


# Debriefing hermeneutics for a balanced reading of the biblical text

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In this study, it is argued that the trust of previous (and existing) hermeneutical approaches of promoting ancient biblical texts as applicable to the everyday life of contemporary readers is not only imaginable but also too ambitious. The Hebrew Bible emerged from an Israelite cultural context, which neither speaks to nor deliberates on issues concerning the African cultural contexts. The present essay utilises a narrative approach comprising three main overtures. Firstly, some examples of previous contributions on hermeneutics will be discussed. Secondly, this study interrogates the legitimacy of employing African biblical hermeneutics that utilises ancient Jewish texts as applicable to African societies today. Thirdly and finally, the study will critically appraise for a balanced reading of the biblical text.

**Contribution:** The present study aims at engaging (debriefing) existing hermeneutical contributions towards proposing a balanced reading of the biblical text. In order to achieve that goal, the study engages into a dialogue following hermeneutical approaches, which are popular amongst most African scholars, namely African biblical hermeneutics, black biblical hermeneutics, contextual biblical hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics and oral hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** African biblical hermeneutics; black biblical hermeneutics; contextual biblical hermeneutics; science of interpretation; oral hermeneutics.

## Introduction

Biblical studies scholars have contributed immensely to the field of hermeneutics. What has emerged as common in previous contributions is that 'hermeneutics' is 'the science/art of interpretation' (see e.g. Abulad 2007:11; Chifungo 2013:127). Although other scholars, especially those who write from an African perspective, might have a different approach in their focus on hermeneutics with African biblical hermeneutics, the underlining leitmotif of interpretation cuts across their individual investigations. Hendriks (2007:21, cited in Chifungo 2013:18) wrote: 'We have to find a way of doing theology in which we can disengage the old orders and paradigms and engage a contextual theological point of view'. It appears that Hendriks does not necessarily seek to disregard the biblical context and its audience in ancient Israel. It is equally important at this stage to state that as the conversation on hermeneutics expanded, it also gave birth to other forms of biblical interpretation such as African biblical hermeneutics, Black biblical hermeneutics, oral hermeneutics<sup>1</sup> and contextual biblical hermeneutics, amongst others. Previous contributions, for example, by David Adamo, Cheryl Exum, Elelwani Farisani, Gerald West, Itumeleng Mosala, Jesse Mugambi and Justin Ukpung were largely biased towards African biblical hermeneutics at the expense of 'throwing the reader away' from the immediate context of the biblical text itself. In the author's opinion, that is both dangerous and unwarranted.

The present contribution is unique in two ways. Firstly, it deviates from the common trend of 'comparing' and 'appropriating' narratives (and contexts) of the biblical text to African experiences, which is not a fair treatment of the text. Secondly, while complementing previous scholarship on hermeneutics as a science of interpretation, the present study seeks to add its voice to oral hermeneutics, which in the author's view is a common feature among African Initiated Churches (AICs) that is yet to receive the attention it deserves. This study is therefore a critical appraisal for a balanced reading of the biblical text.

1. Oral hermeneutics is a broad field that needs a separate study in order to give it a fair discussion. The author would like to 'shelve' this theme for a future investigation. However, this study will briefly discuss oral hermeneutics in relation to African Initiated Churches.

**Note:** Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse, sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa).

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## Criteria for selecting some scholars for this study

The selection of the aforementioned scholars was influenced by two main factors, namely *familiarisation* and *professionalism*. By *familiarisation*, reference is made to publications on African biblical hermeneutics and scholars who support this approach. The author had the privilege to have personally met and familiarised himself with the scholars discussed in this debate at various platforms. Academic conferences and seminars on religion and theology traditionally bring together practitioners and experts from various research institutions in the African continent and beyond. Most of these scholars have either presented or published articles on African biblical hermeneutics. A fruitful dialogue with some of them during question-and-answer sessions after their presentations enriched and broadly widened the scope of the present conversation.

By *professionalism*, reference is made to the author's profession as an academic. Over the years, the author's tasks as both an academic and a scholar have come into direct contact with differing and voluminous articles on African biblical hermeneutics through examination, peer review and supervision of dissertations and theses. Although informed by various approaches to hermeneutics, some contributors do not sufficiently and appropriately substantiate their preference for African biblical hermeneutics in sustainable ways.

## Methodology

The present study seeks to discuss hermeneutics through a narrative method (see e.g. Alter 1981; Broadus 1979). Alter (1981) writes that:

A proper narrative event occurs when the narrative tempo slows down enough for us to discriminate a particular scene: to have the illusion of the scene's 'presence' as it unfolds; to be able to imagine the interaction of personages or sometimes personages and groups, together with the fright of motivations, ulterior aims, character traits, political, social, or religious constraints, moral and theological meanings, borne by their speech, gestures and acts. (p. 63)

Broadus (1979) writes that in a narrative:

[A] speaker must always subordinate narration to the object of his discourse, the conviction or persuasion which he wishes to effect. He must not elaborate or enlarge upon some narrative merely because it is in itself interesting or follow the story step by step according to its own laws. (n.p.)

Following up on Broadus' definition, Fee and Stuart (1993) further explained that:

Every individual OT narrative is at least a part of the greater narrative of Israel's history in the world, which in turn is a part of the ultimate narrative of God's creation and his redemption of it. This ultimate narrative goes beyond the OT through the NT. You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two. (p. 80)

Steffen (1996:222) also characterised a narrative as 'the account by a narrator of events and participants moving in some pattern over time and space'. In this study, narratives from the biblical text and secondary sources will comprise the data pool. Personal observation also informs the development of the present argument. The author is privileged to have been born and raised in a typical rural African family in which oral hermeneutics played a critical role in the dissemination of information. Some of the ideas on oral hermeneutics utilised in this essay derive from the author's personal experiences. The same ideas were extracted from another contribution.

## Hermeneutics

The author categorically confesses that the readership would be betrayed and disappointed repeatedly by reading titles on hermeneutics, which seemed promising and had the potential of providing detailed accounts of what hermeneutics entails. Because previous contributions lacked such an explanation, which is owed to the readers, the author concluded that many biblical commentators do not really know what hermeneutics entails and therefore give incoherent examples of hermeneutics without elucidating its specifics and its main characteristics. For example, when one reads Abulad's (2007:11–23) 'What is hermeneutics?', the readership gets the impression that a detailed definition of hermeneutics would suffice. Abulad's (2007) contribution did not sufficiently elucidate hermeneutics in terms of both its generally acceptable meaning and its practicality. In my opinion, scholars such as Ricoeur (1974), Kearney (1996), Suazo (2006) and Porter and Robinson (2011) have accurately defined hermeneutics and its application in illuminating texts. For example, Ricoeur (1974:60) wrote about hermeneutics as 'work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning'. Kearney (1996:1) speaks of 'hermeneutics of action', while Suazo (2006) preferred to talk of the 'hermeneutic phenomenological approach'. Wilber (1997:72) preferred to call it 'cultural hermeneutics'. One would also postulate Wilber's 'cultural hermeneutics' with hindsight of 'contextual hermeneutics', which some African scholars discussed in this conversation have proposed and continue to stand for. In his book, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Osborne (2006) does not deviate from previous scholarly assessments observed here when he stated that:

The goal is not to discover what the text is saying but first to experience what it does and then to persuade others regarding the validity of your perspective on the text. (p. 379)

In the same vein, Van Leeuwen, Guo-Brennan and Weeks (2017) stated that:

Hermeneutics has been theorized and applied as a philosophical framework and interpretive research methodology which pays particular attention to linguistic, social, cultural and historical contexts to understand the life world and human experiences. (p. 1)

Davis' (1981:27) opinion that the 'primary concern is to recover the meaning which the text had for its original

recipients', supports the thrust of the current debate on hermeneutics that seriously takes into account the context of the addressees.

### **African biblical hermeneutics: Representative examples of its proponents**

African biblical hermeneutics emerged in response to various forms of biblical interpretation including hermeneutics. When the earlier forms of biblical interpretation (e.g. the historical-critical method) were perceived as having failed to address the particularities of everyday life among Africans, a yearning for a newer form of biblical interpretation (e.g. the contextual biblical interpretation) was born. The newer approaches to biblical interpretation widened in scope to include scholarly contributions by both indigenous and multiracial societies. Van der Merwe (2016) also observed that:

Over the past few decades a paradigm shift has taken place with regard to biblical hermeneutics – a movement from a particular methodology (such as the historical-critical or text immanent or reception theories) to a more comprehensive approach in hermeneutics (the incorporation of various methodologies simultaneously) to do more justice to the interpretation of the Bible text. (p. 581)

The following sections comprise some assessments of individual contributions on African biblical hermeneutics by David Adamo, Cheryl Exum, Elelwani Farisani, Gerald West, Itumeleng Mosala, Jesse Mugambi and Justin Ukpong as representative examples.

#### **David Tuesday Adamo**

Adamo (1999:60–90) examined African Biblical Studies (ABS) as the 'African social cultural context and subject of interpretation'. This approach is reminiscent of a traditional 'appropriation approach', which most contributions by African scholars have attempted to link with 'hermeneutics'. Adamo's argument that the biblical Moses married a Cushite, an African woman, although debatable, has gained traction with readers. According to Numbers 12:1, Moses married a Cushite. However, the Bible depicts this act as against the Mosaic Law. Meanwhile, one would still probe for clarity by asking the following question: why would Moses break the law which he had written? Adamo (2016) wrote that:

African Biblical Studies is the interpretation of the Bible for transformation in Africa. When we discuss the hermeneutic(s) that can transform Africa we are discussing the biblical studies that are vital to the well-being of our society. (p. 2)

Adamo (2016) further opined that:

A closer and critical examination of African Biblical Studies will reveal some facts that make it legitimate, important and Christian. The use of imprecatory psalms with the names of God shows the recognition of the power in names within African tradition that is quite similar to the power attributed to names in the Hebrew Bible. (p. 3)

Adamo, amongst others, bases his argument on the presence of an African in the Bible by deciphering the claim of some

passages of Scripture; for example, Psalm 68:31 says 'Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God'. Adamo's preferred reading of the chosen text might be one of the reasons for the criticism against 'squeezing the text' (see Meyer 2015:1–7). Esias Meyer's position, which complements my own, serves as an example of several contributions that are opposed to such a reading of the biblical text.

#### **Cheryl Exum**

Of interest in Cheryl Exum's contribution is the author's feminist approach to biblical hermeneutics. In her critique of biblical stories of abuse against women (e.g. Gn 34, Jdg 19–20; 21:19–23; Ezk 16; 23), Exum (1995) presupposed that perpetrators will avoid such practices in the future. Exum (1996:112) further argued that '[p]hysical abuse is God's way of reasserting his control over the woman'. One wonders whether it is logical for Exum, among others, to wait for the confirmation of the biblical text in order to affirm their roles as critics against the alleged abuse of women in our post-biblical society. In other words, Exum proposes a 'strategy of resistance' (see Jump 2001:55–78). According to Jump (2001:55), the strategy of resistance 'takes seriously the gender politics of both representation and interpretation'. Such ambitious interpretations of passages of Scripture are typical of numerous feminist interpretations which have received little attention because of the deliberate intent to use the Bible as a masterpiece towards achieving egotistic objectives. In my opinion, there are more serious matters that feminist theologians (and preachers through the pulpit) should strive to address. These include the growing misconduct among our African youths, both girls and boys, rise in child pregnancy, abortion and drug abuse. The Bible says much about intoxication but virtually nothing about substance abuse. Examples of common passages on intoxication include the following: 'wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise' (Pr 20:1); 'do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18). Mentioned in this discourse are just a few examples of more pressing issues which the Bible does not address, but which are very serious in our African societies today. Exum and other theologians need not ignore the negative impact of the specific matters confronting African societies today.

#### **Elelwani Farisani**

Elelwani Farisani does not openly write in support of either African biblical hermeneutics or black biblical hermeneutics. The inclusion of Farisani in this debate is because of his critique of hermeneutics when he argues about 'ideologically aware reading of the text' (Farisani 2010:507). One is humbled by Farisani's boldness in challenging Jesse Mugambi and other scholars, who in Farisani's opinion seem to be reading Ezra-Nehemiah out of context. In the following passage, Farisani (2010) argued:

The Ezra-Nehemiah text has been used by Jesse Mugambi and others in a quest for a theology of reconstruction. The way these

African scholars have used Ezra-Nehemiah undermines their basic call for a theology which aims at addressing the needs and plight of the poor and the marginalised in Africa. This is precisely because they appropriate the Ezra-Nehemiah text without engaging with the text in any depth. By not so doing, these scholars have failed to identify an ideology prevalent in the Ezra-Nehemiah text, an ideology which is biased in favour of the returned exiles, but biased against the *am haaretz*. (p. 515)

Farisani (2010) further argued:

By so doing, such an analysis hopes that in appropriating any biblical text in addressing the class, race and gender issues in South Africa, black theologians will be sensitive to the voices and needs of all stakeholders in taking up this theological task in Africa. (p. 515)

Farisani (2010, 2014) opined that:

[A]ny uncritical reading of the Biblical text tends to further oppress and side-line the poor and marginalised by appropriating the ideologically undifferentiated Biblical text as the 'revealed word of God'. (p. 515; see also p. 207)

Meanwhile, Farisani (2014:208) appeared to be consistent in his approach. For example, he argued that the books of 'Philemon and 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 have been used to justify slavery in Africa and United States of America'. Farisani's observation is based on the misinterpretation of Scripture by the superiors of the time who also read and interpreted the text out of context. In an earlier contribution, Farisani (2002:297) had maintained that any discussion on the theology of reconstruction needs to recognise 'the fact that each and every text in the Bible is the product of its socio-historical context'. Assessment of Farisani's contribution in this way serves to illustrate that, although some scholars appear to be pan-Africanist and might have some inclination towards African biblical hermeneutics (ABH), they are also critical of the literal and fundamentalist reading of the biblical text. The scope of the present dialogue agrees with the argument of critical scholars (e.g. Farisani) which is opposed to reading the biblical text literally as if to suggest its contents were meant to address contemporary issues in Africa. The debate on slavery in Philemon and 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 (see Farisani 2014:208) is one such example.

### Gerald West

Another renowned scholar of biblical hermeneutics is Gerald West. Although West's contributions are not precisely inclined towards appropriation, they present evidence of some thrust on African biblical hermeneutics. For example, his contribution on the title 'Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: modes of reading the Bible in the South African context', West (1995) opined that:

First, African biblical hermeneutics is predominantly interested in the historical and sociological dimension of the biblical text. Second, African life interests are consciously and explicitly a part of the interpretative process. Third, African biblical hermeneutics is always aware of the ambiguous history of the Bible's arrival in Africa, and so is constantly attempting to assert itself over against the dominant discourses of western, colonial and imperialistic forms of biblical scholarship. (p. 11)

As West (2002; see also West & Dube 2000) observed, one would presuppose that African biblical hermeneutics arose as a 'protest movement' to counteract the perceived Western biblical interpretation on behalf of the African readership. It can be observed that every time there is a discussion on hermeneutics and biblical interpretation, the question of Western invasion and colonisation of Africa brings Christianity and the Bible to mind. It appears that most biblical commentators attempt to take a socio-political dimension in response to their reading and interpretation of the biblical text. The memory of colonial and/or apartheid experiences 'refuses' to escape their individual discourses, and African biblical hermeneutics serves as a means to engage the text in order to achieve a political goal. Thus, West (1995:11) writes of 'the ambiguous history of the Bible's arrival in Africa'. Although West does not precisely sound in favour of African biblical hermeneutics, there are identifiers that situate him either as one who sympathises with or feels that those who write about it might have a legitimate 'indigenous dimension' towards biblical interpretation.

### Itumeleng Mosala

Mosala (1989a) wrote that:

The Bible is not only the product and record of class, race, gender and cultural struggles, but also the site and weapon of such struggles. The Bible is the place where and the means whereby many contemporary struggles are waged. (p. 11)

Mosala (1989a:67) called it 'the black struggle for liberation'. According to Mosala (1987a:x), 'people's reading of the Bible is framed by their history and culture'. In other words, for Mosala, it is not unreasonable for any biblical interpretation to disregard the history and culture of a people. Perhaps Mosala, although he did not mention it, seems to suggest that the biblical text and its narratives about wars and victories involving kings and priests have the potential of influencing political struggles and social unrest in the post-biblical world including Africa. In my view, Mosala needed to show awareness of the cultures of the people of ancient Israel. That is the key to an informed interpretation of the biblical text. In addition, one should be conversant of the fact that the political and economic strengths of the surrounding 'giants' of Egypt and Mesopotamia influenced both Israel and Judah either negatively or positively. Simkins and Kelly (2014:35) admitted that Israel and Judah were located 'in the land bridge where the regional powers of their world, Egypt and Mesopotamia, met and clashed'. In my view, any serious scholarship on the cultures of ancient Israel should look at the broader picture of the cultures of the peoples within the region. Mosala's (1989:11) opinion that 'the contemporary struggles waged out of familiarisation with the Bible' is highly debatable because devout Christians and Bible readers will argue that the Bible has always promoted peace. Nevertheless, Mosala's biblical interpretation might also need to be understood in the light of Farisani's (2010) contestation that:

[I]n South Africa certain scholars used the biblical text to support an apartheid ideology which systematically oppressed and dehumanised black people. In response, Black theology also

used the Bible as a weapon in the struggle of black people against the apartheid ideology. (p. 507)

### Jesse Mugambi

Mugambi's (2003:118) tone also suggested a reinvention of a hermeneutics that departs from the missionary church teachings and its forms of biblical interpretation. Mugambi is popular for reading the Ezra-Nehemiah text without considering the context of the text. Such an approach to biblical text provoked Farisani (2010:515) to challenge Mugambi. Farisani describes Mugambi's approach as 'uncritical reading' (Farisani 2010:515). Admittedly, Mugambi is celebrated by many (see e.g. Cezula 2013:3) as a campaigner of what became known as 'reconstruction theology' (cf. Mugambi 1995, 1997, 1999, 2003). Mugambi's reconstruction theology focuses largely on the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. However, as highlighted earlier, Mugambi has also received his fair share of criticism particularly because of, amongst other factors, the lack of critical interpretation of the Scriptural texts from which his conversations developed. As already observed here, Farisani is one example of such critics.

### Justin Ukpong

In his argument for African biblical hermeneutics, Ukpong (1995:4) talks of 'paying attention to the African sociocultural context and the questions that arise therefrom'. He further argues that '[t]he focus of African interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context' (Ukpong 1995:6). Ukpong (2004:24) further remarked that '[t]he 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'. It is argued in this conversation that for any hermeneutical interpretation to be justified, the interpreter needs to examine the biblical text itself in order to give it 'fairer hearing'.<sup>2</sup> Ukpong might as well be categorised together with Jesse Mugambi, whom Farisani (2010:515) castigated for 'uncritical reading' of the biblical text. Meanwhile, one wonders whether Ukpong (1995) deliberately contradicts himself when he writes that:

[T]his involves interactive engagement between the biblical text and a particular contemporary sociocultural issue, such that the gospel message serves as a critique of the culture, and/or the cultural perspective enlarges and enriches the understanding of the text. (p. 6)

However, the author's earlier observation of Ukpong's writings on African biblical hermeneutics shows that 'uncritical reading' of the text was always apparent.

## Strengths and weaknesses of African biblical hermeneutics

### Strengths

Firstly, the strength of African biblical hermeneutics is confirmed by the inclusion of the African Biblical Hermeneutics Section at both the Annual and International Meetings of the

<sup>2</sup>The phrase is the author's.

Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Some hermeneutical contributions by the founding members of this SBL section have been discussed in the present study. Dube (2012:6) confirmed this: 'The founding members of the African Biblical Hermeneutics Section were Dora Mubwayesango, Justin Ukpong, Musa W. Dube and Gerald O. West'. In addition, previous contributions to African biblical hermeneutics have presented scientific arguments, which usually went through rigorous scrutiny by way of critical reviews. The fact that a manuscript on hermeneutics or African biblical hermeneutics was finally published after going through a rigorous process by experienced reviewers suggests that it merits the attention of the readership. Secondly, although biased to some extent (it is a human error), most contributors to African biblical hermeneutics are highly qualified practitioners, the legitimacy of whose findings cannot be discredited. Thirdly, Africans have endured various experiences of colonialism, segregation, exploitation and marginalisation. African biblical scholarship is a form of self-expression by indigenous Africans who yearn for African approaches to biblical interpretation and theology. It can also be observed that right from its inception in Africa, the missionary church was opposed to African culture and Africans' ways of self-expression. African biblical hermeneutics is a kind of protest project against the missionary church for its refusal to recognise most African cultures and religious practices, while recognising a few. The proponents of African biblical hermeneutics seem to be saying: 'As Africans, we have our own ways of interpreting the Bible'. In that sense, African readers still regard the Bible as the 'white man's project' whose objective was to subjugate Africans. Some African (and African-American) scholars have openly expressed such opinions in writing. For example, Peel (2000:4) regarded Christianity as 'the religious project which was brought by the missionaries in the first place'. Although to some extent the given claim by Peel could be legitimate, one may also need to locate the social function and benefits of the Hebrew and Christian Bible within African communities.

### Weaknesses

Most, if not all, previous contributions on hermeneutical approaches did not first and foremost foreground the criteria selected to prefer a particular passage of Scripture ahead of others for debate and 'appropriation' in our postmodern African context. There are interpretation issues which need to be clarified and carefully taken care of as scholars attempt to grapple with some passages of Scripture that pose serious humanitarian threats when read and applied as relevant in our modern-day African context. In other words, one would need to respond to the following questions: (1) What is the hermeneutical interpretation of 'human sacrifice' in ancient Israel as depicted in the Abrahamic narrative (Gn 22, see also 2 Ki 3:27, 2 Ki 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Oesterley 1937:78)? By contrast, the book of Leviticus (18:3 & 20:21-24) forbade Israel to sacrifice their children to Molech. (2) How does hermeneutics explain these inconsistencies? (3) How would hermeneutical proponents interpret the 'death penalty' (Dt 22:20-22) because of one's loss of virginity? (4) If research and scientific discovery attempt to inform and educate the

reading public, how does a hermeneutical interpretation of some of the naïve Israelite practices as depicted in the Bible inform and educate modern societies? Selected reading or interpretation of the Bible is not only biased but also dangerous. There are numerous places in the Bible that do not make sense in real-life situations in our modern day. Considering the varying interpretations that the readership is receiving, African biblical hermeneutics appears hollow. It is obvious that once the journey of African biblical hermeneutics has begun, proponents will not know where to stop. One wonders whether Deist (1992:314–315) was making reference to African biblical hermeneutics when he proposed ‘an indigenous South African tradition of OT scholarship’. A few examples will suffice. Some societies in Africa stress virginity (hence ‘virginity testing’) on a girl child as taught in the biblical text. Arnfred (2004) argues that:

[V]irginity testing appears to place an absurd and unjustifiable burden of responsibility upon the shoulders of very young women, the custom totally leaves out the responsibility of men and poses no challenge to masculinities, and it leaves patriarchy undisturbed. (p. 11)

In the prophetic book of Ezekiel, it is stated that priests ‘[s]hall not marry widows or divorced women; they may marry only virgins of the stock [*mizzera*] of the House of Israel, or widows who are widows of priests’ (Ezek 44:22). If truth be told, pastors (as priests) marry women who are either divorced or who have lost their virginity at the time of marriage. It is in the context of the given examples that appropriation of the biblical text in our modern post-biblical world would not make logical sense. Masoga’s (2004) proposal would likely attract a majority support when he penned that:

[B]iblical interpretation has to take into account two levels of the indigenous nature of the Bible: firstly, that of the biblical world that shaped and finally produced the biblical text and, secondly, that of the readers of the text. (p. 140)

Farisani’s (2010:507) argument for a ‘sociological analysis of biblical texts as a preferred methodological approach for black theology to effectively unearth the ideologies imbedded in biblical texts’ also cautions contributors about ‘uncritical’ biblical interpretation.

## Oral hermeneutics in Africa

In the author’s opinion, it is logical to commence a discussion on oral hermeneutics in the context of the missionary enterprise and missionary churches in Africa. This is so because it is variously documented that AICs emerged as a protest movement following the mushrooming of mainline churches in Africa. It is observed that the mainline churches have lost a great number of their membership because of the emergence of AICs (see Van der Merwe 2016:566). Mentioning ‘mainline churches’, the following examples come to mind: the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, the Salvation Army, the United Methodist Church, the Anglican Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Christ, amongst others. These are churches exported to Africa through the missionary enterprise in

Africa. They are also known elsewhere as ‘missionary churches’ (see Adamo 2016:9). Mugambi (2003) also observed that:

It is interesting to trace the history of biblical hermeneutics throughout the history of Christianity. During the apostolic period oral tradition flourished, and it was not until several decades that the tradition was reduced to writing. In the following three centuries, church dogma was fixed in an effort to distinguish context interpretations of the Gospel from false ones. The famous theologians who have earned a place in the roll of honour were committed Christians who tried hard to defend the Christian faith against its enemies and opponents. Yet their defence of the faith was culturally conditioned since it was conducted within the Graeco-Roman setting. In many parts of tropical Africa, Christianity is hardly a century old. Churches are still in the process of establishment within the local African culture. Theological training is still conducted in foreign languages – English, French, Portuguese and Arabic. (p. 121)

In this regard, Van der Merwe (2016:564) remarked that: ‘The emergence of AICs created a platform for resistance against missionary activities in Africa’. Steffen (1996) remarked:

Oral hermeneutics focuses on the conversations between characters (humans, spirits and animals). As it searches for mysterious meaning, it centres in on character theology rather than conceptual theology; it focuses on the dialogical, on-going conversations within the text, and the inner discussion going on between the listener and the author (and Author) of the text. Frozen text melts away to living dialogue. (n.p.)

Current New Testament studies developed ‘oral hermeneutics’, which attracted scholars such as Steffen and Bjoraker (2020), author of *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*. Chifungu (2013:198) also observed that ‘[a]n oral hermeneutics could play a very important role in bridging the gap that still exists between what is taught in the seminary and the reality on the ground’. One would therefore argue that the question of reasserting oral hermeneutics in Africa cannot be ignored. For Chifungu (2013:216), ‘[i]mplementing an oral hermeneutics within the lay preaching context of the Malawian Church is vital’. While hermeneutics is generally defined as ‘a science of interpretation’, particularly of Scripture, oral hermeneutics can be seen as the interpretation of Scripture by utilising local vocabulary and indigenous skills. Admittedly, oral hermeneutics is uncommon among the so-called mainline church groupings. In Africa, oral hermeneutics is practised extensively, especially among AICs where the written Word (the Bible) plays little role in both the delivery of the sermon and ecstatic behaviour of congregants. The oral hermeneutics might mistakenly be associated with ignorance and backwardness by some critics, but the *agrammatoi kai idiotai* in Acts 4:13 (see Horsley 2010:94) identifies in every respect the oral hermeneutics practised among AICs. Horsley (2010) correctly pointed out that:

[C]onsideration of the *oral and written* aspects of scripture may be one of the keys to addressing the question of how the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Mark, became included in the Bible by the ecclesial authorities of established Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. (p. 94)

Philip (2005) probably puts it better while observing that:

The idea that historians work (or should work) only with written documents has had unfortunate effects on history in general (imagine if detectives were only allowed to introduce written evidence in court!), although the lack of written evidence for much of African history has mitigated those effects on the history of Africa. The idea, borrowed from literary criticism, that nothing exists outside the text, useless for history. (p. 39)

The Bible is also silent about the development of the oral tradition. Thus, Culley (1986:31) noticed that '[s]ince no clear picture can be reconstructed on the basis of evidence from the Bible and its historical context, one must resort to other means'. Kelber (1983) made the following observation on the characteristics of oral hermeneutics:

The oral medium, in which words are managed from mouth to ear, handles information differently from the written medium, which links the eye to visible but silent letters on the page. (p. xv)

The assertion that most AICs are tied to oral hermeneutics is not an overstatement. African biblical hermeneutics is the project of the so-called 'literate' (college and university professors, researchers, educators, critics, etc.). Thus, Chifungo (2013:174) posited that 'literate need facts, numbers and procedures to understand things; oral communicators need events so that they can learn by associating the story to the event and the knowledge'. For indigenous and local communities deeply rooted in African cultural practices and customs, oral hermeneutics is the norm. As already precluded earlier on in this discussion, the author is conversant with oral hermeneutics and oral traditions among Africans. In oral hermeneutics in Africa, conversation between humans and the ecosystem is believed to be possible. The interface between humans and the spiritual realm is believed to inform individuals of the existence of a Supreme Being who created the natural world. Therefore, for African societies, worship and veneration of the 'gods' occurs in recognition of the natural order. In an immediate family setup, oral hermeneutics is not only informative but also serves as a springboard for teaching and education on life in general and African cultural practices and customs in particular. Among AICs, homiletics is practised not on the basis of a written Word, but on the basis of indigenous knowledge systems that derive largely from cultural practices and local customs. As opposed to hermeneutics that derive from homiletics taught at Bible colleges and seminaries, which follow a particular pattern informed by Western training and biblical teachings, preachers and teachers among AICs believe in the inspiration from a spirit given to specially chosen people by the Supreme Being. Most preachers and teachers of AICs are not theologically trained. However, that does not make their sermon delivery or teaching inferior. The leadership among AICs emerges from among members who either claim that the Supreme Being is 'calling' them to perform the task of a cleric or are appointed by unanimous vote of congregants. Others are initiated into leadership positions. Hence, Mbiti (1969:122) remarked: 'The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge, which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated and who are seen as

children'. Because it is generally believed in scholarship that 'numbers do not lie', the huge number of congregants found at a particular gathering suggests that AICs are meeting the specific, physical, material and individual needs of their members. Most AICs do not have a church building; shrines are usually located in the thicket and on mountain surroundings. It is therefore not fitting to categorise mainline churches in Africa as 'indigenous' because they own buildings, and administration is based on Western and missionary patterns. Among AICs, the Bible plays no role in both the administration of congregations and in sermon delivery. Recently, what has generally punctuated African scholarship on hermeneutics was the inclination towards indigenous knowledge systems, and this trend has infiltrated AICs and motivated oral hermeneutics as opposed to the traditional biblical teaching and preaching by the mainline churches. Although African biblical hermeneutics proposes an indigenous interpretation of the Bible in Africa, the initiative is still lurking in both character and practice because the proponents for African biblical hermeneutics still use the Bible as their basis of contestation. It is also important to note that some AICs still use the Hebrew Bible. However, members of AICs are not fundamentally bound by the contents of the biblical text; they use indigenous expressions (e.g. dancing, clapping of hands, drum-beating, rattling, ululation, etc.; see Chifungo 2013:73) and oral administration of local and indigenous medicines. Although AICs do not use a written Word, they administer with accuracy the procedures of conducting a worship service from the beginning to the end. Another way in which oral hermeneutics influence both the psyche and the belief systems about God among the members of AICs is the management of polygamous relationships together with their followers and several children born within such polygamous institutions. Indigenous Africans and AICs should be applauded for their knowledge about the invisible God, yet they still believe that he exists as depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

## Conclusion

It was argued in the entire discourse that although scholarship in Africa largely favours African biblical hermeneutics, which usually takes the appropriation dimension into account, the context of the text needs to be considered critically. Hermeneutical approaches that have sprouted from hermeneutics included African biblical hermeneutics, black biblical hermeneutics, contextual biblical hermeneutics and oral hermeneutics. It was also explored that oral hermeneutics defines traditional African life patterns and religious expressions among AICs. It was explored that indigenous Africans are known for oral teaching and preaching; their relational manipulation of the divine and the sacred is punctuated by their familiarisation with indigenous knowledge and ecosystems. Admittedly, most rural African societies are illiterate. However, the wealth of knowledge exhibited through oral tradition continues to influence in a positive way the government of societal structures and local rural communities and enablement of coexistence among siblings.

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