

Indigenous Exegesis:

Exploring the Interface Between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy

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What sense does it make to speak of ‘indigenous exegesis’? In some sense this article is an exegesis of this question and this phrase. While acknowledging the presence and importance of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible in the formation of African biblical scholarship, African biblical scholarship has said very little about the textual interpretative interests of ordinary African ‘readers’ and the place of these interpretative interests in the academy. This article addresses and redresses this anomaly, arguing that it does make sense to speak of ‘indigenous exegesis’ and that indigenous exegesis does have a place in the academy alongside the more familiar forms of exegesis.

1. Introduction

Conjoining ‘indigenous’ and ‘exegesis,’ as my title does, is somewhat unusual. Each word has its own semantic field, with little or no overlap, except perhaps if we use the word ‘exegesis’ metaphorically. But I have resisted placing the term ‘exegesis’ in my title in inverted commas, avoiding – for now – the too easy making of a metaphor.

Behind my reticence is the question, posed to me by a colleague, Maarman Sam Tshehla, as to whether the academic adjective ‘critical’ belongs to the west. What, in other words, do we mean by ‘critical’ and is what we mean essentially western? Or, in the words of Alpheus Masoga, “Who owns and controls the *jargon* ‘critical’?” (Masoga, 2002:107) I continue to ponder these questions, aimed as they are in both cases at my own work and my use of the terms ‘critical’ and ‘pre-critical’ to describe the interpretative practices of academically trained readers of the Bible and ordinary untrained ‘readers’ of the Bible respectively. This article is an attempt to come up with some sort of reply to their important and probing questions.¹

In some sense, the academic use of the term ‘critical’ is a western thing, in that it has a long history of use within the western academy, both in very specific senses, for example, ‘historical-critical’ biblical scholarship, and in a more general sense, for example, ‘critical thinking.’ Clearly the term ‘critical’ requires some explication, simply repeating it does not help. If we explicate current uses of the phrase ‘critical thinking’ in the academy, across a range of disciplines, we arrive at, I would suggest, something like ‘structured and systematic questioning’. Of course, each discipline has its own particular set of structured and systematic questions – and biblical studies is no exception – but they would all subscribe to this common sense. In fact, in

¹ This article is a reworking and development of parts of an essay I have written in an earlier attempt to address these questions (see West, Forthcoming).

recent attempts by tertiary institutions in South Africa to express the outcomes of their courses in Outcomes Based Education terms, one of the few common denominator outcomes for most academic courses has been “to develop critical thinking” in students.

Staying within biblical scholarship, biblical scholars, in the western academic tradition, ask a range of structured and systematic questions of the Bible: historical-critical, socio-historical, literary, semiotic etc., each with its own particular subset of critical questions. Asking these kinds of questions is what separates us out from our more ordinary ‘readers’ in the churches who do ask questions of the Bible, but not usually in a structured and systematic manner and not in the structured and systematic manner prescribed by each particular subset.

So, in this specific sense of the term ‘critical,’ critical biblical scholarship is a western thing. But if we follow the trajectory of the proliferation of acceptable subsets of ‘critical’ questions entering biblical studies discourse – reader response criticism, autobiographical criticism, deconstruction criticism, post-colonial criticism, etc. – then the presence of a particular kind of subset becomes less important than the more general commitment to structured and systematic questions, whatever their subset. The question posed by my colleague now takes on the following form: Is structured and systematic questioning a western thing? Put like this, the question is less easy to say ‘Yes’ to, for surely other traditions, even African traditions,² ask structured and systematic questions?

However, my move away from particular subsets of structured and systematic questions may be nothing more than slight of hand, because surely what we in the western tradition mean by ‘critical’ is precisely those subsets generated by the Enlightenment and its various forms of ‘modern’ rationality? Certainly, if we remain committed to modernity’s legacy then ‘critical’ must be a western thing. But does not our post-modern moment push us to reexamine this too historical notion of ‘critical’? Must ‘critical’ remain an adjective of western biblical scholarship, or can it be comprehended as an African adjective also? Once we allow the historical associations to wane, foregrounding structured and systematic questioning, we can.

Making similar moves, we can uncouple the term ‘exegesis’ from its historical (in at least two senses) biblical studies moorings. It is probably accurate to say that the term ‘exegesis,’ though initially restricted to the historical-critical subset of structured and systematic questions, now embraces the other subsets mentioned above, so that to speak of ‘literary exegesis’ or ‘structuralist exegesis’ is not to speak improperly, nor metaphorically. Our use of the term ‘exegesis’ has shifted and has come to mean much the same as ‘critical,’ so that the phrase ‘critical exegesis’ is tautological, unless we allow the term ‘exegesis’ to become metaphorical, referring to any form of biblical interpretation whatsoever. But as I said above, I do not want to give up the hard won ground that the term ‘exegesis’ connotes: a structured and systematic questioning of the biblical text. But I do want to challenge the historical-critical hold on this term, as valuable as its contribution has been.

Of course there would be those within the guild who would feel uncomfortable with both shifts: the shift of ‘critical’ from its modern meanings and the shift of ‘exegesis’ from its historical (in

² The *sangoma* or *ngaka*, for example, might be said to ask structured and systematic questions as part of the interpretative procedures included in their healing rituals.

both senses) emphases. But I want to celebrate these shifts, precisely because they open up space to revisit commonly held assumptions within biblical scholarship. One consequence of these shifts has been the recovery of so-called ‘pre-critical’ forms of exegesis—those structured and systematic sets of questions that were used for centuries by the Church before the (historical) hegemony of modernity (Fowl, 1997). In this article, while remaining within the trajectory of biblical interpretation in the Church,³ I want to focus on indigenous African forms of exegesis. My starting point is African biblical scholarship, a scholarship that is more closely linked to the Church and the ordinary ‘readers’ of the Bible who make up its membership than most.

2. ‘African biblical scholarship’

But I begin with a caution. Tinyiko Maluleke cautions us biblical scholars to be careful about using the term ‘African biblical scholarship’ too casually (see West, 1997, Maluleke, 2000: 94-95). Maluleke’s point is that

there cannot and should not be such a thing as “African Biblical Scholarship” if this is envisaged in terms akin to that produced by western-type training. Both African Christians and African Christian theologians have not been able to relate in any exclusive way to the Bible – as a singular collection of texts – in the way that both the historical critical and latter day sociological hermeneutics have done. Except for a small minority, very few Black and African Biblical scholars have been able to do discipline-specific textual biblical studies (94-95).

Maluleke goes on to suggest that like ordinary African Christians, African biblical scholars’ relationship to the Bible has been as “part of a larger package of resources and legacies which include stories, preaching and language mannerisms, songs, choruses, ecclesiologies, theodicies, catechism manuals and a range of rituals and rites” (95). We must not be misled, says Maluleke, by the overt presence of the Bible among African Christians; while it is “one of the few ‘tangible’ things” in African Christianity, “The Bible,” insists Maluleke, “has been appropriated and continues to be appropriated as part of a larger package of resources” (95). And ‘African biblical scholars’ cannot escape this reality; indeed they are examples of this reality.

Most, if not all African ‘biblical’ scholars operate as philosophers, missiologists and quasi-systematic theologians (e.g. Dickson, Mbiti and Fashole-Luke). Indeed, it seems that the more Mbiti insisted on the centrality of the Bible in African Theology, the more of a philosopher, missiologist and systematic theologian he became (95).

So I use the term ‘African biblical scholarship’ here cautiously and carefully, accepting much of what Maluleke has to say on this matter. Elsewhere I have chartered some of the contours of ‘African biblical scholarship’ (West, 2000b, Ukpong, 2002) and together with Musa Dube provided a glimpse of ‘African biblical scholars’ at work (West and Dube, 2000). In this article I take my reflections further, attempting to tease out and understand more clearly the forms of engagement between African scholars and the Bible. More specifically, Maluleke’s insistence on ‘African biblical scholarship’ as something quite different from “that produced by western-

³ It is here that my extensive debt to John Suggit is most apparent; he showed me what it meant to ask structured and systematic questions of the Bible within the context of the Bible as the book of the Church.

type training” requires probing. What, I continue to ask in this article, are some of the distinctive features of ‘African biblical scholarship’?

As I have argued at some length in the references cited above, ‘African biblical scholarship’ is indelibly marked by the missionary/colonial encounter and by its close association with ordinary African ‘readers’ (whether literate or not) of the Bible. While both of these deserve more careful attention than they have received, this article will focus on the latter.⁴

3. Exegeting ‘inclusive’

In an article which argues that inclusivity is a key characteristic of African women’s biblical scholarship, Teresa Okure, a Nigerian biblical scholar, states that African women’s biblical scholarship “is inclusive of scholars and nonscholars” (Okure, 1993:77). Though she does not elaborate, I will offer an exegesis of this phrase, attempting to delineate more carefully in what ways ordinary African “nonscholars” are constitutive of African biblical scholarship (see also West, 2000b).

Okure is not alone in making this claim, and the claim is not restricted to an African *women’s* approach. The inclusion of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible in African biblical scholarship is acknowledged, whether implicitly or explicitly, by most African biblical scholars. But quite what this inclusion includes is not clear. I do not think that this is merely a nostalgic or romantic yearning for a lost naivete, as it is in western literary biblical scholarship, where the scholarly reader imagines his or her scholarly self in this ‘ordinary’ role.⁵ African biblical scholars take real ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible more seriously and certainly acknowledge their real existence and presence. This is not to say, however, that ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible are not re-presented by scholars in public forums; they clearly are re-presented rather than actually present at academic conferences. But, I will argue below, they (ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible) in certain important ways partially constitute African biblical scholarship.

Before I come to the first of the ways in which ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible are included in African biblical scholarship, I want to briefly take up another related matter, implied by the penultimate sentence in the paragraph above. While dialogue with ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible is an important part of African biblical scholarship, it must be acknowledged that much of the dialogue that African biblical scholars participate in in their scholarly capacity is with other scholars. The reading community of other scholars is a crucial

⁴ A volume of *Semeia* goes some way to elaborating the former (Boer, 2001).

⁵ We are misled if we imagine that the advent of reader-response criticism has created a place for ordinary ‘readers’ of the Bible within western forms of biblical scholarship. While we might expect that ordinary ‘readers’ are invited to join the discipline of biblical studies among the plethora of ‘readers’ already clogging the corridors of the academy, this is not the case. We have “mock”, “informed”, “competent”, “implied”, “model”, “average” and “super”, “strong”, “mistaking/mistaken”, “deconstructing”, “perverse”, “feasting”, “subjective”, “transactive”, “validating”, “amazing/a-mazing”, “resisting”, and many more readers. However, as Tim Long notes, “while very different, all have one important feature in common: none *actually* exists. All are textual constructs, ‘fictive’ readers” (Long, 1996: 86-87). So no sooner has the invitation to ‘the real reader’ been extended than it becomes clear, on examining the fine print on the invitation, that only already trained readers need come, now in their new guise as ‘real readers’. Real, real readers – ordinary, untrained, nonscholar ‘readers’ – are still not welcome. Stephen Moore, in his analysis of reader-response criticism, concurs: biblical studies as a discipline has no place for real readers. “For biblical studies the moral is plain: criticism is an institution to which ‘real’ readers need not apply.” Real readers of the Bible are really repressed readers (Moore, 1989a: 90, see also Moore, 1989b: 106); they are disabled by the disguised academic reader.

component of all scholarship, including African biblical scholarship. However, there is something of a tension among African biblical scholars, including myself, as to an appropriate hierarchy of scholarly communities. Many of us have been trained in the academies of the west, and much of our reading matter continues to come from this site of biblical interpretation. Dialogue with other African scholars outside of our particular countries is difficult, and while African biblical scholarly materials are reasonably plentiful (LeMarquand, 2000a), distribution within Africa is also difficult. Part of the problem is, of course, money (Holter, 1998). Travel within Africa is expensive, finding foreign currency to buy books from another African country is often impossible, and establishing regular African academic conferences usually requires funding from outside of the continent. But money is not the only problem. Some of us African biblical scholars have been bewitched by the west, and western scholarship has become our preferred dialogue partner.

There is now, I think, a shift taking place. With the liberation of South Africa in 1994 the continent has in significant senses been restored to wholeness. New energies are coursing through the continent. We are rediscovering each other, and this is a tremendous boon to biblical scholarship in Africa. As both Justin Ukpong and I have argued (Ukpong, 2000a, West, 2000b), the liberation of South Africa has provided an impetus for sustained dialogue between the two major paradigms of African biblical scholarship – the inculturation and the liberation paradigms.⁶ A necessary by-product of this recovery is the recognition that we must privilege and prioritise dialogue among ourselves. We must find ways, notwithstanding the very real money matters in our way, to work together, to read and distribute each others' work, to use African-written texts in our teaching, to establish regional and continental conferences, to replenish our libraries with African resources (while maintaining and building up resources from the more conventional sources), and to publish together. Having said this, I am not sure that other scholars, even African others, ought to be our primary dialogue partners. Moving African scholars up in our hierarchies of discourse, above western scholars, is certainly an important step in redefining our discipline post colonialisation. Saturating oneself in the discourse of African colleagues changes things. But is it enough to keep the discourse among scholars, even African scholars? I think not; and I am not alone, as I have indicated. There is a general consensus that African biblical and theological scholarship ought to be and is indeed inclusive of nonscholars – ordinary African users of the Bible.

The most minimal sense in which ordinary African Bible 'readers' might be said to be a part of African biblical scholarship is as receptors of Bible scholarship. This is not as trite as it sounds. Designing one's biblical scholarship in such a way that it can be consumed by ordinary people is no small feat and takes considerable dedication and skill. While there are those, both African and others, who see their scholarship in this way, Okure is alluding to a form of engagement that is more mutual. Ordinary 'readers' of the Bible do not simply consume the product, they partially constitute both the process and the product.

A second way in which ordinary African Bible users might be said to be included in African biblical studies is as informers for biblical scholarship. In his discussion of 'cultural exegesis', Daniel Smith-Christopher delineates an area where 'ordinary readers', in my sense of the term,

⁶ The momentum has been such that even the most resistant western-based strains of African biblical scholarship – white (mainly Afrikaner) South African biblical scholarship and African Bible translator scholarship – have been partially co-opted.

might having something to contribute to biblical scholarship. He notes that Latin American liberation theologians “have long talked about an ‘exegesis of the poor’” (Smith-Christopher, 1995:15). He then comments that what Latin American liberation theologians “normally mean to suggest [by this phrase] is that the poor have a unique insight into the Bible ... because their socio-economic circumstances are in some ways similar to the circumstances of those who drafted the Bible, or those spoken about in large sections of the Bible” (15). But, he continues, most liberation theologians who use this and similar phrases turn out to be talking “about the use of the Bible for contemporary life and faith”, what he calls “applied theology or *applications* of the biblical message” (15).

Because Smith-Christopher belongs to the dominant paradigm within biblical scholarship which believes that what biblical scholarship is really about is what the text *meant*, he wants to ask whether it is in fact true that the poor understand the Bible better than the rich (15). While he accepts that a given text may be *understood* differently in different contexts, he wants to ask questions of “accuracy of understanding” (16). What exactly is he asking here? Lying behind his conception of biblical scholarship is the sort of distinction found in the work of E.D. Hirsch between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ (alluded to in Smith-Christopher’s discussion), a distinction that has a long (and contested) history (see Fowl, 1990: 383). Biblical scholarship, for Smith-Christopher and the majority of the guild, is about “*historical* meaning” (17). So, this being the case, “what we [Smith-Christopher and those who share his interpretative interests] would like to know from the liberation theologians is whether the poor Brazilian peasants who read the Bible can give any insights into what the text means *for others besides themselves*, let alone whether their observations can actually guide a process of rethinking historical-critical reconstructions of past events” (16). *That* is the question he is interested in and which what he calls ‘cultural exegesis’ is interested in. In other words, “Can the native American elder, the Indian or African student or scholar, give all of us new ideas about what the text *historically meant*?” (16).

The tone of Smith-Christopher’s discussion may perhaps suggest that he answers this question in the negative – that only properly trained mainstream biblical scholars can do this kind of thing. But we should not be misled by Smith-Christopher’s tone; he is, in fact, quite open to the contribution of ordinary ‘readers’. Ordinary ‘readers’ are contributors to what Smith-Christopher calls ‘cultural exegesis’. Cultural exegesis, in his use of the term, is not about various forms of sociological or anthropological analysis (12), and has little to do with the cultural studies movement (see Segovia, 1995: 29-30). While comparative forms of sociological and anthropological analysis are close relatives of cultural exegesis, cultural exegesis “asks another question” (Smith-Christopher 1995:13). For example, whereas Robert Wilson has used ethnographic data on Siberian shamans in his comparative analysis of biblical Hebrew prophets (Wilson, 1980), cultural exegesis “would want to know what Siberian shamans would *themselves* say upon reading some passages from Jeremiah or Amos. Would a shaman see something that Wilson (or any other European-American biblical scholar) has missed?” (13). Wilson is, according to Smith-Christopher, doing “a kind of ‘second hand’ cultural exegesis”; while he is using ethnographic data to shape the questions he puts to the text, this cultural data comes from published sources and “not from first hand experience” (13).

Clearly, then, the ordinary reader does have something to contribute to cultural exegesis. The ordinary reader can enable biblical scholars to see something they might have missed concerning what the text historically meant.⁷ Smith-Christopher admits the ordinary reader, albeit as a consultant, to the very heart of the dominant paradigm – the sacred territory of what the text really historically meant.⁸

While there is no doubt that ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible have furnished massive amounts of information of potential value to the biblical studies enterprise, this is a by-product of something more profound. Ordinary Africans are more than merely informants for African biblical scholarship. Again, I think that Okure is saying something more than this; ordinary indigenous African ‘readers’ of the Bible—most of whom are black, poor and marginalized—are *constitutive* of African biblical scholarship in some more profound sense.

A third way, then, in which ordinary African users of the Bible might be said to be included in African biblical scholarship is to make them and their contexts “the subject of interpretation of the bible” (Ukpong, 2000a:23). The biblical text is read for a particular people in a particular context, but it is not read on behalf of them, it is read with them. Here ordinary African ‘readers’ are integral to the scholars work. Biblical interpretation is done as a collaborative act between scholars and nonscholars in which “the resources of the people’s culture and historical life experience are used as complementary to conventional critical tools of biblical exegesis” (23). “The goal of 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” (24).

There is no doubt that the “African socio-cultural context” is the subject of much African biblical scholarship, and that the African socio-cultural context saturates the forms of engagement between the African biblical scholar and ordinary African users of the Bible in his/her community. Included within the African socio-cultural context are both the particulars of specific African contexts, determined by careful phenomenological, socio-anthropological, historical, social and religious analysis (Ukpong, 1995:11-12), and general significant features that characterise the African world-view: a unitary view of reality, a divine origin of the universe and an integral connectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos, a sense of community in which people are because they are in relation to other people, and an emphasis on the concrete and pragmatic. Though not exhaustive, these features are common to most, if not all, African world-views (Ukpong, 1995:8-9).

This third way makes the ordinary African ‘reader’ and her/his context the subject of interpretation and African biblical scholars do their scholarship in this context. In Ukpong’s analysis, however, the emphasis is different with respect to what each of the partners brings to the collaborative interpretative process. Ordinary ‘readers’ bring their reality and biblical scholars bring their interpretative tools. This division of labour may characterise much of African biblical scholarship, but the boundaries are not always this clear. Ukpong himself

⁷ One could make a similar argument with respect to literary modes of reading.

⁸ David Tombs’ study of how the sexual abuse of Latin American citizens by the military might shed light on the possible sexual abuse of Jesus during his detention is another, and particularly illuminating, example of how the experiences of peoples in the present might serve the predominant concerns of biblical scholars (see Tombs, 1999).

mentions the important presence of “popular approaches to the Bible” (Ukpong, 1996) and, commenting on my work, makes it clear that the ordinary African context provides both “the critical resources for biblical interpretation and the subject of interpretation” (Ukpong, 2000a:23).

So, both Ukpong and I include not only the socio-cultural context of ordinary African ‘readers’ as definitive of our (and African) scholarship, but also their “critical resources.” This then leads me to my fourth and (for now) final way in which ordinary African Bible users might be said to constitute African biblical scholarship – through their interpretative resources. But while we can and do characterise the African socio-cultural context we still have some way to go in properly characterising nonscholarly African critical interpretative resources. To put it differently, while ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible partially constitute African biblical scholarship in the ways reflected on above, what does this include by way of their dealings with the Bible as *text*? Their questions and experiences clearly do make a significant contribution, but what about their interpretative strategies with respect to text, the scholar’s domain of training and expertise?

In my own work I have stressed that we ought to allow the interpretative interests and strategies of ordinary African ‘readers’ to constitute African biblical scholarship. I am using the phrase ‘interpretative interests’ here in the way that it is used by Stephen Fowl (Fowl, 1990). Briefly, Fowl suggests that instead of talking about the ‘meaning’ of a text, we explicate ‘meaning’ in terms of interpretative interests; interpretative interests being those dimensions of text that particular biblical scholars privilege as the location of ‘meaning,’ whether this be in the text itself (literary, structuralist, etc.), behind the text (historical-critical, socio-historical, etc.) or in-front-of-the-text (symbolic, metaphorical, etc.) (see West, 1995:131-173). What, then, are the interpretative interests of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible, and what role do they play in African biblical scholarship?

4. Ordinary African modes of ‘reading’

There is no precision in African biblical scholarship as to the interpretative interests of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible, though recent work is beginning to take up the task of characterising their modes of reading (Ukpong, 2000b, Mijoga, 2000). My own work in this area so far also makes an attempt, but succeeds only in sketching the domain of interpretative interests in rather broad strokes (West, 1999:79-107). I play with and explore a range of metaphors in an attempt to grasp some of the dimensions of ordinary Africans’ engagement with the biblical text, arguing that ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible ‘re-member’ a ‘dis-membered’ Bible, by means of “guerilla exegesis” (Hendricks, 1995), by reading with the nose (de Oliveria, 1995), by a process of “engraf(ph)ting” (Fulkerson, 1994:152), by “a looseness, even a playfulness” towards text (Wimbush, 1991:88-89), and, I would add, by “conjuring” with text (Smith, 1994) and a hermeneutic of “strangeness” (Camp, 1993:166-169). All of this is wonderfully suggestive and provides a host of impulses for digging deeper and becoming more precise. And, as I have said, African biblical scholarship is not averse to these textual resources of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible, particularly on the countless occasions when African biblical scholars and ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible read together in the churches and communities.

But, I want to ask, what explicit place do such interpretative interests and reading strategies have in the other locations of African biblical scholarship, the biblical studies context of the academy? Is there a place for the interpretative interests of ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible in the academy? As Ukpong’s analysis indicates (see also LeMarquand, 2000b) and as Knut Holter would concur from the perspective of African Old Testament scholarship (Holter, 2000b, Holter, 2000a), our academies, whether seminaries or universities, tend to bracket (at best) the textual interpretative ‘reading’ resources of ordinary Africans.

A large part of placing these reading resources in parenthesis in our scholarship and pedagogy is that we do not know how to characterise or categorise them. We have no trouble at all in documenting and displaying the varied interpretative interests and methods of western biblical scholarship; our libraries are full of such secondary accounts of biblical studies method – even if in many of our African libraries the books are rather outdated – and we ourselves are fairly familiar with these methods, having been trained in them, whether in African institutions or elsewhere away from the continent. We, then, perpetuate the cycle, training the next generation to do as we have done. Fortunately, such is the powerful presence of our African realities that we cannot but help being retrained by ordinary African ‘readers’ of the Bible and their lived experience as soon as we venture outside. But is this lurch in terms of reading practice as we move in and out of the academy necessary or desirable?

A negative answer is offered further support by the contention in the work of Vincent Wimbush that early African American (African slaves in America) encounters with the Bible have functioned “as phenomenological, socio-political and cultural foundation” for subsequent periods (Wimbush, 1993:131). If Wimbush is right in asserting that the array of interpretative strategies forged in the earliest encounters of African Americans with the Bible are foundational, in the sense that all other African American readings are in some sense built upon and judged by them, then such analysis has tremendous hermeneutical significance for our current contexts. What Wimbush’s work suggests, and its contribution lies in its heuristic capacity rather than in its detail, is that ordinary African American readers of the Bible embody a long history of biblical hermeneutical strategies that can be traced back to the formative encounters with the Bible’s they encounter in the hands of their masters and mistresses, and which they began to appropriate, both by watching how whites used this book and by forging their own interpretative resources so that they could wrest control of this potentially powerful book (Wimbush, 1991, Wimbush, 1993). Further, his work emphasises the layered nature of ordinary African American biblical interpretation, reminding us that whatever we might do in the academy is just one more layer. Not only do ordinary African American readers (and African ‘readers’) of the Bible not come to seminary and university empty handed – without interpretative strategies, but what they do bring has been foundationally shaped by the very earliest encounters of their ancestors with the Bible.

While this is not the place to pursue the historical dimensions of Wimbush’s work, I want, briefly, to pick up the hermeneutical trail along the historical trajectory of African biblical interpretation – in the present.

5. Biblical interpretation as *marabi*

In the present the Bible is central to the lived faith of ordinary African Christians. While some Black and African theologians may wish this was not the case, even those who raise real

questions about the Bible in Africa – Takatso Mofokeng (Mofokeng, 1988), Itumeleng Mosala (Mosala, 1989), Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Oduyoye, 1995), Musa Dube (Dube, 2000) and Tinyiko Maluleke (Maluleke, 2000) – acknowledge that the Bible is a significant resource for African Christians. Maluleke, probably the most nuanced of African theologians on this matter, acknowledges this quite specifically, pointing to the many ways in which the Bible is a resource in Africa: as the most widely translated book it makes a contribution to the construction of indigenous grammars and texts, it is a basic textbook in primary and higher education, literacy has been closely tied to Bible reading and memorization, it is the

most accessible basic vernacular literature text, a storybook, a compilation of novels and short stories, a book of prose and poetry, a book of spiritual devotion (i.e. the ‘Word of God’) as well as a ‘science’ book that ‘explains’ the origins of all creatures. In some parts of Africa, the dead are buried with the Bible on their chests, and the Bible is buried into the concrete foundations on which new houses are to be built. In many African Independent Churches it is the physical contact between the sick and the Bible that is believed to hasten healing (Maluleke, 2000:91-92).

Clearly African Christians relate to the Bible in various ways, and this is Maluleke’s point (and mine), *that we recognise the diverse ways in which ordinary Africans actually engage with the Bible*. This, I would argue, is a task for *African* biblical scholarship. And, as Maluleke has suggested, there are two related components to the task: to analyse how ordinary Africans actually *read* and *view* the Bible (Maluleke, 1996:15).

My own work mentioned above on indigenous interpretative techniques, painted in broad strokes, is an attempt to tackle the first of these components.⁹ Bewitched as I am by tools of the west and intrigued as I am by the fine texture of texts, my emphasis has been on how ordinary African Bible users interpret the Bible as written text. Ordinary Africans do engage with the Bible as an opened text. The Bible is read. Even those who cannot read have it read to them by those who can. Every ordinary reader, then, whether literate or not, interprets the read text, the Bible as text. But I need to hone my analysis more carefully than I have so far if I am going to do justice to the reading resources of my students and the local communities of the poor and marginalised with whom we in the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) read the Bible (West, 2000a).¹⁰

Emerging work in the interface between orality and literacy and my own preliminary analysis of neo-indigenous forms of biblical interpretation have yielded a finer, though still tentative, account of what might be called a “neo-traditional” hermeneutic. This phrase, which I have borrowed, together with a whole series of yet-to-be-developed associations, from Christopher Ballantine’s fine study of early South African jazz (Ballantine, 1993:26), denotes the derivation of early forms of South African jazz, *marabi*, from traditional African musics. Fundamental to indigenous African musics is “a cyclic harmonic pattern.” This rhythmic repetition of harmonic

⁹ For an account of the former, and the inseparability of these two dimensions among ordinary African users of the Bible, see (Adamo, 1999, Adamo, 2000).

¹⁰ It is important that I locate my research quite specifically in these contexts, concerned as I am to avoid the commodification of yet another ‘native’ artifact (Boer, 1998:37).

patterns, provided traditionally by a drum or, in an urban situation, “a player shaking a tin filled with small stones,” formed the ‘root progression’ on top of which melodies (and sometimes lyrics) were superimposed. These melodies too followed a cyclical form, with

cyclical repetitions of one melody or melodic fragment yielding eventually, perhaps, to a similar treatment of another melody or fragment, and perhaps then still others, each melody possibly from a different source. And in this manner “you played with no stop – you could play for an hour-and-a-half without stopping.” (Ballantine, 1993:26-27).

The cited quotation within my quotation, from an interview conducted by Ballantine with *marabi* musician Edward Sililo, captures another aspect of this neo-traditional form of interpretation: its duration. That *marabi* goes on and on is an element of its form. But duration is not an end in itself, which becomes clear when we listen to Wilson Silgee’s recollection of what it was like to attend a *marabi* party:

Marabi: that was the environment! It was either organ but mostly piano. You get there, you pay your ten cents. You get your scale [drinking vessel] of whatever concoction there is, then you dance. It used to start Friday night right through Sunday evening. You get tired, you go home, go and sleep, come back again: bob a time, each time you get in. The piano and with the audience making a lot of noise. Trying to make some theme out of what is playing (cited in Ballantine, 1993:28-29).

There is almost an element of contestation in this description; *marabi* is a communal attempt to make some common sense or theme “out of what is playing.” *Marabi* is a communal and cyclical (and, perhaps, contested) act of interpretation.

While *marabi* was (and in its evolving forms still is) the interpretative form (of music) of secular social occasions (Ballantine, 1993:26), particularly in black urban areas, its form mirrors the interpretation of the Bible in countless African churches of all and every denomination and in both rural and urban contexts. *Marabi* as music and *marabi* as a metaphor for biblical interpretation are examples of those “purposive act[s] of reconstruction” in which indigenous peoples have “created a middle ground between a displaced ‘traditional’ order and a modern world whose vitality was both elusive and estranging,” by “the repositioning of signs in sequences of practice,” a *bricolage*, that promises “to subvert the divisive structures of colonial society, returning to the displaced a tangible identity and the power to impose coherence upon a disarticulated world” (Comaroff, 1985:253-254).¹¹

But my use of *marabi* to designate forms of indigenous African biblical interpretation is more than a metaphor; the hermeneutic moves which characterise *marabi* are found in other neo-indigenous forms. In his attempt at “developing a new critical methodology for oral texts,” Duncan Brown tracks, historically and hermeneutically, the traces of a “cyclical construction” that, in his words, “appears to be bound up with African ontology which (in contrast to the linear,

¹¹ The work of Jean Comaroff cited here is profoundly relevant to my study. Her study provides a remarkable analysis of how this people appropriate aspects of Protestant orthodoxy and European colonialism which are then “resituated within practices that promise to redirect their flow back to the impoverished, thus healing their afflictions” (Comaroff 1985:253).

progressive , and teleological colonial-Christian model) emphasises the circularity of religious , social and historical life” (Brown, 1998:107). Brown finds this cyclical patterning in a diverse range of African oral forms: in the songs and stories of the /Xam ‘Bushmen’ (66), in the formal public praise-poems (*izibongo*) of the Zulu praise poets (*izimbongi*)(107), in the hymns of Christian prophet Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites (150), in the Black Consciousness poetry of Soweto poet Ingoapele Madingoane (184), and in the political resistance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula (229).

Brown’s description of the hymns of Isaiah Shembe is remarkable for its resonance with my discussion of *marabi* above. Brown reminds us of the work of Bengt Sundkler in which Sundkler stresses that “The hymn is not first of all a versified statement about certain religious facts. The hymn is sacred rhythm. And the rhythm is naturally accentuated by the swinging to and fro of their bodies, but loud hand-clapping and by beating the drum” (Sundkler, 1948:196, cited in Brown 1998:150).

The start of the dance is signalled by the beating of the ughubu drum [the Nazarite drum which has a central place in their worship], and the hymn leader then begins to sing. She or he may begin at any point in the hymn, offering a lead which is taken up by the group of singers. Rhythm takes precedence over textual fidelity to linear structure (beginning-middle-end), and the singing of a four-verse hymn may last for up to an hour, with the leader taking the group through the hymn many times, not always in the same verse order, and ending at any point in the hymn (Brown, 1998:150).

Moving from description into analysis, via the work of Carol Muller (Muller, 1994:136), Brown underlines Muller’s argument that

Shembe’s “reinsertion of the traditional concept of cyclicity into the articulation of ritual time and space” has political implications in the colonial context of the hymns’ generation and performance: “Isaiah’s insistence on this trope most powerfully reflected the symbolic contest between colonized and colonizer, whose organization of time and space was symbolized in the principle of linearity” (Brown, 1998:150, citing Muller 1994:136).

The particular usefulness of Brown’s study is that it does have an historical dimension. Both the songs and stories of the /Xam and the praise-poems of indigenous southern African peoples predate the missionaries and colonisers. Though not always as detailed as I would like, Brown’s hermeneutic analysis is suggestive for my own project, identifying as he does a communal cyclical interpretative process, founded on a rhythmic form (whether of drumming, dancing, singing, or praying). The emerging ‘text’ is constructed on cycles of repetition which participants may contribute to by making “‘cuts’ back to a prior series through an explicit repetition of elements which have gone before” (Brown 1998:107-108).

We find just such a communal and cyclical process of interpretation of the Bible in almost every black southern African church.¹² To date the only analysis of this interpretative phenomenon is

¹² This form of interpretation can be found in so-called ‘main-line’ churches (missionary instituted churches), though not usually on Sunday’s. All-night-vigils and women’s groups are the favoured sites for this form in main-line churches.

found in the work of Musa Dube (Dube, 2000:190-192, Dube, 1996:119-121).¹³ She characterises this form of interpretation, what she calls a *Semoya* (of the Spirit) reading, as a communal and participatory mode of interpretation through the use of songs, dramatised narration and repetition (Dube, 2000:190). The text, decided on for the occasion by an individual, once read, becomes the property of the group. All, both young and old, women and men, clergy and laity “are free to stand up and expound on the text in their own understanding.” While they are doing this, listeners may “contribute to the interpretation by occasionally interrupting with a song that expounds on the theme of the passage,” or the “interpreter herself/himself can pause and begin a song that expresses the meaning of the passage” (190). Listeners, through song, participate in the interpretation of the passage. Such interruption-interpretations are particularly significant, suggests Dube, because of the form that exposition tends to take.

The predominant form of exposition is “largely grounded on the assumption that ‘a story well told is a story well interpreted’” (Dube, 2000:190, Mijoga, 2000:49-60):

This indigenous method of interpretation capitalizes on recalling, narrating, and dramatizing the story without explicitly defining what it means. Instead, the meaning is articulated by graphically bringing the story to life through a dramatic narration.

Even those who lack a particular gift for dramatic representation recall and retell the story, “almost verbatim.” In every case, whether the performance is dramatic or pedantic, the nuances of interpretation are “to be read in the interjected songs and the repeated phrases” (190). Particular songs, interjected in particular places, and particular repetitions constitute and contribute to the communal interpretation, contending for meaning for as long as it takes around the cyclical axis of preaching.

Wilson Silgee’s account of *marabi* above could be an account of an African Christian revival service or an all-night-vigil, with a few modifications. Exchange the Spirit for the alcoholic concoction and the Bible for the piano, and you have ordinary Africans “trying to make some theme out of what is playing/preaching.” My own unfinished fieldwork on Southern African forms of neo-indigenous biblical hermeneutics, made possible by the respectful and resourceful fieldwork of Gopolang Moloabi, resonates strongly with the interpretative patterns discerned by others. Moloabi’s transcripts of revival/vigil-type services, while yet to be analysed in detail, amply demonstrate the interpretative devices detected in the work of those discussed above.

6. Presence and pattern: tracking ‘critical’

The detailed analysis this fieldwork demands will be done elsewhere; here I want to assert *the presence* of neo-indigenous interpretative strategies, and their *patterned* form. But the question that has hovered over this article from the beginning is whether such patterns can be construed as ‘critical.’ I concede that this patterning is not exactly the structured and systematic questioning

¹³ Hilary Mijoga’s recent study of preaching in African Instituted Churches in southern Malawi does not deal explicitly with this cyclical form of preaching, but his book is invaluable in providing a full and detailed account of the many facets of AIC preaching (Mijoga, 2000).

that characterises more familiar forms of exegesis. But it is not entirely dissimilar either.¹⁴ In a recent article, Duncan Brown has taken his work on indigenous hermeneutical forms further, arguing that some of the skills of tracking “are akin to those of much Western intellectual analysis” (Brown, 2001:80). Drawing on Edward Chamberlin’s work on the history of reading (Chamberlin, 2000) and Louis Liebenberg’s work on the art of tracking and the origin of science (Liebenberg, 1990), Brown pieces together a compelling argument for recognising important “affinities between tracking and reading.” “Spoor requires decoding, involving the analysis of signs in context, the creation of hypotheses, and so on: the same cognitive processes as reading printed texts” (Brown, 2001:78).

My argument is quite simple. Reading comes before writing; and the cognitive advances we sometimes associate with literacy were fully evident tens of thousands of years ago, and still are today in contemporary hunter-gatherer societies. Specifically, the complex balancing of letter and spirit, or sign and meaning, which we identify with reading practices that developed from classical through medieval to Renaissance Europe, was flourishing in a very sophisticated form in the intellectual dynamics of ancient tracking in indigenous societies around the world (Chamberlin, cited in Brown, 2001:78).

Chamberlin’s argument is based extensively on Louis Liebenberg’s analysis of the art of tracking in the Kalahari, in which she argues that what she calls “speculative tracking” – “the creation of a working hypothesis on the basis of the initial interpretation of signs, a knowledge of animal behaviour and knowledge of the terrain” – “involves a fundamentally new way of thinking” (Liebenberg, 1990 #3704:29, cited in Brown, 2001:79), “a continuous process of conjecture and refutation to deal with complex, dynamic, ever-changing variables” (Liebenberg, 1990 #3704:45, cited in Brown, 2001:79). In other words, speculative tracking “involves an interaction between the imaginative and the *critical* faculties, between invention and discovery, and between teleological and mechanistic explanations; that is, a constant interplay between hypotheses and the logical consequences they give rise to” (Chamberlin, cited in Brown, 2001:79, my emphasis).

I could go on, delving deeper into indigenous hermeneutic forms, like tracking, and neo-indigenous hermeneutic forms, like *marabi*,¹⁵ but I believe I have made my point: talk of indigenous exegesis is not misplaced, sharing as it does a number of critical features with forms of exegesis we western trained biblical scholars are more familiar with. Furthermore, *marabi*-like interpretation is a form of “popular critique,” to use Masoga’s phrase, which “challenges the view that sees peripheral readers as naïve and pre-critical” (Masoga, 2002:102, 107).¹⁶

¹⁴ In a soon to be published article (Tshehla, Forthcoming), Maarman Sam Tshehla pushes the discussion further by insisting that indigenous exegesis must be “mother tongue exegesis.” As he notes in his article and in his comments on this article of mine, such a conception would have profound implications for our pedagogy, emphasising as it does “the use of the student’s mother tongue in theological reflection and biblical exegesis as a bridge between academic and non-academic readings.” He also contends that an emphasis on “structured and systematic” are “a function of literacy education, and thus an illegitimate comparative for the majority of South Africans. The latter’s oral performances have a certain ‘order’ to them – but the emphasis is on communal appropriation and not on individual reflection.” And, he would add, conventional scholarship, with its differently structured and systematic tools is inadequate for the task of analysing oral performances.

¹⁵ *Marabi* as a metaphor for neo-indigenous biblical interpretation might be thought of as a form of biblical and theological tracking!

¹⁶ I also want here to claim space for this form of exegesis in our pedagogy. Recognising its presence in our students is a first step; analysing its contours more carefully is an important second step that still awaits us, as is a third step, that of exploring its engagement and interface with our familiar forms of exegesis.

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