

AFRICAN INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE¹

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Abstract: This paper offers a panoramic view of the various approaches in African biblical hermeneutics. It discusses their basic presuppositions, contributions to the spread of Christianity in Africa, and concludes by proposing a new way of reading in communicative perspective: adherence to the biblical text, and the context of the interpreter. It is believed that this approach will restore the Word of God to its primary position and give a new dimension to African biblical interpretation.

Introduction

Until the 1960s, biblical interpretation in Africa was done mainly from the Western cultural point of view, and the results passively 'learnt' in the seminaries and theological faculties of the local Universities. A shift occurred after this period, when many African interpreters² began

¹ This article is a Paper presented at an international Conference on the Bible "Evangelium und Kultur" in Steyl, Holland, 21st-27th July, 2006.

² Some of the prominent pioneers include the following: A. N. Mushete, 'Christianisme et authenticité', *Le Monde Moderne* 12 (1976), pp. 41-59; M. P. Hegba, *Émancipation d'Eglises sous tutelle* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976); J. S. Mbiti, 'The Bible in African Culture', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 27-39; K. A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984); J. S. Ukpong, 'Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 40-61; J.-M. Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain* (Librarie-Editions L'Harmattan: Paris, 1980); C. Nyamiti, 'Contemporary Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 62-78; K. Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions', in V. Samuel & C. Sugden (ed.s), *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World* (Bangalore: Partners in Mission-Asia, 1983), pp. 115-175; J. S. Pobee, *Skenosis: Christian Faith in an African Context* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992); M. A. Oduyoye, 'Feminist Theology in an

developing models of interpretation, with the objective of inculturating the Bible in a dynamic dialogue with the multiplicity of cultures that characterise the African Continent. These different readings gradually came to be denoted as 'African biblical hermeneutics.'³

The aim of this article is to offer a panoramic view of the various approaches in African biblical hermeneutics, discuss their basic presuppositions, indicate some of their contributions to the spread of Christianity in Africa, and finally propose a reading in communicative perspective.

African Biblical hermeneutics

African approach to biblical hermeneutics operates within the general framework of biblical hermeneutics, namely, the art of interpreting a biblical text in order to understand its original meaning and then delineate its significance for the contemporary audience. Accordingly, the primary task of biblical hermeneutics is 'to concretize the Word of God for the people of today.'⁴ This one process of relating the Gospel message to the people's life situation or living experience has been referred to in mission history as adaptation, or indigenisation, or incarnation, inculturation, or *skenosis*, and recently as contextualization.⁵

In spite of the problem of terminology, I agree with Nthamburi when he observes: 'Scripture cannot be understood in a vacuum. It can only be understood in relation to the total life in a given contemporary society.'⁶

African Perspective', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 166-181. For an extensive bibliography on African Theology and Christology refer to D. B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

³ Some organisations, among others, who pay attention to African biblical hermeneutics are the following: Society of New Testament Studies (International), New Testament Society of South Africa (South Africa) and Pan African Association of Catholic Exegetes.

⁴ P. C. Phan, 'Theologizing in the Context of Cultural and Religious Pluralism: an Asian Experience', *TD* 50 (2003), 152.

⁵ B.S. Bevan, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 21-22.

⁶ Z. Nthamburi, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in the African Instituted Churches' *AICMAR Bulletin* 1 (2002), p. 15. See also R. Bieringer, "'Come and See" (John 1,39): Dialogical Authority and Normativity of the Future in the Fourth Gospel and Religious Education',

Any authentic interpretation of the Christian message, therefore, has to be actualised: the message must address the needs of the people dialoguing with the text, and ultimately influence their choice in life.⁷ In the light of this, I wish to note that what makes an interpretation 'African' is not the identity of the interpreter, his being an African or a Missionary working in Africa, but that it reflects the experience of the *people* of God living in Africa (social, economic, cultural, religious, and political life).⁸

As already noted, the recent history of the continent is characterised by the struggle for independence of many African nations in the 60s-70s. The new situation brought with it adverse effects on many African states in their struggle for total liberation and emancipation. Whereas some have achieved a fair amount of progress, many people in different parts of Africa still continue to face grave social problems - the devastating epidemic of HIV/AIDS, malaria, high rate of infant mortality - economic problems and political instability.⁹ It was in this context of suffering and hope that some African theologians began reflecting on how the Christian gospel could address itself to the concrete, existential situation of the people, to bring about an integral development of the person and his environment. Such endeavour and reflections are founded on two basic pre-suppositions, as the following section will indicate.

Analysis of Contemporary African Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical interpretation in Africa is a flourishing enterprise both in *academia* and at the *popular level*.¹⁰ Many African universities founded

in L. Lombaerts and D. Pollefeyt (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (Leuven: 2004), p. 201.

⁷ For more details, see O. Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1983); See also J. Osei-Bonso, *The Inculturation of Christianity in Africa: Antecedents and Guidelines from the New Testament and the Early Church* (Frankfurt am Maim: Peter Lang, 2005). See also U. Luz, 'Reflection on Appropriate Interpretation of New Testament Texts' in U. Luz (ed.), *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2005), p. 272.

⁸ It is worth noting here that the African continent presents diverse cultural experiences as you move from one region to the other. Diversity and cultural dynamism ought to be presumed when we speak about the theme of biblical interpretation in Africa.

⁹ For a reflection on the African crises situation through the prism of religion see M. R. A. Kanyoro, 'Mission for the African Church: Lessons and Challenges from the Book of Acts', *AICMAR Bulletin* 1(2002), pp. 82-88.

¹⁰ These two levels are also referred to as *scholarly* and *lay exegesis* respectively. Cf. Luz, 'Reflections on Appropriate Interpretation', 266.

within the past 50 years have Departments of Religious Studies or Faculties of Theology that investigated the relationship between Faith and Culture, and stimulated the production of a number of studies, including doctoral theses dedicated to African Christianity.¹¹ The result of these researches generated interest among scholars and became the bedrock for further work on African Christianity through the decades till date.

On the *popular front*, we have converts to Christianity taking the initiative to integrate the Christian message into their daily lives. This is done in diverse ways. For example, in Ghana you often come across writings on cars and stores such as 'Jesus is my Saviour.' 'The wages of sin is death,' etc. Many business sign-boards also have biblical quotations. This is a striking phenomenon in Ghana that immediately catches the attention of any foreign visitor to the Country! Such a hermeneutic suggests an impact of the biblical message on the lives of the Christians involved.

Besides the individual assimilation, we have community sharing as a hermeneutic process of learning. In many regions, groups gather frequently for bible reading and sharing. Pamphlets and guides are often prepared for this purpose by the various Christian denominations. The 'Lumko Series,' prepared by the Catholic Church of South Africa, which is used in many countries, follows this approach. Going through the different publications, one becomes aware immediately of how an accent may not be put on the 'reading' as an end in itself, but as a means that leads to judge the reality, in view of transformation. The question is not so much 'what does this Word say' or 'how to pray the Word,' but how 'the Word-Prayed' judges the reality and acts to change it. In this context, the 'Sharing groups' are not 'recipients' of a proclaimed Gospel. Instead they read their lives and that of the community in the light of the Sacred Scriptures¹².

Presuppositions

The basic presuppositions on which African interpretation and theologising are based may be summarised as follows:

- a. The Bible is contextual,
- b. Biblical message requests to be contextualized.

¹¹ See the abundant bibliographical data provided by D. B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 293-298.

¹² Cf. Luz, 'Reflections on Appropriate Interpretation', 272-273.

The Bible is Contextual

The God of the Old Testament is a God involved in the daily life situation of his people, leading them to experience him in the events of their lives (cf. the Exodus experience, narrated in the Torah). So also, in the New Testament, Jesus entered into human history on a journey of progressive incarnation: in meeting him, we touch God tangibly. The gospel narrative testifies to his involvement in the life of his contemporaries, expressed through his attention to their concerns and needs. Paul also, as the other New Testament writers, wrote the 'Good News of Jesus Christ' to help his communities to experience God concretely in the situation in which they lived. These brief indications permit us to see how Sacred Scripture 'is borne contextualized,' and how the same message reaches at us in different contexts.¹³

In the Bible, *context* is not an abstract concept, but the concrete life of a *people* in a particular place and at a particular time. It is about a group of human beings and their story. Joy, sufferings, hopes and despair, love and hatred...are elements of the reality denoted 'context.'

In brief, African biblical hermeneutics comes out of a careful social analysis. The social, economic, political, cultural, and religious environments, the history of the people...constitute the 'Tent' in which the Word lives among us. Discernment in this light helps to see the negative and enslaving elements, and the positive prophetic aspects that inspire genuine spirituality.¹⁴

Biblical Message Requests to Be Contextualised.

Biblical tradition reveals how God has made himself known to the people of each generation. He initiated an intimate relationship with the chosen people, through Moses and later through his Word spoken through the prophets. At an appointed time, God spoke to humanity through his own Son, Jesus (Heb 1, 1-3). Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue his mission of spreading the Good News of God's presence in human life (Matt 28, 19-20).

¹³ Cf. Imasogie, *Christian Theology*, 7; for a detailed illustration of inculturation in the bible and early Christianity see Osei-Bonso, *Inculturation* 25-77.

¹⁴ P. A. Kalilombe, 'Spirituality in the African Perspective', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 115-135.

In the light of the foregoing, the Bible cannot be reduced to pieces of 'information' to be learnt. Instead, it reveals itself as a *dialogue* between the living God and humanity.¹⁵ It is a communication in which the whole person enters into an intimate relationship with God, to learn to live his/her original vocation of 'sonship,' discovering in the encounter with the Creator his original dignity. In this unceasing *dialogue* resides the communicative potential of the Word of God, mediated through human words and culture: God speaking to the heart of human beings to transform their lives. Put in other words, the Word of God, whenever read, in whatever period and moment, challenges the reader to make a fundamental option for a better way of living. A presupposition of African hermeneutics is, therefore, that an African, to be precise a Ghanaian, in the moment in which he reads the Bible does not hear a 'closed' story, but reads his own life in dialogue with God.

Procedure

African biblical interpretation is still at its developmental stages. The literature on the subject that I have so far come across neither speaks of a clear method nor an approach, but exemplifies a praxis, presents an 'empirical experience.'

Traditional western methods of doing exegesis are not dispensed with, but appropriated critically and selectively. African hermeneutics is a way of reading. Unlike classical exegesis, it places great emphases on the **context** of the **contemporary audience** and the effect of the message on his or her experiences.¹⁶

The first consequence is the selection of biblical texts on the basis of their "utility" to illumine the situation of the reader. This rather subjective and random selection often leads to a partial reading that does not always value the unity of the Word of God, but creates a hierarchy of texts: books or passages considered 'less useful' are given less importance, and run the risk of being forgotten.

¹⁵ Cf. P. Sequeri, 'La struttura testimoniale delle scritture sacre', in G. Angelini (ed.), *La rivelazione attestata: la Bibbia fra testo e teologia* (Milano: 1998), pp. 3-7. See also See also Bieringer, 'Come and See', pp. 199-201.

¹⁶ Cf. Nthamburi, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', p. 16; see also J. Punt, 'Post Colonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa. Some Mind and Road Mapping', *Neot* 37 (2003), pp. 59-86.

A second consequence derives from the polyvalence implied in the concept of context, made up of a plurality of religious, cultural, economic, social and political elements. Different interpreters often stress one or the other element, on the basis of their specific preparation and on where they stand in their reading. As a result of this accentuation, we have different interpretative approaches.

Different Directions in Contextual Reading

Among the most characteristic approaches, we can list the following:¹⁷

- Interfaith approach;
- Postcolonial approach;
- Inter-cultural approach;
- Comparative approach;
- People based approach;

Interfaith or Multi-Faith or Comparative Approach

This is where the stress is on relation to other religions, for example, African Traditional Religions and Islam. In this hermeneutics, the Bible is not used as a yardstick to judge the other religions, but as a dialogue partner in the search for mutual enlightenment. Such a reading may be propitious in a religious pluralistic setting, and also contribute effectively in promoting inter-religious dialogue.¹⁸

Postcolonial Approach or Hermeneutic

When the reading is inspired by the long history of Western colonialism and imperialism, we have postcolonial approach or hermeneutics.¹⁹ Postcolonialism saw many African nations in political and socio-economic emancipation, fighting against neo-colonialism. A greater awareness was being created among people for restoration of African dignity - freedom from oppression of all forms to a dignified living - in the Church as well. In the attempt to forge a Christianity that responded to the needs of the masses, particular attention was paid to the poor, the less privileged in

¹⁷ It must be noted that there is sometimes an overlapping between one approach and the other.

¹⁸ See G. Ossom-Batsa, 'Christological Issues. Stumbling Block or Meeting Point for Muslim-Christian Dialogue?', *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1/1 (2006) p. 95-101.

¹⁹ Ela in his book, *Le cri de l'homme africain*, emphasises the re-appropriation of the word of God within the struggle of the masses of post colonial African societies. See also S. S. Maimela, *Proclaim Freedom to My People* (Joannesburg: Skotaville, 1987).

society. This tendency resulted in the development of African liberation theology. The institutional comforts, the secure situation of the privileged few and the appalling situation of the masses became the cardinal point of reference of this approach.²⁰

Cultural or Inter-cultural Approach

This is where the stress is on cultural context.²¹ Here concepts present in the Bible and the tradition are studied together, with the view of each throwing more light on the other. For example, miracle discourse, reconciliation discourse, life, death and resurrection, kingship, and healing, eschatology, to mention but a few. Such an approach appears to feature in the studies dedicated to African Christology, which try to view Jesus from an African perspective. Among the many authors in this line we could name the following: Nyamiti,²² Bediako,²³ Stinton.²⁴

People-based or Community approach

This approach is sometimes called *popular reading*. It is when ordinary believers gather in communities for Bible study and worship to read and apply the Bible to their lives. The traditional myths, fables, proverbs, songs are valued as hermeneutic criteria for the interpretation of the biblical narratives.²⁵ In this approach, the role of the community is essential: as they appropriate the Word into their daily living, they gain more insight, and their lives are transformed. Most African Independent Churches have their origins in this praxis.²⁶

²⁰ Cf. J.-M. Ela, 'Christianity and Liberation in Africa', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 137-138.

²¹ Cf. E. Martey, 'Christological Foundations of the New Testament and Contemporary African Christology', *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1/1 (2006), p. 83-94. See also T. Okure, "'I will Open My Mouth" (Matt13,35): A Case for Gospel Based Biblical Hermeneutics', *NTS* 46 (2000), pp. 445-471; J.S. Ukpogon, 'Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics', *JTSA* 91 (1995), pp.3-14.

²² C. Nyamiti, *Christ as Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, (Gweru: Mambo, 1984).

²³ K. Badiako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Asempa Publishers: Accra, 1990).

²⁴ D. B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*.

²⁵ Myths, fables, proverbs, songs as resources for African hermeneutics are still to be developed in the academia. Cf. Kris J.N. Owan, *Moments of Meditation*, APWS 1&2 (Iperu-Remo, 2001-2001).

²⁶ Cf. Nthamburi, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', pp. 18-19

Evaluation of African Biblical Hermeneutics

⌘ The major contribution of African biblical hermeneutics is the formation and spread of an authentic African Christianity, where Christianity is no longer considered a foreign religion, but a religion truly incarnated on the continent.²⁷ It also provides the basis for a theological reflection that takes the African experience serious; it produces a theology that scratches where it itches.

The multiplicity of context that characterise our continent further generates diverse ways of being a Christian, no longer linked to a determined cultural form, but incarnated in a dynamic way in a plurality of forms, where believers could experience the power of the Word of God.

Furthermore, there is mutual enrichment between Culture and Faith. Faith in Christ is not seen as something foreign to be implanted in a culture, but rather as an on-going exchange between culture and the Christian message that leads to an authentic self-hood in relation to God.²⁸

Alongside the above positive dimensions, there are also some negative aspects. Too much stress on context and culture runs the risk of generating a 'pseudo-biblical theology,' not concretely founded on the Scriptures. We can think of a theological reflection oriented towards 'Fundamentalism' and 'Syncretism.' Where an adequate social analysis is not carried out before an eventual contextualisation, there is the likelihood of mixing Christian ideas with African Tradition. In addition, it runs the risk of anachronism, making reference to a culture of the past that no longer exists as the frame for interpretation.

African Interpretation in Communicative Perspective

In the preceding sections, we described biblical interpretation in Africa and the various ways in which it is practised. What cuts across all the different directions/approaches, and in fact, unite them, is the focus on context, especially the context of the reader or interpreter. Though context is an

²⁷ Cf. E. Anum, 'The Usage of the Bible in African Missionary History: The Legacy of the New Testament Usage that Lingers on in Africa', *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1/1 (2006), pp. 69-82. See also K. Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context: The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 6(2003), pp. 15-30.

²⁸ Cf. Osei-Bonso, *Inculturation*, p. 21.

essential element in the interpretative task,²⁹ an exaggerated emphasis on it risks conditioning the interpretation, suffocating the Word and reading it in a background element.

For this reason, it is important to reflect on an interpretation in communicative perspective, to restore the Word of God to its primary position, without forgetting its incarnation.³⁰ I maintain that the assumption of a *pragmatic horizon*³¹ may offer a determined contribution to African biblical interpretation, on a tri-partite level, bringing to the fore adherence to the biblical text, attention to the actions suggested in the text, and the context of the interpreter.³²

Adherence to the Biblical Text

The communicative perspective implies due respect for the biblical text. This consists in paying attention to the linguistic and non-linguistic elements, as signals put there by the author for his audience on his/her journey of reading. Lack of critical reading or focus on only a concept or an aspect of text does not lead to an objective understanding, and does not therefore permit an awareness of the communicative force of the text.

It is in this area that some of the contextual approaches in African hermeneutics, especially people-based ones, fall short. To forestall this, an African reading in communicative perspective has to place the text in its unique position. Making use of all the available exegetical tools, the text has to be read in a plurality of perspectives, to discover its organisation, as

²⁹ Cf. PCB, *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa*, 1360-1369.

³⁰ A similar idea is expressed by C. Umoh, 'A Challenge for African Exegetes and Theologians: Matthew's Interpretation of the Prophetic Tradition' in J-B. Matand Bulembat (ed.), *Prophecy and Prophets in the Bible: Requirements of Prophetism in the Church as Family of God in Africa*, Proceedings of the Eleventh Congress, Cairo, Egypt: September 6th-12th, 2003, (Kinshasa: Médiaspaul, 2004), pp. 167.

³¹ For a detailed explanation of pragmatic horizon in interpretation, see G. Ossom-Batsa, *The Institution of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Mark: A Study of the Function of Mark 14,22-25 within the Gospel Narrative*. European University Studies: Theology Series, vol.727 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 36-40. See also M. Grilli, 'Processo comunicativo pragmatica e interpretazione della Bibbia', *Greg* 83(2002), pp. 655-678.

³² This is similar to what Luz, 'Reflections on Appropriate Interpretation', 273 says: "The various levels of textual interpretation can thus be terminologically distinguished as follows: a. historical-critical exegesis of the original sense of the text; b. interpretation of the matter of the text with reference to the present-day context of my thinking, my language and my situation; c. realisation of the text through suffering or through action."

well as its semantic and communicative force. This requires an adequate formation in the biblical sciences to give competence to the reader or interpreter.³³

Call to Action in the Biblical Text

Studying the organisation of the text and the communicative force of the different elements helps to highlight its functional organisation. In other words, the actions *suggested* by the text to the implied reader express the communicative function of the text.

Such an analysis has a consequence for contextualisation of the text. The text is not made to say what the reader wants to hear. Often, the temptation in African contextual reading is to read oneself, the socio-economic and political situation into the text and bend the text to suggest an answer. This leads to bending the text to say what is not suggested in it.

From the communicative point of view, the reader is instead challenged to read his or her life in the light of the text, ultimately leading to a transformed life in order to transform his or her environment. The understanding that comes out from the respect for the text, the journey of the implied reader becomes a call to action for the real reader. Indeed, it is this 'call to action' that makes the Word of God alive and fruitful in the daily life of the reader.

Context of the Interpreter and Reader

From the communicative perspective, context is not the point of reference for the interpreter, but the frame within which the dialogue between God and humanity takes place. The action suggested by the text is the same, but its realisation is conditioned by the context of the community of readers.

Only at this point the experience of the reader may lead him to see more clearly certain aspects of the text that may evade other readers because of their different experiences. An example may be the importance given to the healing narratives in a context where not everybody has the opportunity of basic medical care, or the relevance of forgiveness in an experience of armed conflict.

³³ Aloo Osotsi Mojola, 'Bible Translation in African Christianity', *AICMAR Bulletin* 1 (2005), pp. 13-14.

Challenges

We conclude by noting some challenges that African biblical hermeneutics has to face:

- lack of excellent centres of formation and adequate tools,
- globalisation, and
- lack of adequate self-esteem.

In most regions of Africa, with the exception of, perhaps, South Africa, there is lack of adequate formation centres and research tools.³⁴ To be precise, in some places, for example Ghana, the formation centres like universities exist but lack most of the structures such as good libraries and internet facilities for an in-depth research work. These make research and publication difficult for young up-coming African scholars, and prevent them from rubbing shoulders with their colleagues on the other continents.

Globalisation is one of the aspects of modern society and has to be taken into consideration by African biblical interpretation in its emphasis on the context of the readers. With globalisation, the world is destined to become 'a small village,' where cultures meet and change rapidly. The definition of context needs therefore to be critically examined to avoid anachronistic readings, readings far away from a reality that is continually changing.

In my opinion, the problem posed by globalisation may be a challenge to overcome a 'parochial' vision of the Sacred Scripture as an exclusive possession of a community closed up in itself, to a vision of the Bible as a common patrimony of the 'global village,' offered to whoever is in search of authentic values to promote the dignity of the human person. Such openness may favour a plurality of readings and reciprocal respect. It may also facilitate an ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.³⁵

I can testify to the validity and possibility of such openness, that I experience daily in the University of Ghana, where I teach. Christian and Moslem students together discuss biblical and Quranic themes, in an environment free of prejudices and intolerance, producing original

³⁴ The same observation is made by G. LeMarquand, "'Prohecy! Who Struck You?'" (Mk 14,65): Understanding a Gospel Text with African Help', in J.-B. Matand Bulembat (ed.), *Prophecy and Prophets in the Bible: Requirements of Prophetism in the Church as Family of God in Africa*, Proceedings of the Eleventh Congress, Cairo, Egypt: September 6th -12th, 2003, (Kinshasa: Médiaspaul, 2004), 182.

³⁵ Cf. G. Ossom-Batsa, 'Christological Issues', pp. 95-101.

interpretations, enriched by their different experiences and consolidating their mutual respect.

By lack of self-esteem, I mean the inferiority 'feeling' latent in the African's self-conception, present in many Africans. This 'feeling' comes out of a series of historical and religious events. We can name the Slave Trade, Colonialism (both political and economic), Apartheid (official and unofficial), and the struggle of 'Black people' to be recognised as humans in many Western states.³⁶

It is to be noted that, with the exception of Egypt and Ethiopia which have a millennium of Christian tradition, most African countries encountered Christianity in this historical turmoil. We cannot hide the fact that the same Bible was used to underline the inferiority of the Black race: the long theological discussion on whether Africans have souls or not, or the use of the curse of Ham (cf. Gen 9:25-26), father of Ethiopia, Egypt, Put and Canaan (Gen 10:6), in the apartheid context are examples of such use. We can also add the condemnation of African traditions and customs by the early missionaries, without first investigating their significance, instead of transforming them into 'seeds of the Gospel.'

All these factors led converts to the conviction that anything African was 'bad and less valuable,' whereas whatever came from the 'Whites' was 'good and full of value.' It is sad to contest that such a view still determines political and ecclesial actions. A biblical reading which will help Africans to conceive themselves as dialogue partners with God may contribute to affirm the consciousness of being true sons and daughters in the image and likeness of God, capable of transforming their society.

Conclusion

We have argued in the preceding pages that the Word of God is valid for all peoples at all times. The concrete living experience of the readers ought to have a role in any authentic interpretation. However, the text must not become a slave of its context, but conserve its central position.

³⁶ That Colonialism and neo-colonialism have had an effect in African biblical interpretation is also noted by E. Anum, *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 78-79. For a discussion of the plight of black people in South Africa and North America and the genesis of Black theology, see S. S. Maimila, 'Black Theology', pp. 182-195.

The African experience, with the multiform cultural expression, language, varying from region to region, becomes a challenge to the exegete in making his/her interpretation meaningful to the people they address. Reading the Word in a dialogical perspective, making use of the available exegetical tools, will expose the dialogical nature of the Word, and invite hearers to read their lives in the light of the message communicated. This, hopefully, will lead to personal conversion and, ultimately, the transformation of the community.

The future of biblical interpretation in Africa depends, to some extent, also on the creation of good research centres with the basic exegetical tools and a continuous collaboration with colleagues on the other continents. The exchange of ideas and views will serve as a catalyst and stimulus for ongoing quality research in the field.