

Jesus, our Liberator: An Intercultural Dialogue

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Abstract

Do contextual readings have value? And by contextual is meant re-readings of the text that take into account the contextual situatedness of the reader. With advances in the study of hermeneutics, there is the recognition of the two-sided nature of historical conditioning. While the text stands in a given historical context and tradition, so does the interpreter, and the two are in constant engagement. In addition, the Christian faith is a multi-dimensional faith. Christological studies have, understandably, used Western categories. The question is, given multidimensionality, might there be other categories that better speak to us in our contextual and historical situatedness? This paper shows that an intercultural approach to the gospel of John will uncover facets of the Johannine Jesus that may not be immediately evident to Western readers. It begins with a brief introduction to how the Bible is read in Africa. This is followed by an overview of African Christologies to establish

the current views. It is proposed that the view of Jesus as liberator best captures who the Johannine Jesus is in an African context. In order to arrive at this conclusion, an African intercultural hermeneutic will be applied to the text of John 8:31–47. It is hoped that such an approach will provide a more holistic understanding of Christology for African believers as well as complement existing Christologies.

1. Introduction

Do contextual readings have value? With advances in the study of hermeneutics, there is the recognition of the two-sided nature of historical conditioning. As Thiselton (2005, 11) points out, the interpreter also stands in a given historical context and tradition; and the text and the interpreter are in constant engagement.

As an example, take the story of the tortoise and the hare that is common in many parts of the world.

Keywords

contextual, Christology, intercultural hermeneutics, four-legged stool, Johannine Jesus

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Tortoise challenges hare to a race and of course nobody expects him to win. What tortoise does is to recruit his relatives and place them strategically along the path of the race. Each one jumps out of the bush ahead of hare in sequence as the one behind him hides to avoid being seen. At the end of the race, tortoise is the undisputed winner. Without knowing which rules to apply, or “how to read,” one might misunderstand this story to be a criticism of tortoise’s deception. This story actually teaches that cooperation is necessary in society. It is also a story that emphasizes the importance of honor in an honor/shame culture. It “is an appeal to a higher moral ethic, and that ethic is that a family (or village or clan) must work together in unity to see that disgrace never comes to it” (Buchele 2020). Our contextual situatedness leads us to different ways of reading this story. This paper proposes that contextual re-readings are valid because they reveal insights we might not otherwise see.

This paper will show that an intercultural approach to the Gospel of John uncovers fresh facets of the Johannine Jesus.¹ It begins with a brief overview of how the Bible is read in Africa and of African Christologies. An African intercultural hermeneutic will then be applied to the text of John 8:31–47 to uncover the overriding Christological theme of “liberator” that emerges and its implications. It is hoped that such an approach will provide a more holistic understanding of Christology for African believers and that it will complement existing Christologies.

2. Reading the Bible in Africa

Hermeneutics is not new to Africa. African literature demonstrates that there are rules to interpreting stories, poetry, proverbs, riddles, and songs that make understanding possible. Where the Bible is concerned, history

¹ For an application of this model to Galatians, see Mburu (forthcoming).

records that interpretation of the Bible was being done by Africans almost two thousand years ago. Some of the most important early interpreters of the Bible include church fathers like Origen and Augustine in northern Africa. More recently, missionaries re-introduced biblical hermeneutics into Africa, inevitably bringing with them cultural baggage from their Western context. Because colonization was also taking place at the same time, some Africans have objected to Western approaches, preferring instead to “decolonize” hermeneutics. Consequently, biblical hermeneutics in Africa generally tend to be liberational and against the colonial missionary enterprise (Mburu, forthcoming).

Much biblical interpretation is done by ordinary Christians or church leaders at the “grassroots” level, for example, in worship, prayer, and preaching. African biblical hermeneutics is not limited to academic study or even written forms of interpretation, but also includes oral hermeneutical reflection (Van den Toren, Mburu, and Bussey 2021). It also tends to be functional. In other words, how does the text speak to concrete, contextual realities being experienced by African people? How Africans approach the discipline of biblical hermeneutics may look different from that of the West, as it includes both the theories of interpretation as well as general principles and methods implicit in practices of interpretation (Van den Toren, Mburu, and Bussey 2021). There is the consensus now that Africans need to move away from the Western approaches that have been imposed on us, because they promote a “foreign” way of reading the Bible that introduces a “double hermeneutical gap.” This is the general impetus or motivation behind the approach of this paper.

As with all hermeneutical approaches, there are some weaknesses to look out for. One, some of these approaches encourage syncretism. This is particularly true of those approaches that give equal or almost equal weight to the African (particularly religious) context. Of course, syncretism is not

just an African problem. Two, some of these approaches make the reader more important than the author or the text. Three, some impose meaning on the text because of an overemphasis on what the reader needs to hear. This results in a distortion because what the author intended to communicate or even what the text actually says might be ignored. Four, some collapse the two horizons of meaning and significance by moving directly from text to application without fully engaging in interpretation. Again, this distorts the intended meaning of the text. Five, there is the risk of a canon within a canon. Some methods might focus only on texts that are relevant to them and ignore the larger biblical metanarrative.

3. Overview of African Christologies

While Western categories are useful, we also need a Christology that is deeply relevant to the lived experiences of African people. It cannot be an abstract, philosophical Christology. An African Christology simultaneously asks the questions, “Who is Christ?” and “How does he affect my life?” To answer these questions, various African scholars have come up with categories that resonate with the church in Africa. While these are not limited to the Gospel of John, they are nevertheless important in helping us situate ourselves in the current context of African studies related to Jesus Christ.

Scholars generally propose two categories of African Christology. According to Wachege (1992, 176), Nyamiti (1989), and Stinton (2004), African Christology is divided into Christologies of liberation and Christologies of inculturation. Most scholars lean towards this categorization. Charles De Jongh (2008, 3) introduces another paradigm. He identifies two main trends which he describes as cultural and functional. While useful, these two-fold categorizations are nevertheless limiting.

Some titles of Jesus Christ that have emerged from various African Christologies include Liberator (Takatso Mafokeng, Allan Boesak, Jean

Marc Ela, Laurenti Magesa, T. Souga, L. Tappa, M. A. Oduyoye, and E. Amoah, to name some), Chief, Master of Initiation (championed originally by Anselme Titianma Sanon), Healer (Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike), Ancestor (Charles Nyamiti [brother-ancestor] and Benezet Bujo [proto-ancestor]), and Victor (John Mbiti) (Gathogo 2015).

4. An Intercultural Approach to the Johannine Jesus

How does this relate to our approach to the Johannine Jesus? The Christian faith is a multi-dimensional faith. Multi-dimensionality recognizes that while theology is universal, it must also be specific to specific contexts. In other words, multidimensionality captures “the global character of the Christian faith.”² Pobe (1992, 15) rightly argues for a cultural consideration in Christology in Africa and affirms that it is “important who the African is, because *homo Africanus* is encountered by Christ as he or she is.”

In surveying the history of Johannine research in Africa, van der Watt (2015) notes that, in recent times, African scholars have promoted inculturation (intercultural) readings of the text. A critical analysis of intercultural readings reveals that it takes the context in which the interpreter is found seriously (Ukachukwu 2003, 32). Indeed, the variety of indigenous interpretive resources that Africans used with their oral traditions should be viewed as a valuable resource in the hermeneutical task (West 2005, 6).

² This is a dominant theme that characterized Lamin Sanneh’s writings.

5. Approach: The Four-Legged Stool

The method used here lies in the cultural trend. However, as is the case with many African Christologies, it does not make a clear distinction between ontology and functionality. African scholars that have employed an intercultural approach that provided insight into the model used here include Ukpong, Ukachukwu, and Loba-Mkole.³

This intercultural approach is based on the concept of moving from the known to the unknown.⁴ It uses the readers' contexts as a starting point, moving directly from theories, methods, and categories that are familiar in our world into the more unfamiliar world of the Bible, without taking a detour through any foreign methods. Foreign methods introduce a double hermeneutical gap. This occurs when a reader is forced to confront at least two cultures in the process of interpretation. For African readers, this includes the Western culture since most hermeneutical methods currently in use in Africa are developed in Western contexts. Readers face the challenge of first understanding the assumptions inherent in these methods before dealing with those in the biblical texts. It recognizes that parallels between biblical and African cultures and worldviews can be used as bridges to promote understanding, internalization, and application of the biblical text. It, therefore, has an intercultural dialogue as its basis. It is similar to what Jesus and Paul did. This approach proposes that the biblical culture, as well as African material and non-material culture, should play a significant role in hermeneutics intended for an African audience. It incorporates techniques and categories found in African literature—both

³ See van der Watt (2015) for a summary of other scholars that have provided contextual readings within the African context such as Kang (2003), Dube (1992), Ngele (2011), and Ahoua (2008).

⁴ The following summary of this intercultural method throughout the paper is taken from Mburu (2019).

oral as well as post-colonial. It applies principles of interpreting genres such as African stories, proverbs, songs, and similar genres to the biblical text (Mburu 2019). This approach recognizes that there are numerous African worldviews but that the commonalities make it possible to address African worldview as a single entity.

This approach is described using the metaphor of a four-legged stool (Mburu 2019, 65–69). Each of the legs, as well as the seat, are steps that move the process of interpretation forward. It is interdisciplinary in methodology and recognizes the importance of culture and worldview, as well as the theological, literary, and historical aspects of the text. While these steps are distinctly separate for purposes of analysis, it is understood that there is overlap between them as each step must necessarily enhance the others until greater precision in understanding is achieved—much like the so-called “hermeneutical spiral” in Western hermeneutics (Osborne 2010, 22–23). This approach does not collapse the contexts of author, text, and reader. All three stand in a context that must be interrogated, and the two horizons of meaning and significance are kept distinct.

6. An Intercultural Analysis of John 8:31–47

This text raises two crucial questions, both of which are surrounded by controversy around Jesus's identity. The first question is “Whose Son is Jesus?” and the second, “Whose children are the Jews?” The narrator develops the plot in such a way that at the end of this text we recognize that the second question can only be answered in light of the first. This dialogue between Jesus and the Jews aptly captures the essence of the conflict between belief and unbelief that drives the entire narrative of John and is therefore a valid representation of the purpose statement (20:31). A global view will be taken in identifying representative parallels from the gospel as

a whole. For practical reasons, the rest of the model will be applied to the specific text of John 8:31–47.

6.1 *Leg 1: Parallels to the African context (both traditional as well as modern)*

The first leg primarily involves identifying parallels between our African contexts and the biblical text. It is a bridge between the two contexts that allows us to do two things. One, to understand the biblical text from a familiar position. These “shared mutual interests” (Ukachukwu 2003, 25) orient the listener as to how to hear and interpret the text and form the basis on which the narrator earns the right “to be heard.” Two, to examine ourselves so that we correct any faulty assumptions that may hinder the interpretive process. It guides us in identifying both points of contact as well as differences with the biblical context. Space allows us to focus only on two aspects, namely, parallels within the socio-cultural and the religious contexts.

6.1.1 Socio-cultural parallels

a) Negative ethnicity

The first socio-cultural parallel is negative ethnicity. The concept of the ethnic group has both an objective and subjective dimension. The subjective dimension is characterized by the presence of socio-psychological boundaries whose major characteristics are group-inclusion and exclusion (Bokombe n.d., 3). The African worldview regarding people can best be described as “existence-in-relationship,” (Gehman 2005, 52),⁵ also known as *Ubuntu*. This positive aspect of our worldview regarding anthropology provides the

⁵ This phrase was originally coined by Swailem Sidhom.

African with a unifying worldview. However, ethnic identity is so strong that the “other” is often regarded in dehumanizing terms. This results in negative ethnicity expressed through ethnic rivalries that often lead to violent conflicts, and is fueled by historical, political, social, economic, and religious factors.⁷

Negative ethnicity is also seen in this gospel. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans had deep historical roots. Jews hated Gentiles because they believed that their Jewishness made them ethnically and religiously superior. Texts in which Samaritans are mentioned in a negative way include John 4:1–42 (the Samaritan woman) and John 8:48 (in which Jesus is disparagingly called a Samaritan and demon-possessed in the same breath). Our situations of negative ethnicity help us relate to the ethnic tensions that dot the landscape of this gospel.

b) Gender Inequalities

The second socio-cultural parallel is gender inequalities. Our understanding of gender has deep roots in our traditional cultures, and some gender problems in Africa predate the arrival of Islam and Christianity, as well as the colonial era (Mombo 2020, loc. 9969). Even in modern Africa, there are obvious gender disparities. This is because patriarchal cultural ideas and practices are still dominant in many parts of the continent, even where modernization and globalization have had an impact. These differences in status and value are closely linked with the culturally and socially defined roles assigned to men and women (loc. 4945–4947).

Gender issues in John must also be understood from a historical

⁶ For this perspective, see <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2013/01/2013116142546193334.html>.

perspective. Gender inequalities are reflected in the stories of the Samaritan woman and the woman caught in adultery (John 4:1–42; 8:1–11). In the first century, women had almost no rights in society and were oppressed in every area of life (Oepke [1964] 2006, 777). Although there are a few instances in which women are referred to positively (for instance, in a culture where the testimony of women was considered meaningless, Jesus chose a woman to be the first witness to his resurrection), in general women were openly despised (ibid.).

6.1.2 Religious Parallels

a) Spiritual blindness

The first religious parallel is spiritual blindness. While there are many sound churches in Africa, there are also many deceptive doctrines that are propagated by religious leaders to the detriment of the people. In an environment where false “gospels” bombard us from every direction, fueled by modern technology and the digital age, the truth is often difficult to recognize. The most prominent false teaching is the prosperity health and wealth gospel. This is now manifesting itself in some forms of Neopentecostalism that overemphasize power encounters, deliverance from ancestral and other curses, signs and wonders, as well as placing an emphasis on objects believed to have power. There are also many thriving cults.

The theme of spiritual blindness runs like a thread throughout the gospel. However, this theme is epitomized by the Jewish religious leaders and the Jewish religious establishment in general. The story of the man born blind (John 9) is the best illustration of this theme. The irony of this narrative is that Jesus is operating on two levels—the first is that of actual physical blindness while the second is the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees.

b) Syncretism

The second religious parallel is syncretism. While there are many cultural aspects that are positive, there are also many negative syncretistic beliefs and practices that confuse African Christians about what genuine biblical faith and practice should be. Syncretism is “the unresolved, unassimilated, and tension-filled mixing of Christian ideas with local custom and ritual.” (Sanneh 2003, 44). In a rejection of the identity imposed on them by “others,” many African Christians seek to redefine their identity by looking back to traditional religious beliefs and practices resulting in “double loyalty” or “dual belonging” (Galgalo 2012, 27). Witchcraft is one of the major manifestations. The African worldview(s) regarding external reality and dynamism means that people seek to gain power and control over their circumstances in any way possible (Turaki 2006, 34–35). However, syncretism is not purely an African phenomenon, and it exists everywhere that the Church is found.

Samaritans reflected a syncretistic religious orientation. The Samaritan Pentateuch consisted only of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They rejected all the other texts. They also believed that Mount Gerizim, not the temple in Jerusalem, was the place appointed by God for sacrifice and worship. Additionally, they also believed in the return of Moses as *Taheb* (the “restorer” or “returning one”), who was primarily a political figure but who was also expected to restore true worship, since he was of the tribe of Levi (Williamson and Evans 2000, 1059).

6.2 Leg 2: Theological Context

The second leg is the theological context. In Africa, biblical hermeneutics is inseparable from theological reflection, as the emphasis is generally to address contextual realities within our culture (West 2005, 4). Since this model recognizes a distinct separation in the two horizons of meaning and

significance,⁸ application at this point, while expected, can only be tentative. As is characteristic of the Johannine style, the theological emphases of this text are expressed in contrasts.

6.2.1 Belief versus unbelief

The first theme is belief versus unbelief. Belief in Jesus is the central theological theme, not only in this text, but in the gospel as a whole. John highlights the unbelief of the Jews. Although they think that their ethnic heritage as Abraham's descendants is enough, they are wrong. Their spiritual blindness is evidence of their estrangement from God, regardless of their ethnic identity.

6.2.2 Sonship versus slavery

The second theme is sonship versus slavery. Those who accept Jesus and hold to his teachings are God's sons. On the other hand, those who reject Jesus are slaves to sin. God is not their father. Rather, their familial line is traced all the way back to the devil. Although they are ethnically Abraham's descendants, their works reveal their illegitimacy and hence their true spiritual identity as slaves and not sons.

6.2.3 Truth versus lies

The third theme is truth versus lies. In the context of this text, truth is the divine, liberating message revealed both in and through Jesus and is the only avenue through which true liberation from sins can be obtained. It is also the sphere in which God and Jesus operate. This truth is diametrically opposed to the very essence of the devil who is incapable of functioning in truth. Those who reject Jesus's truth automatically function in the sphere of the devil.

⁷ See Hirsch (1978, 79–80) for this distinction.

6.2.4 Tentative application

There are two tentative applications that emerge. First, Jesus Christ is the only one authorized by God to free humanity from the bondage of sin. Second, a rejection of the truth that Jesus is and brings is, in essence, a choice for the devil.

6.3 Leg 3: Literary Context

The third leg is the literary context.⁸ Here one identifies the genre, literary techniques, language used, and the progression of the text.

6.3.1 Genre

A literary analysis begins with an identification of the text's genre. The Fourth Gospel, in general, provides us with challenges in isolating its genre, not least of which are due to its similarities to Greco-Roman "lives" or *Bioi*.⁹ However, because the "life" of Jesus is set in the broader context of Israel's history, it has an undisputed salvation-historical dimension. Because of this wider theological scale, the genre of this gospel may be understood as a historical theological narrative. This text falls into this category as well. African stories exist in two distinct but interconnected "worlds"— the world of the agents of communication and the world of the story. These provide us with an interpretive key.

⁸ A summarized version of this text is discussed in Mburu (2010).

⁹ Within the broader framework of "gospel," the Gospel of John has been characterized as a biography (*bios*) (included in this category are theological biography, historical biography, biography using different modes such as tragedy, and so forth), an aretology, history, a novel, Greek drama (whether tragedy or comedy), a new literary form, narrative, narrative Christology, Jewish Trial, and even a Jewish theodicy. For a discussion of these various options, note especially the discussions by Keener (2003, 1:4–11) and Guelich (1991, 173–208).

6.3.2 The world of the agents of communication

The agents of communication include the narrator and the listener. In biblical narratives, the narrator is usually the same as the author. Following the classic approach initially proposed by Westcott, it is likely that the author was a Jew, of Palestinian origin, an eyewitness, an apostle, the beloved disciple, John, the son of Zebedee.¹⁰ It is also likely that he was known to his readers and served as a guarantor of the oral tradition that stemmed from Jesus's ministry.¹¹

The listener is also usually the same as the original readers in written biblical narratives. As is the case with all the gospels, the life situation of Jesus (*sitz im leben Jesus*) and that of the Church (*sitz im leben der kirche*) must be considered. Scholars have disagreed as to whether the original readers were Jews or Gentiles. The narrator's emphasis on the new temple, conflict with the synagogues (16:2), as well as an emphasis on Pharisees suggests that "their opposition is somehow related to the opponents his readers face in their own communities" (Keener 2014, 246). This suggests a primarily Jewish audience.

6.3.3 The world of the story

Within the world of the story, we first identify the plot. Plot development in this text is structured around both the recognition, and the lack thereof, of Jesus's identity.¹² The conflict between belief and unbelief is evident as the narrator strives to uncover Jesus's identity through his interaction with

¹⁰ See Westcott (1975 [1881], v–xxviii) for the development of this idea. See also Blomberg (2001, 27–30) and Morris (1995, 218–292). Due to its limited scope, this study assumes certain conclusions regarding the historical background and composition of the Fourth Gospel, while at the same time conceding that there is by no means a consensus on most of these issues.

¹¹ For this discussion, see Bauckham (2006, 300–302).

¹² Culpepper (1987, 85–88) provides an excellent discussion of this plot and its development.

the Jews. There is "conscious plotting" by the narrator which reflects the clearly articulated purpose statement (20:30–31).¹³

The spatial setting is centered mainly in the temple courts (8:20, 59). Although the temporal setting is not clearly demarcated, this incident took place shortly after the end of the feast of Tabernacles (7:37). This is important because the narrator uses this incident to demonstrate that the feast is fulfilled in Jesus (see 8:12 and the reference to Jesus as the "light of the world").¹⁴

The narrator uses several literary and structural devices to weave his story. There is alternation between narration and dialogue, with the narration playing a supportive role. The dialogue in this story is contrastive with the characters expressing themselves in their own way, thus effectively revealing their ideological mentalities. Thus, the listener becomes part of the story as they identify with first one character, and then the other. Dialogue also slows down narrative time enabling us to experience a sense of "real-ness" and "immediacy" as we are caught up in the conversation. Other devices include the use of misunderstandings and irony which not only propel the plot forward but shift its direction in unexpected ways. The movement is therefore not purely linear as there are some surprises.

The story revolves around two characters: Jesus and the Jews. The term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel often carries negative overtones. The narrator generally uses it, not as an ethnic designation, but to characterize

¹³ Carson (1991, 90, 662) argues that this should be understood not as "Jesus is the Christ," but as "the Christ is Jesus," which has the effect of emphasizing kind rather than identifying. However, the context of this story points to identity.

¹⁴ By stating that he is the light of the world, in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus points to himself as the fulfilment of the torch-lighting ceremony that formed part of this feast (cf. 9:5) as well as all that the Torah signified with regard to light (cf. Ps 119:105; Wis 7:26) and life (cf. Deut 30:15–20; Sir 17:11; Prov 8:35). So Köstenberger (2004, 282) and Lincoln (2005, 265).

the response of unbelief concerning, and rejection of, Jesus's revelation.¹⁵ Through the development of the character of the Jews as they interact with Jesus, the narrator explores the heart and soul of unbelief.

6.3.4 Wider literary context

This text must be understood in light of its immediate literary context. In the sections just prior to our text (8:12–30), Jesus points the Jews to the authority of his Father, his sender, thus validating his testimony in accordance with their own law, which states that the testimony of two men is valid (8:17). In the section following (8:48–59), the Jews continue to refute Jesus's claims about himself. They fail to understand that the promises to Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is in this section that we find one of the "I am" statements (8:58). But even this testimony to Jesus's identity is rejected by the Jews who try to stone him for his blasphemy (8:59).

6.3.5 Analysis of the text¹⁶

a) Whose Son is Jesus? (8:31–38)

This section, beginning with the logical conjunction οὖν, consists of Jesus expounding on the true impact of his presence.¹⁷ It displays characteristics common to a trial or lawsuit as is evidenced by the repeated motif of testimony.¹⁸ The notion of testimony was crucial in Jewish society.¹⁹

15 While this is generally true, it is not always the case, as seen in 2:6 and 5:1 where it is neutral and in 4:22 where it is positive (salvation is from the Jews).

16 Some of the conclusions arrived at in this analysis have been taken from Mburu (2010).

17 It is possible that, rather than having merely a transitional force (so Wallace 1996, 674), the conjunction οὖν should be interpreted logically. See also Morris (1995, 404).

18 There are several other confrontations recorded by John that are also set in the form of interrogations or mini-trial scenes (cf. 5:19–47; 7:14–36; 8:12–58; 10:22–39). See Lincoln (2005, 8) for this discussion.

19 See the background to the legal principle of witness in Deut 19:15; 17:6 and Num 35:30 (Brown 1966, 1:223).

Jewish law preferred external testimony, recognizing it as more valid than personal testimony because legal procedure was based on an examination of the witnesses rather than the accused. In fact, self-witness was regarded as invalid in both Jewish and Hellenistic legal proceedings (Schnackenburg 1980, 2:120). Nevertheless, Jesus testifies in his own defense.²⁰ Lincoln (2005, 264) points out that, as was the case in 5:17–49, "Jesus starts off as a witness in his own defense and then the roles become reversed as he becomes prosecutor and judge of the opponents, leveling counter-accusations and charges against them."²¹ This switching of roles is not uncommon in the Fourth Gospel and finds a precedent in the Old Testament lawsuit (cf. Isa 41:21–24, 26; 43:9) (Trites 1977, 84). Jesus's identity is once again in question, and it is crucial that the veracity and character of the witnesses on either side be established.

The narrator tells us that, in spite of active opposition, many Jews continue to put their faith in Jesus (8:30; although the next few verses reveal that their belief is spurious; see 8:33, 37, 59).²² While it may appear that in this context John's use of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι is neutral (referring to the people of Jerusalem or Judea in general, as Brown suggests) the conversation that follows reveals that this is not the case (Brown 1966, 1:355). These Jews are hostile to Jesus. Culpepper points out that, "The pathos of their unbelief is

20 Note that earlier, Jesus had himself stated that his own self-testimony was not valid, but had gone ahead to include ample testimony from others that proved that his testimony was acceptable (cf. 5:31–45).

21 See also Lincoln (2000, 86).

22 No semantic distinction should be made between πιστεύω plus the dative and πιστεύω plus εἰς. Lincoln (2000, 90) rightly refers to the response of the people as "pseudo-belief."

that they are the religious people, some even the religious authorities, who have had all the advantages of the heritage of Israel.”²³

As is characteristic of Johannine style, the plot is propelled forward by misunderstandings laden with irony. Jesus begins by stating that true discipleship is measured by whether or not one remains in his word. He concludes with the explanatory statement (καὶ is used in an exegetical sense here) καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς (8:32; cf. 1 John 2:21). Here, truth is firmly located in a Jewish background. It should not be understood as general or philosophical truth, but the divine liberating message revealed both in and through Jesus. The usage here reflects the understanding that ἀλήθεια points to “the eschatological revelation of salvation which Jesus, as God’s messenger, has brought (18:37)” (Schnackenburg 1980, 2:205). Truth, personified as a liberator, is both an object to be known and it is also what effects liberation. Carson (1991, 348–349) may, therefore, have a point in seeing this as close to the meaning of gospel.

There may be in this context an implicit contrast between the power of Jesus’s revelation and the law. While Judaism taught that study of the law makes a man free, John goes further to show that the law points to Jesus (5:39, 46), who, as revealed later, is himself the truth (14:6).²⁴ For the Jews, knowledge was focused on knowledge of the law through interpretations and traditions (Keener 2014, 247). But in this context, γινώσκω has both

²³ Culpepper (1987, 129) writes, “[t]he reasons for the Jews’ response are explained not in terms of their ‘Jewishness’ but in universally applicable characteristics: they have never heard or seen the Father (5:37), they do not want to come to Jesus so that they might have life (5:40), they do not have the love of God in themselves (5:42), and they do not receive Jesus (5:43) or seek the glory of God (5:44). An even more basic reason emerges later: they are from a different world order (8:23).”

²⁴ Early rabbinic writing contains the idea that the study of the Law is a liberating factor, freeing one from worldly care (Pirqe Aboth iii, 6; See Brown 1966, 1:355).

an abstract and an experiential sense (cf. 1:14, 17; 8:36). Jesus, therefore, introduces a revolutionary understanding of the path to liberation—one that is embodied and personal. This liberating function of truth demonstrates the narrator’s authorial intent in pointing to Jesus as the Messiah who brings God’s salvation (20:31).

The implication is that the listeners are in bondage, and their indignation at being assigned slave status is expressed in their words, that they, being Abraham’s descendants, have never been in bondage (8:33). This reveals their ideological mentality. Given their obvious history of bondage under various masters (Babylon, Persia, Greece) and their present situation under Roman rule, this obviously refers to something other than political bondage. Their claim is that because of their kinship with Abraham, they have never been under the power of an external spiritual force (Borchert 2002, 303). Or, perhaps, it may indicate that although they have briefly experienced subjection to foreign masters, they have never actually been enslaved (Brown 1966, 1:355).

The Kiswahili saying “*Uhuru ukiondaka, utumwa utawala*” (when freedom leaves, slavery rules), underscores the reality that freedom and bondage are mutually exclusive. One’s identity is either as a slave or a free person. With his characteristic double ἀμήν, Jesus points out that πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας (8:34). This introduces a twist in the plot and moves the story forward in a surprising way. Jesus clarifies that he is not talking about physical or political liberation, but rather release from bondage to sin. The relative clause refers to a general attitude of opposition to God, rather than actual acts of sin, in which case their rejection of Jesus is included here.²⁵

²⁵ For the former, see Schnackenburg (1980, 2:208). For the latter, see Barrett (1978, 345).

Borchert (2002, 407) notes that an understanding of the Feast of Tabernacles is important for understanding Jesus's words about liberation in this context. Because the Feast commemorates the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness, it therefore alludes to more than political freedom. In view of the Johannine concept of sin, it refers to "freedom existentially as liberation from the realm of sin and death, from the darkness of an existence remote from God (cf. 8:12), from the ordinary unsaved situation of man in 'this world' (see 8:23)" (Schnackenburg 1980, 2:206).

Jesus rearticulates the liberation motif with the words *ἐὰν οὖν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθέρωσῃ, ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε* (8:36). He corrects their mistaken belief by pointing to himself as the liberator who effects true freedom in the lives of sinners. Being made free is nothing other than a synonym for salvation (Barrett 1978, 345). We recognize Jesus's identity and ideological mentality in his words—this authority to provide true freedom comes from his status as God's Son (8:36).

b) Whose children are the Jews? (8:39–47)

Although the Jews continue to protest that Abraham is their father (8:39–47), Jesus points out that by their rejection of him and the truth he conveys from God (8:37), they show no relationship to Abraham. We catch a glimpse of the Jews' ideological mentality through their words and the note of indignation in their voices. They are Abraham's children (8:39a) and cannot be illegitimate because God is their father (8:41). By implication, they are guaranteed salvation. Morris notes that, "Jews held themselves to be sons in God's household. They presumed accordingly on rights that, being really slaves, they did not possess" (Morris 1995, 407).

As this conflict between belief and unbelief continues to build, Jesus denies them any right to claim either Abraham or God as their father. Evidence of their Abrahamic lineage should be obvious in their actions

(8:41b). Because belief takes center stage in Abraham's righteousness, one can only claim to be a child of Abraham if one believes in Jesus because he is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise. Their inability to understand that not only has he been sent by God but that what he conveys is from God, is evidence in itself that they do not belong to God (8:47). Köstenberger (2004, 188) explains that, "Jesus's role as the sent son highlights both Jesus's equality with the Father in purpose (and even nature) and his subordination to the Father in carrying out his mission: 'it is a legal presumption that an agent will carry out his mission' (b. `Erub. 31b–32a; cf. b. Ketub. 99b)." As God's sent Son, Jesus is the only one qualified to offer and effect liberation (10:30; 14:10; 17:2). Consequently, to reject the Father's appointed agent is to reject the Father. Here we see that Father and Son operate in community.

The Jews reveal their illegitimacy by their failure to love Jesus who has been sent by God (8:42–43)²⁶ and their inability to hear (8:47). As a result, Jesus explicitly places them in the lineage of the devil with *ἐκ* in this case functioning as a preposition of source (8:44; cf. 1 John 3:8, *ὁμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ*). The familial imagery, "your father, the devil" is even more striking because Jesus contrasts it with their previous claim that Abraham is their father (8:38). Jesus's ideological mentality is revealed through his words (8:44). A lack of love for Jesus, which is ultimately a failure to believe in him, demonstrates an allegiance to the devil. Jesus adds that their intention is to carry out their father's desire (with *ἐπιθυμίας* in this context indicating strong desires directed to the wrong things; Morris 1995, 411). Immediately after this, the reader will notice that the Jews try to stone Jesus (8:59). According to Jewish tradition, Satan's lie had led to Adam's death (Gen 3) (Keener 2014, 274). His character as a murderer is

²⁶ This second class contrary to fact conditional sentence should be understood thus: "If God were your Father (but he is not), then you would love me."

therefore ingrained in him (ἐκεῖνος ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς). The devil is also incapable of standing for truth because there is none in him (causal use of ὅτι). With these words, the narrator highlights the conflict between belief and unbelief in Jesus that lies at the center of the plot.

Jesus finishes (8:45) with the reason why his hearers do not listen to him (causal and not temporal use of ὅτι as the NLT suggests). It is because he speaks the truth (ὅτι τὴν ἀλήθειαν λέγω). As is expected of trial scenes, truth and lies feature prominently in the interaction between Jesus and the Jews. In line with the modified dualism represented in this gospel, the personification of truth and lying are found in Jesus and Satan respectively and a radical opposition exists between their followers (Brown 1966, 1:365). Their inability to hear has as its basis the fact that they do not belong to God and are consequently unable to recognize the truth before them (8:45–47). It is they, not Jesus, who have misunderstood their identity.

Both Carson (1991, 351–352) and Ridderbos (1997, 311–312) note that the issue of fatherhood is prominent in this discussion, ultimately separating Jesus from those who would kill him. Jesus is pointing beyond physical descent, which is ultimately irrelevant, to the manifestation of spiritual characteristics that accurately reflect one’s lineage. He redefines the identity of the “children of Abraham,” basing it not on ancestry or ethnicity but on belief in him. It is a spiritual identity.

6.3.6 Tentative application

The tentative applications from this literary analysis strengthen those suggested earlier. First, Jesus is the only one authorized to liberate us from slavery to sonship because he represents the Father and is the sent one of God. Second, the chains of bondage to sin have been broken in Christ, and believers have been moved from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of

God. Third, Jesus chose to liberate us by entering into our human existence. Because of this, we are assured that he liberates us not from a distant, transcendent plane of existence, but from within our own circumstances.

6.4 *Leg 4: Historical and Cultural context*

The final leg is the historical and cultural context. In addition to theological and literary concerns, African literature is informed and shaped by socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions within the continent. Thus, “behind the text” issues provide crucial data in the interpretive process.

6.4.1 Slavery

The first context is slavery. Slavery was deeply entrenched in the social and legal framework of the first-century Greco-Roman society. The NT understanding of slavery has a double heritage, both Jewish and Greek. Theologically, early Christians inherited the OT conception of slavery (see Exod 21:1–11; Lev 25:39–55; Deut 15:4–18), which regarded slavery as an undesirable result of unfortunate economic circumstances. It was a necessary evil but not a permanent status. Unlike sons, slaves were part of a household, although not permanent members (Keener 2014, 274). Culturally, the early Christians lived in a context that was dominated by the Greek conception of slavery, which was both economic and ideological.

6.4.2 Jewish identity

The second context is Jewish identity. The main identity markers in Judaism consisted of shared ethnicity, culture, and religion. Circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and keeping the Mosaic law were badges of identity peculiar to the Jewish people (Hansen 1993, 227). Because Abraham is the progenitor of Israel and Jewish teachers regarded him as the model

convert to Judaism, he is vital to the Jews' argument (Keener 2014, 274). Belief in Christ would result in a questioning of one's Jewish identity. This brief overview of pertinent historical and cultural issues clarifies the application points arrived at in the other three legs.

6.4.3 Summary

What is the meaning of this text? On the level of the life situation of Jesus, the unveiling of Jesus's identity as liberator serves as a mirror that exposes the Jews' wrong assumptions about their own identity as free people. It forces them to confront their identity markers and to examine the evidence that Jesus gives regarding his identity as God's Son who is the only one with the authority and power to provide liberation from bondage to sin. On the level of the life situation of the church, the original readers of John's Gospel are forced to reconsider their understanding of their own identity as Jewish Christians. This is especially important for two reasons: one, their faith is confirmed as being genuinely Jewish because Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish cultus (it is their opponents who have misrepresented biblical Judaism); two, emperor worship was gaining prominence and believers were being forced to decide to whom they owed allegiance.

6.5 *The seat*

The last step is the seat. These four legs together reveal the probable meaning as it was intended for the original listeners. The seat is where we derive significance. This is the application to the context of the listener expressed in terms that we understand in our own African society. The seat is a confirmation of the tentative application of the text as uncovered in the legs above. The application of this understanding of Jesus as liberator for African Christians today is addressed in light of the parallels noted above.

6.5.1 Socio-cultural: negative ethnicity and gender

The first application relates to socio-cultural aspects. Jesus includes non-Jews and women who were socially disenfranchised. He introduces a transformative way of thinking, uplifting the marginalized, and empowering them to have a voice (Mombo 2020, loc. 5031–5033). This sets an important trajectory for modern day African believers and challenges us to experience a paradigm shift. The *Ubuntu* philosophy must be reframed in terms of Christ. If we believe, like Desmond Tutu (1999, 31), that “what dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me,” then our new identities as believers united by the liberating power of Christ must take precedence. Just as Jesus operates in community with his Father, liberty is experienced not just individually, but within community as well. This is unity in diversity (see John 17:20–23). This liberative aspect of Christ's identity also speaks to our physical realities because he chose to liberate us by entering into our human experience.

6.5.2 Religious: syncretism and spiritual blindness

A second application relates to religious aspects. The inclusion of Samaritans by Jesus is surprising from the context of a Jewish audience but not unexpected given the salvation-historical thrust documented in the entire Bible. However, if Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish cultus, and he brings in “outsiders,” then it follows that he is the fulfilment of African religions. This does not mean that there is continuity. Rather, Jesus brings in something new. Jesus has both power and authority to liberate and can transform our worldview of dynamism and remove our spiritual blindness.

7. Implications of the Johannine Jesus as Liberator

The first implication of the Johannine Jesus as liberator is that it redefines our African Christian identity. A clearly perceived and articulated identity is important for economic, social, political, and spiritual progression because we operate on the basis of our identities. An understanding of the identity of Christ as liberator confronts us and challenges us to reclaim our rightful identities by interrogating our cultures and worldviews and asking what values and practices we can use and benefit from.

Second, such an understanding raises our awareness of, and response to, the religious spaces we occupy and allows us to have true freedom. An understanding of Christ as liberator of all who believe in him removes the insider/outsider dichotomy and validates our experience of Christ in the wider context of world Christianity.

Third, we must continue in this freedom once we have attained it. True liberty carries with it an ethical imperative to obey God's commands. It is self-evident in the fruit we bear (15:16; 1 John 2:6). Most importantly, it is not just about externals—it is a matter of heart transformation. African Christians need to understand that the Holy Spirit empowers us to live in the liberty won for us by Christ (14:19, 23). He is not merely a means of experiencing power encounters, miracles, signs, and wonders.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper began with the proposal that contextual re-readings can no longer be ignored. The story of the tortoise and the hare showed that we all have blind spots in our approaches to texts. The intercultural approach that was followed uncovered facets of the Johannine Jesus as

liberator that confront our cultures and worldviews with regards to our socio-cultural and religious contexts.

True liberty comes only through Jesus Christ. From the issues noted in our socio-cultural and religious systems, it is evident that Christianity in Africa appears to be based on an inadequate understanding of the essence of true liberty. Because the understanding of Christ's identity as liberator is not adequately developed, both the person and the work of Christ are minimized. However, when we understand that Christ is our liberator *par excellence*, this becomes the grid through which we re-define our identities, respond to our socio-cultural and religious spaces, and strive to live in the freedom secured for us. Such a Christology is, therefore, deeply relevant to the lived experiences of ordinary African believers.

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