter articulates this clearly when he says comparative studies can be characterised “as studies whose major approach is a comparative methodology that facilitates a parallel interpretation” of certain biblical texts or motifs and supposed African parallels, “letting the two illuminate one another”. “Traditional exegetical methodology” is of course, he goes on to say, part of the interpretive process; however, in African biblical hermeneutics the biblical text “is approached from a perspective where African comparative material is the major dialogue partner and traditional exegetical methodology is subordinated to this perspective” (Holter 2002:88).

But implicit in these bi-polar-like formulations are aspects of the third pole – the reader’s

appropriation. While the real reader who brings the biblical text and African context into dialogue tends to remain 'hidden' in Holter's explanation of the comparative method, it is always a reader who enables the text and context to come into conversation. So when Holter refers to the ways in which biblical text and African context "illuminate one another", we must remember that they are only able to illuminate one another through the mind of the reader.

Justin Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method, takes us a step further, in his own comments on the comparative approach. He says that the goal of comparative interpretation is "the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation" (Ukpong 2000:24). What connects text and context, then, is a reader who activates a form of dialogical appropriation that has a theological and a praxiological dimension. What we can term an 'ideo-theological orientation' in the reader is what characterises the third pole of appropriation. This ideo-theological orientation can take various forms, resulting in at least four different emphases in African biblical interpretation: inculturation, liberation, feminist, and postcolonial hermeneutics. But before we discuss each of these, we must reflect more fully on the third pole -- appropriation.

Appropriation

The third pole offers an important starting point in understanding the different emphases in African biblical hermeneutics. The other two poles, the biblical text and the African context, are no less important, but an examination of the third pole clarifies how these two fundamental poles are brought into dialogue.

That there is engagement between biblical text and African context is fundamental to African biblical scholarship. While Western forms of biblical interpretation have been reluctant, until recently, to acknowledge that text and context are always, at least implicitly, in conversation, the dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. Similarly, while Western forms of biblical scholarship have been reluctant to acknowledge a real flesh and blood reader, African biblical scholarship has been explicit about the interpretive presence of the African reader. This is readily apparent from even a cursory survey of the published work of African biblical scholarship (LeMarquand 2000). Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context. This is what links ordinary African biblical interpretation and African biblical scholarship, a common commitment to 'read' the Bible for personal and societal transformation. The focus of this essay is African biblical scholarship, but its close alliance with ordinary African interpretation -- indeed, its partial constitution by ordinary African interpretation -- should not be forgotten (West 2002).

The kind of contextual change and transformation envisaged in particular African contexts shapes how biblical text and African context are brought into dialogue. The two most established forms of appropriation in African biblical scholarship have been inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. In the last decade, however, another form of appropriation has emerged, known as postcolonial hermeneutics. In the next four sub-sections we will discuss each of these in turn, showing how each in its own way is a form of ideo-theological appropriation that brings the African context and the biblical text into conversation (or, perhaps, contestation).

Each of these forms of appropriation has what I refer to as an ‘ideo-theological’ orientation. Because the act of appropriation involves a dynamic, back-and-forth movement and engagement (Boff 1987:136), both the Bible and the context contribute to and constitute the ideo-theological orientation of any particular interpreter. But other aspects of the interpreter’s experience and life interests also impart their imprint on one’s ideo-theological orientation. This is why the interpreter’s ideo-theological orientation is often not foregrounded in the interpretive act -- it seems to the interpreter to be a self-evident product of the biblical text, the context, and the interpreter’s reality. But one of the tasks of academic biblical scholarship is analyse what appears self-evident.

Inculturation hermeneutics

The most common African form of ideo-theological orientation is inculturation hermeneutics. Like other forms of African biblical interpretation inculturation hermeneutics takes its cue from life outside the academy. The general experience of African Christians was that African social and cultural concerns were not reflected in missionary and Western academic forms of biblical interpretation. Inculturation hermeneutics arose as a response, “paying attention to the African socio-cultural context and the questions that arise therefrom” (Ukpong 1995:4). Inculturation hermeneutics “designates an approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African ... context the subject of interpretation”; which means that every dimension of the interpretive process is “consciously informed by the world-view of, and the life experience within that culture” (Ukpong 1995:5). While the Nigerian biblical scholar Justin Ukpong includes the historical, social, economic, political, and religious as elements of inculturation hermeneutics (Ukpong 1995:6), the tendency of most African inculturation hermeneutics is to concentrate on the cultural and religious elements. These elements, then, make a substantial contribution to the ideo-theological orientation of inculturation hermeneutics.

Another element in the constitution of inculturation hermeneutics is the recognition that African biblical interpretation is always in some sense ‘over-against’ or in opposition to the forms of biblical interpretation imposed by and inherited from missionary Christianity and

Western academic biblical studies. The missionary-colonial axis is always a factor in inculturation hermeneutics, providing it with a particular ideo-theological orientation.

Alongside this oppositional element is another element, somewhat in tension with it. As Ukpong says, “[t]he focus of [African] interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context” (Ukpong 1995:6). This formulation recognises that the Bible is a significant sacred text with a message for African socio-cultural contexts. As Ukpong goes on to say, “This involves interactive engagement between the biblical text and a particular contemporary socio-cultural issue such that the gospel message serves as a critique of the culture, and/or the cultural perspective enlarges and enriches the understanding of the text” (Ukpong 1995:6). Here he captures succinctly the two-way engagement between text and context; what he also captures here is the predominant attitude of trust towards the Bible within inculturation hermeneutics. Though the Bible has come to Africa as part of the missionary-colonial imperialistic package, the Bible itself has ‘good news’ for Africa, and/or Africa is able to illuminate the biblical message in a way that Western biblical scholarship has not been able to do. So an attitude of trust towards the Bible itself is a feature of inculturation hermeneutics, alongside its oppositional stance towards colonialism.

Liberation hermeneutics

Almost all of the above elements are also constitutive of liberation hermeneutics, though the mix is somewhat different. Like inculturation hermeneutics, African liberation hermeneutics has its starting point with the experience of the masses. In the words of the South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala, the hermeneutical starting point of liberation hermeneutics is the “social and material life” of “the black struggle for liberation” (Mosala 1989:67).

However, while African liberation hermeneutics acknowledges the importance of both the spiritual and the material (Mosala 1989:67), like inculturation hermeneutics, the emphasis in liberation hermeneutics is on the economic and the political dimensions of African life. Religion and culture are important but peripheral, and economic and political analysis is central. Race and class, not religion and culture, are the critical categories of liberation hermeneutics. And while inculturation hermeneutics is quite eclectic in the kinds of sociological conceptual frameworks it draws on, liberation hermeneutics is more specific, drawing heavily on Marxist conceptual frameworks (Mosala 1989; Frostin 1988). African liberation hermeneutics also clearly shares the oppositional stance of inculturation hermeneutics to the missionary-colonial project, though its categories of contestation are different, as indicated. However, liberation hermeneutics raises questions about the Bible itself, with a clarity not found in inculturation hermeneutics. The Bible is a resource for liberation, but it is also a source of oppression and domination, and not just in the way it has been used by the missionary-colonial project; the Bible is in part intrinsically oppressive (Mofokeng 1988:34; Mosala 1989:41). The ideological ambiguity of the Bible is a

significant feature of liberation hermeneutics, resulting in an intertwining of suspicion and trust in the ideo-theological orientation of liberation hermeneutics.

The ambiguous attitude to the Bible in liberation hermeneutics has also had methodological consequences for some. The predominant interpretive methodologies for engaging with both the African context and the biblical text in inculturation hermeneutics have been historical and sociological forms of analysis. With respect to the biblical text, historical-critical and an eclectic range of sociological methods are used (Ukpong 1995, 1996). With respect to the African context, an eclectic range of religio-cultural forms of analysis within African theology and anthropology are used (Ukpong 1995, 1996). African liberation hermeneutics inherits but then rejects this eclectic assortment of socio-historical analytical resources (Mosala 1989:43-66), arguing instead for a more structured and systemic analysis of both the biblical text (within its sites of production) and the African context, using historical-materialist categories of analysis. According to Mosala, the biblical text and African context should not only be brought into dialogue in terms of content, they should also be brought into dialogue in terms of methodology. Both the Bible and the black experience and struggle must be analysed structurally using historical-materialist categories; in other words, African interpreters must recognise that the biblical texts are rooted in the struggles of their material sites of production, just as the life of ordinary black South Africans is rooted in particular socio-historical modes of production (Mosala 1989:31-32).

To sum up so far, it is apparent that though African inculturation hermeneutics and African liberation hermeneutics share a number of significant features there are also a number of distinctive features in their ideo-theological orientations. What they have in common is a commitment to relate their biblical scholarship to the realities of ordinary Africans, an oppositional stance towards the missionary-colonial enterprise which brought the Bible to Africa, a recognition that the Bible is an important text in the African context which must be engaged with by critical scholarship, and a preference for socio-historical modes of analysis for both the biblical text and the African context. What is different are the dimensions of African social reality that they emphasise (religion and culture versus economics and politics), their attitude to the Bible (trust versus suspicion), and their advocacy of specific methodological models and analytical tools (eclectic sociological analysis versus historical-materialist analysis). All of these similarities and differences constitute how they connect text and context -- how appropriation takes place.

Feminist hermeneutics

African feminist hermeneutics -- and the designation 'feminist' is problematic, with some preferring to borrow the African-American term 'womanist' (Nadar 2003), some adopting an African indigenous designation, such as *bosadi* (Masenya 2001), and others using the general phrase 'African women's hermeneutics' (Haddad 2000) -- emerges from within African

inculturation and African liberation hermeneutics, and so shares features with both.

African feminist hermeneutics has been in dialogue with both the religio-cultural emphasis of inculturation hermeneutics (Mbuwayesango 1997) and the racial-economic-political emphasis of liberation hermeneutics (Mncube 1984; Mosala 1984; Plaatjie 2001), though the former is predominant. Because of the predominance of a religio-cultural emphasis in African feminist hermeneutics it could be argued that much of this work is really a form of inculturation hermeneutics. However, African feminist hermeneutics usually shares the attitude of suspicion towards the biblical text of African liberation hermeneutics. Most importantly, African feminist hermeneutics, like African liberation hermeneutics, insists on a related structured and systematic analysis of both the African context and the biblical text, its distinctive feature is that their focus is on gender and the systemic nature of patriarchy (Okure 1993; Dube 2001).

A methodological innovation in some African feminist hermeneutics has been its use of literary exegetical modes of analysis of the biblical text. While the predominant exegetical modes of analysis of both African inculturation and liberation hermeneutics have been socio-historical, with only a few voices advocating and using literary modes of exegesis (Boesak 1984; West 1995) African feminist hermeneutics has been quite receptive to literary modes of interpretation (Nadar 2001).

In sum, African feminist hermeneutics shares elements with both inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. African feminist hermeneutics straddles both, sharing all the common features, but tending towards inculturation hermeneutics in their focus on religion and culture and an eclectic array of sociological analytical tools, and tending towards liberation hermeneutics in their suspicion of the (patriarchal) ideology of the text.

Postcolonial hermeneutics

African biblical hermeneutics, whether tending towards inculturation or liberation or feminist trajectories in its ideo-theological orientation, has always been resolutely situated over-against missionary-colonial imperialism (West 2005). So it is strange that African biblical scholarship has been slow to engage explicitly (West 1997; Punt 2003, 2006) with emergent forms of postcolonial hermeneutics (see Sugirtharajah 1998, 2006; Segovia 2005; Moore and Segovia 2005). However, as with all forms of academic African biblical hermeneutics, the wider world of biblical scholarship has offered African biblical scholarship potentially useful resources which it can refashion to fit to African contexts.

It is from within African feminist hermeneutics that the most sustained engagement with postcolonial hermeneutics has come (Dube 1996, 1997, 2000; Nzimande 2005). As with the other forms of African biblical hermeneutics, postcolonial biblical hermeneutics has its

starting point in the realities of ordinary Africans, for whom the Bible has become an African book, but an African book “that will always be linked to and remembered for its role in facilitating European imperialism” (Dube 2000:3). The complicity of the Bible with European imperialism is explicit and central to the ideo-theological orientation of African postcolonial biblical hermeneutics. What the other forms of African biblical hermeneutics do not address in sufficient detail is the question “why the biblical text, its readers, and its institutions are instruments of imperialism” (Dube 2000:6); this is the first part of the task of postcolonial hermeneutics.

Together with African liberation and feminist hermeneutics, postcolonial hermeneutics is deeply suspicious of the Bible’s own imperial charter (Dube 2000:10). In other words, the kinds of imperial attitudes and practices performed by missionaries and colonial forces is related to the imperial tendencies of the biblical texts themselves (Dube 2000:15). The next crucial question, therefore, is how postcolonial African subjects should read the texts which have been instrumental to the establishment of colonialism in their contexts (Dube 2000:16). So the second part of postcolonial hermeneutics is to read the Bible for decolonisation.

Reading for decolonisation must, Musa Dube argues, follow the logic of imperialism, understanding its grammar and then reading against it. This includes reading against the geography of biblical and Western imperial expansionism, reading against the racialising potential of the biblical text (expressed in ethnic terms) and the racial politics of Western imperial ideology, reading against the sanctioning of unequal power relations in biblical texts and colonial projects, reading against the universalising tendencies of both the Bible and Western imperialism, and reading against the suppression of the female presence in the Bible and imperial project (Dube 2000:16-21).

While the Bible can and must be read for decolonisation, it is not the only resource. Among the resources for reading for decolonisation are the very languages and literatures (including the oral) denigrated and supplanted by the Bible and Western imperialism (Dube 2000:49). However, African postcolonial hermeneutics recognises that the vast literature “born from the encounter with imperialist forces” is itself “partly shaped by the textual forms of their imperial counterparts” (Dube 2000:50-51). African resources, particularly those forged in resistance to imperialism, partake in a form of hybridity (Dube 2000:122), in which something new and vital is constructed from the encounter with colonialism (Sugirtharajah 2003:126). One of the most significant contributions of African postcolonial hermeneutics is this recognition that African postcolonial interpretation (like African postcolonial identity) is itself partially constituted by colonialism (Sugirtharajah 2001:249). Instead of denying this by claiming an authentically African interpretation, postcolonial interpretation embraces the multiplicity of identities and differences that constitute the postcolonial African context, but always with a view to harnessing these hybrid resources for decolonisation.

While all forms of African biblical hermeneutics, whether inculturation, liberation, feminist, or postcolonial, are committed to identifying and recovering African interpretive resources, they also engage critically with the pre-colonial African heritage. African postcolonial hermeneutics is no exception, recovering but also questioning, for example, the power of pre-colonial African queens (Nzimande Forthcoming, 2005).

In sum, in its present form, African postcolonial hermeneutics shares much in common with the ideo-theological orientations of liberation and feminist hermeneutics, but also shares elements of the ideo-theological orientation of inculturation hermeneutics.

Before concluding this discussion of the appropriation pole, three other elements which cross-cut and contribute to the ideo-theological orientations of academic African biblical interpretation deserve our attention. These are the ecclesio-theological heritage of the missionaries, the role of ordinary non-academic African interpreters of the Bible, and the specific contextual struggles and issues of African life.

Ecclesio-theological missionary heritage

In his detailed study of the role of religion in the making of the Yoruba people of West Africa, J.D.Y. Peel reminds us of the enduring contribution of the world religions (specifically Christianity and Islam) in any postcolonial context. These are “great vehicles of trans-historical memory” which are “ceaselessly re-activated in the consciousness of their adherents” (Peel 2000:9). Peel cautions that while we must of course ground African Christianity and Islam in African history, we must not neglect the specific ways in they also belong to Christian or Muslim stories (Peel 2000:9). The Christian narrative, Peel reminds us, has its own power. However, while there are cases in which African postcolonial Christianity has had almost no influence from Western missionary Christianity (West 2006), most African Christianities have strong and enduring missionary ecclesio-theological memories (see Sundkler and Steed 2000). In other words, besides the Bible there are almost always residual, at least, missionary ecclesio-theological influences in all four forms of African biblical hermeneutics.

Each of the many missionary movements which brought the Bible, Christianity, and colonialism to Africa had its own ecclesio-theological emphasis. The grand narrative of missionary Christianity -- “the religious project which brought the missionaries in the first place” (Peel 2000:4) -- has an enduring impact in African biblical interpretation, the clearest cases being those of the Catholic and the Evangelical missionary ecclesio-theological legacies and the more recent impact of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianities.

Each of the four primary forms of African biblical hermeneutics is impacted by elements of the missionary ecclesio-theological legacy. However, there are correlations between

particular ecclesio-theological trajectories and particular forms of biblical hermeneutics. Those biblical scholars from Evangelical ecclesio-theological trajectories, for example, tend to work mainly within inculturation hermeneutics because of its attitude of trust towards the Bible, though this is not without its tensions for those who want to recover aspects of their culture denigrated and denied by missionary Christianity (Ganusah 2000).

In sum, the ecclesio-theological heritage of missionary Christianities influences and contributes to the ideo-theological orientations of African biblical hermeneutics.

Non-academic African interpreters

Being rooted in African realities, African biblical hermeneutics is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. This includes allowing ordinary African interpreters to partially constitute the kind of discipline African biblical scholarship is (Okure 1993:77). They do this in a variety of ways, including being (in part) the implied readers of African biblical scholarship, being those who constantly call on African biblical scholars to share their resources with them in order to address their contextual needs, being those who share their local and indigenous interpretive resources with biblical scholarship, and being those who participate with African biblical scholarship in the interpretation of biblical texts (West 2002).

The African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities (Ukpong 2000). In sum, the presence of ordinary African interpreters and their concerns shapes the ideo-theological orientation of African biblical hermeneutics.

African issues

While a great diversity of African issues are brought to bear on African biblical hermeneutics, there are moments when particular issues dominate the landscape. The emergence of African feminist hermeneutics across the African continent in response to gender issues is one example. More recently the continental crisis of HIV and AIDS has summoned all four major forms of African biblical hermeneutics to respond (see for example Dube and Maluleke 2001; Dube and Kanyoro 2004; Masenya 2001, 2006; West and Zengele 2004). Whether the advent of HIV and AIDS will give rise to a new form of African biblical hermeneutics remains to be seen; for the present the forms we have are both responding to and being shaped by the epidemic. HIV and AIDS poses pertinent challenges to the ideo-theological orientation of each.

All of the above contribute to and constitute the third pole of African biblical interpretation -- appropriation. I have focused on this pole precisely because it is so often assumed to be self-

evident. Most of the attention in describing and analysing African biblical interpretation goes to the other two poles -- the text and the context. However, because African biblical interpretation almost always brings these two poles into conversation, the question of how this is done is paramount. Having interrogated 'the how', we can now turn to the other more familiar poles of African biblical interpretation.

The text

Most attention in African biblical interpretation focuses on the biblical text and the methodologies used to exegete them. African biblical scholarship, like Western biblical scholarship, insists on distantiation. The Bible is a collection of ancient texts, each produced in particular socio-historical contexts, and the task of biblical scholarship is 'to hear' the distinctive, ancient voice of the text within its own socio-historical context. Before the text can be brought into dialogue with the context, it must be given its own voice. This is done by locating the text historically, using historical-critical tools, and then situating the historical text sociologically, within a particular social context, using sociological tools. While Mosala, as we have seen, insists on particular sociological tools (historical-materialist sociology) (Mosala 1993), most African biblical scholars are more eclectic, using a whole range of sociological tools (Ukpong 1996).

Some African scholars, though a minority, have used literary tools instead of historical-critical and sociological tools, preferring to locate the text within its linguistic, literary, or canonical contexts (Nadar 2006; West 2004). The purpose, however, is the same -- an exegesis of the biblical text, allowing it to speak with its own voice.

However, the ideo-theological orientation of the biblical interpreter influences what it is in the text that is the focal point of historical-critical, sociological, and/or literary analysis. Inculturation hermeneutics concentrates on the religio-cultural dimensions of the biblical text, liberation hermeneutics on the socio-economic dimensions, feminist hermeneutics on the gender dimensions, and postcolonial on the imperial dimensions.

The context

While Western forms of biblical interpretation have tended to hide and elide the contemporary context of the biblical interpreter, African biblical interpretation is overt about the context from which and for which the biblical text is interpreted. African biblical scholarship tries to be as thorough in its analysis of the details of African contexts as it has been about the details of the biblical text (Draper 2002), using a whole array of historical and sociological tools.

However, here too the ideo-theological orientation of the biblical interpreter influences what

it is in the context that is the focal point of analysis. Inculturation hermeneutics concentrates on the religio-cultural dimensions of the context, liberation hermeneutics on the socio-economic dimensions, feminist hermeneutics on the gender dimensions, and postcolonial on the colonial and neo-colonial dimensions.

Conclusion

Clearly African biblical hermeneutics is a complex process involving three poles: text, context, and the reader's appropriation. Though each can be analysed separately, they continually reconstitute each other. The ideo-theological orientation of appropriation is itself partially constituted by the contextual features of a particular African context, just as it is by the regular reading of scripture. And the ideo-theological orientation influences both what becomes the focus of analysis within the biblical text and the African context and how they are brought into dialogue.

Questions

1. What are the three key elements of African biblical hermeneutics?
2. What are some of the main differences between Western biblical hermeneutics and African biblical hermeneutics?
3. What are the four main types of ideo-theological orientation in African biblical hermeneutics?
4. What are the key characteristics of each of the four forms of ideo-theological orientation?
5. In what ways does one's ecclesio-theological missionary heritage shape African biblical interpretation?
6. Which is your preferred form of ideo-theological orientation and why?

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