

TRENDS IN WISDOM RESEARCH: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Philip J Nel

Research Associate, Centre for Africa Studies
University of the Free State

Abstract

The article explores crucial differences and emphases between mainstream Western interpretations of Wisdom and important scholarly voices from the continent of Africa. The divergent trends are highlighted mainly in respect of the central theme of the volume, namely, human dignity and poverty. The perspective maintained in the article to avoid undue reductionism towards a singular methodological stance and to acknowledge positively ‘other’ spaces for interpretation is informed by the concept of model-dependent realism. In conclusion, a few considerations are tabled which could facilitate a space of dialogue and simultaneously value a sensitivity towards a post-colonial ‘African’¹ scholarly voice.

Key Words: Wisdom Research, Proverbs, Hermeneutic models, Text Appropriation

Introduction

For two reasons it is quite challenging to speak about “*trends in wisdom research – an African perspective*”. Firstly, ‘*trends*’ in wisdom research are multifarious and do not specify an angle of approach or context. I assume that the sub-title ‘an African perspective’ functions implicitly as a qualifier for a focus pertaining to interpretations of wisdom of value to an African context as well as perspectives of scholars from Africa. Secondly, contemplating an ‘*African perspective*’ will always be prone to serious over-simplification (and essentialisation), and by implication it is a homogenising attempt of multi and varied voices – not to mention the inclusion or exclusion of white/black Westernized and white Africanized voices from the continent!

The imposition of these two challenges however, provides me with the liberty to select heuristically trends in wisdom research, mainly pertaining to Proverbs, to reflect critically on issues of wisdom research relevant to Africa as context and on views of those proponents claiming to present authentically a new ‘African’ perspective for the interpretation and value of wisdom. The overriding brief of the volume anticipates a correlation between discussions about wisdom research and aspects of human dignity and poverty. I will restrict myself predominantly to trends in wisdom research with social-cultural assumptions and contextual (moral) appropriation of wisdom pertaining to social responsibility and poverty.

¹ The use of ‘African’ in this article should not be seen as an essentialising effort as though all people and voices from the continent are homogenous. The argument of Mudimbe (1988) holds true that the concept of ‘Africa’ as singular entity is a Western fabrication to ‘other’ the continent. The concept is therefore used with inverted commas where homogenisation could be implied. However, for the sake of comparison the generalisation of ‘African’ is maintained to foreground pertinent scholarly voices from the continent with respect to biblical interpretation without the assumption that all voices echo the same stance.

I will also select particular voices in the field of proverbial wisdom research to ameliorate the issues crucial in the debate between so-called Westernised and Africanised hermeneutics.

Clashes of Perspectives

For most people opposing or alternative views of the same reality pose a serious threat to their sense of logic and usually they revert to a single frame of reference or to their own model of making sense of reality. The history of biblical interpretation reflects the same tendency to latch on to the dominant hermeneutic model of a particular period. It serves no need to recall here the different tendencies in the Bible itself and within its reception history in the various religious traditions. During modernity scholars have satisfied themselves with a mode of explaining and interpreting the Bible through a strong emphasis on logic and methodology. The result has been a legacy of Bible interpretation which centre-stages methodologies about the origin and sources of the text, its historical and socio-cultural context, language, forms, traditions and reception. Although scholars have latched on to different components of the hermeneutic communication model of author-text-reader-context, the belief was firmly entrenched that the model is successful at explaining the text and its interpretation. In this manner the model(s) predicts the outcomes pertaining to the reality of the text and its interpretation. Competition did arise between the different efforts within the same model, because the productiveness of a certain model effort is attributed positively in terms of its success regarding assumptions of truth value or true correlation with reality.

Within this model, however the different emphases thereof, the research on wisdom reflects serious attempts to analyze and understand the background of wisdom, its Ancient Near Eastern social-cultural setting, its formal structures and composition, and finally the text realities in comparison to other texts and traditions of interpretation. The reality of the text is accepted as it stands, and therefore the moral and ethical questioning of social order and hierarchies were not in principle disputed. For example, the *de facto* reality of the poor is accepted the way the Book of Proverbs portrays it, without an attempt as corrective to or transformation of the text reality.

Under the influence of postmodern assumptions scholars have discovered that models are multifarious, and that reality is but the view generated by the model and that no model represents *the* true image of reality. The history of the succession of models is nothing less than a factual reflection of the very nature of model fabrication to explain reality successful – in this case the reality of the Biblical text in relation to an interpretive community. This awareness of the subjectivity (context) of the inquiring subject(s) has brought into question not only the suspicion that a particular model cannot explain reality in its entirety, but also that the context of the subject influences outcomes and views of implied realities. The confrontation in the post-war world with inequalities in the social domain, undesirable levels of poverty, discrimination, economic imperialism, racism, liberation struggles of the oppressed marginalised and women have resulted in efforts to take socio-cultural, political and economic contexts more seriously as imperative to maintain the meaning of the Biblical text in the new world. This situation has become the advent of hermeneutic models of contextual interpretation, liberation theologies, feminist readings and post-colonial biblical text appropriation. These models do not take the reality of the text for granted, but read it against its grain to accommodate current deplorable realities of injustices and seek to appropriate the text in transformative ways. The implication, for example, is quite evident

in a poverty-stricken Africa where Proverbs should be appropriated in a transformative way and not to accept the reality of poverty, but to eradicate it.

At first glance the mentioned models are not easily reconcilable and probably will never be reconciled. This uneasiness does however not resolve the imposition for the Bible interpreter. I am therefore inclined to accept the existence of different models and that we should be open to a '*model-dependent realism*' (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010:6-9) – a concept obtained from the natural sciences to maintain the fundamental perspective that views of reality may differ and in fact differ because our view of reality is the result of a particular model to frame the way in which we find the most successful explanation of reality. For the biblical scholar a model-dependent realism would imply the abdication of a single explanatory model and to embrace a family of models which adds to a fuller perspective of reality. In this sense, there may be a point of convergence between traditional Western interpretations of the Bible and more contextual approaches without being sorted out in neat methodological packaging.

Let us therefore return to where we have started regarding the imposition of Western trends and 'African' trends of wisdom research regarding poverty and human dignity.

Western Research Trends

In the Western tradition of wisdom research the emphasis falls squarely on the *exposition* of the text. This exposition approach has advanced from small unit and form analyses to analyses of wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern context of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine, and eventually to expositions of larger units or collections together with inter-text and inter-biblical traditions. In studies of topic or theme analysis of social-cultural phenomena or pertinent (theological) ideas, relative scanty reflection regarding contextual appropriation occurs (cf. e.g. Brueggemann 1993:201-226, Gottwald 1993 and Habel 1988). Where it does surface, it barely goes beyond the text reality of wisdom itself.

The theological exposition, apart from debating the theological place of wisdom within Old Testament theology, ranges from fairly secular interpretations to ones that presuppose a created order (Schmid 1958, Von Rad 1970, etc.). In Calvinist traditions expositors easily jumped to conclusions that wisdom instruction can only be understood within a covenant relation between God and his people (e.g. Uys 1967:200) – although there is no explicit reference or allusion to covenant in Proverbs. In a similar manner efforts to maintain the fundamental religious nature of Proverbs and to reject any form mundane or secular intentions are informed by the assumption that the over-riding worldview of the Israelites was religious in a holistic sense.

'Non-theological' exposition of Proverbs denies a revelatory character or implied covenantal reference of the book. The fact that many sayings are not grounded in any ethics at all, has caused others to view the sayings as purely prudential (cf. Alter 2011:186, cf. also Fox 2009). This stance offers major challenges to maintain any form of moral imperative of the book.

In respect of human dignity and poverty, the reality of the text portrays a privileged imagined world with which Westerners and whites find it more easily to associate with than Africans and disadvantaged people, as pointed out by Brueggemann (1993). A further complication for the investigator of the social imagined world of Proverbs relates to the fact that a singular imagined world cannot be established. The imagined worlds of Proverbs are from different social classes or layers of society as well as from different time frames. This complex issue has led to various attempts to associate Proverbs with class distinctions

which would explain the relevant imagined world notions of different social layers. Accordingly, sections of Proverbs are viewed as ordinary folk (popular) wisdom shared with common experience, others as royal/official (cf. Crenshaw 2000:227) instructions and more elitist in nature, whilst others are from advanced educational circles (Lang 1972); and let us not forget the fact that most of these have been transformed in terms of explicit theological concerns of the post-exilic period.

With reference to poverty there is no attempt in Proverbs to overcome this imbalance of views. Proverbs is not a seamless 'book', but an anthology of multifarious discourses with implied ambivalence and even irreconcilable ideas (Alter 2010:185-186). The Book of Proverbs airs the diverse attitudes regarding poverty like a juggler. The main thrust in terms of the retribution principle is that wealth and richness is a reward for being diligent, honest, wise and just. It is a blessing from God (Prov 3:1-10) and it makes the owner powerful (Prov 10:15, 14:20). Wisdom and prosperity are stall-mates. To be poor may be because of laziness (Prov 10:4.), lack of drive and short-sightedness (Prov 20:13, 21:17), and finally a fact of life imbedded in creation itself, therefore created by God (Prov 14:31 [ditto 17:5], 22:2).

From a different milieu the poor is listed along with other categories of disadvantaged people such as widows and orphans, and explicitly incorporated into the social justice system in terms of which leaders and people in power should take care of them. In the final analysis, God will champion for them (Prov 22:11, 23). One may think here of a kind of brother ethics – typical of the Deuteronomist tradition. When wealth and poverty are weighed in terms of virtue, it is better to be poor and just than with great income obtained through injustice (Prov 16:8). From the same tradition warning surfaces that richness or wealth does not secure a long life, for wealth must be earned in a moral way without violation of the rights of the poor and without withholding care from the poor.

The edited volume on wealth and poverty in the Old Testament (Bosman *et al.* [eds.] 1991) is treated here within the Western tradition, because the same model of interpretation is implied. The authors take serious cognizance of the diverse historical backgrounds as well as the different imagined worlds – even within the same text. Spangenberg (1991:228-246) for example, when dealing with the issue of wealth and poverty in the Wisdom literature, highlights the different cultural and historical settings in Proverbs and other Wisdom texts to illustrate how different textual contexts portray different views of wealth and poverty. The textual imagined worlds form, however, not part of critical analysis, and therefore the realities of wealthy people living side by side with poor people are seen as the status quo and a reality of the social order. The Wisdom, according to him, does not seek to transform this reality, but rather to ensure just treatment of the poor and to warn against indecent ownership of wealth. It is however not specifically analysed in which way the texts of the Bible, and here specifically the Wisdom literature, maintain an authoritative and indisputable imperative that religious people have a "special responsibility towards the poor and towards their human dignity" as succinctly summarised by Deist (Bosman *et al.* [eds.] 1991:255) at the end of the volume.

In the majority of instances scholars find it hard to believe that the Book of Proverbs is really a reflection of the social context of ordinary folk or in accordance with the intellectual capacity of rural families (Crenshaw 1981). Although many would challenge an elitist royal setting, no one goes so far as to see the aesthetic form and content to be a reflection of grass-root society. Although Gerstenberger (1965) and others emphasised a family ethos informing the sayings, it does not imply that the current form is produced by local rural families or in popular locations. The scholarly tradition prefers a more

sophisticated and privileged setting and does not question in principle the implied order of the imagined worlds of Proverbs. Should one seek to synchronise and systematise the ideas of Proverbs as Wittenberg (1986:51-53) does, then one can only conclude that wealth and poverty are binary aspects reflecting the order of social status. This is exactly the assumption that African scholars dispute.

‘African’ Trends in Wisdom Research

In contra-distinction to the Western model of exposition scholars from the African continent seek to centre-stage *text appropriation* or owning the text symbolically in context. From this perspective the assumed imagined world of Proverbs in which wealth and poverty are fixed realities of society is challenged head-on. The claim is that in both Israelite and African societies, poverty is a social and moral concern, not a destiny. The holistic worldview of Israel and that of Africa is comparable and should at all times be brought into consideration so that one-sided opinions should not be maintained regarding poverty as accepted reality. Should the view of Western scholarship persist, then there is little hope that Proverbs can have any redemptive solution to poverty, and in fact would be meaningless to transform a society in which poverty is a burden to so many people. In Kimilike’s (2008:37) view the crucial questions are:

Do the biblical interpretation of poverty support and maintain the status quo or do they promote creativity and transformation in society? Do the biblical interpretations of poverty posit values which can result in equality or equity in society? Do the biblical interpretations of poverty help the poor to develop a mature self-assertiveness, which will enable them to be an analytical, creative, free, active and responsible society?

Before we take a closer look at his interpretation of Proverb as response to his posed questions, some general observations should be advanced.

It would be misleading to think that all African scholars pursue approaches different from the Western hermeneutic model. In fact, it is unsettling to see how scholars from the continent perpetuate old fashioned ways of biblical exegesis with relative little reference to their own context and critical engagement with the dominant exegetical model. The commentary on the Wisdom Books in the *African Bible Commentary* is a clear case in point. The author (Tewoldemedhin Habtu) relies extensively on the commentary of Kidner (*Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*) and Hubbard (*Communicator’s Commentary*). The imagined world of Proverbs is accepted without critical reflection about discrepancies. One seeks in vain for any suggestion of how the moral values and the ethos of wisdom concur or differ from views embedded in Africa’s moral order and social justice system. It might appear convenient to blame the ignorance of the expositor for such oversight, but then one loses sight of the hegemony of the traditional model of interpretation and its effectiveness to persevere notwithstanding contestation of its dominant position.²

This attitude stands in stark contrast to the vocal challenges of the traditional model by the *Women’s Bible Commentary* as well as prominent feminist exegetes. The former states explicitly that they intend to redress and even reverse the idea commonplace in society,

² In similar fashion the authors of an edited volume about Christian responses to poverty in Africa (Kanyandago 2002) accept uncritically an imagined world of the Bible in which the poor and poverty are favoured for redress and alleviation. Verses from Proverbs and Job are selected randomly to show God’s siding with the poor and how collective responsibility towards the poor is thus commanded as Biblical imperative. The textual world of the Bible is not brought into question, neither the assumption that the Bible has absolute authority to attend to the cries of the poor.

namely, that the Bible is written and understood by white, Western and classically educated middle-class males. The traditional answers found in the Bible are in accordance with questions asked by males. There is therefore a need for an explanation of the Bible which speaks to the needs and questions of women. The imagined world of the text is challenged through a hermeneutics of suspicion (Schüssler-Fiorenza 2001) to reveal the androcentric nature of the text, and the text may even be rejected for its lack of liberating impetus (Mary Daly 1973). In moderate feminist interpretations of Proverbs an ambivalence of text appropriation surfaces. On the one hand, the text's positive 'liberating and life-affirming' aspects are positively appropriated, but on the other hand, the text's negative 'oppressing and minority-silencing' aspects are seen as misappropriated and critically challenged (Camp 1985:20).

In the feminist tradition and together with influences from the postcolonial debate, scholars in Africa such as Musa Dube and Madipoane Masenya seek to dismantle the Western privileged model to create space for the African condition and to relate aspects of the African social-cultural reality as context of interpretation. Masenya's (1996) work on the wisdom literature is the most prominent exponent on the continent. Methodologically, she steers clear from feminist views diminishing the sanctity and authority of the biblical text as well as from those elitist Western voices trying to speak on behalf of the condition of the African woman. She also prevents falling into the trap of African interpretive views which idealise African culture as though it only has become corrupted by colonialism. She opted for an approach she calls an *African woman's liberationist approach* or a *Bosadi (womanhood) partisan reading* of the text (1996:5). Of particular importance to her is the *Bosadi* (womenhood) context for the interpretation of Prov 31:10-31 and how the *mosadi* (woman) contributes to rereading the text in an African context. This rereading falls squarely within the scope of contextual approaches with a slight difference in emphasis on women's liberation. This extra dimension is achieved by exploring the social-cultural context of the Northern seSotho *bosadi* in a liberating manner by using it as a critical context for the biblical world as well as context for the reader (1996:161). From Northern seSotho proverbs and other cultural values a positive image of a woman is construed which then serves as a reference for rereading Prov 31:10-31. The rereading implies a critical subversion of *kyriarchal* elements and promoting liberating aspects.

It becomes evident that the interpretation of Proverbs by Western scholars is challenged, not only in terms of the acceptance of the assumed imagined world in which wealth and poverty are realities, but the very nature of their hermeneutic model is contested. The particular contestation of Kimilike goes beyond approaches of the contextual hermeneutics of Mosala (1989) and Gottwald (cf. also Speckman & Kaufmann [eds.] 2001) as well as those focusing on text appropriation by a lay reader community (e.g. West 2001:169-184). The approach of these scholars, whether called contextual or liberation hermeneutics, advances from the oppressing context of the deprived and colonised reader. From this stance it is expected not to accept uncritically the imagined world of the Bible, but to reread and translate the biblical text so that it may have relevance to the concrete life world of the oppressed and dehumanised conditions resulting from local and global forces and attitudes of class, race, gender, etc.

Reminiscent of the contextual model in Kimilike's approach is his emphasis on African culture and worldview as fundamental sources for the interpretation of the poor in Proverbs (2008:79) However, he goes beyond this stance towards a new hermeneutic model in terms of which the assertion that "the inherent rights of human beings are essential for improving the effectiveness of societal values in order to live a meaningful life" (2008:72) is a non-

negotiable *fait accompli* to which any biblical appropriation should adhere. In order to make Proverbs speak accordingly, Kimilike maintains a commonality between the holistic worldviews of Israel and Africa, as well as a comparable communal understanding of poverty. The communal understanding is gauged from Proverbs in conjunction with grass-root popular sayings from Africa – often African sagacity is maintained as the true reference for the Biblical proverb. In both instances, any idea of poverty as fixed reality is subverted in terms of the broader holistic view of social justice, equality and morality in all spheres of life (2008:301). What Kimilike suggests as a *transformative hermeneutics* of Proverbs to uproot and eradicate poverty, is no longer a variant of traditional contextual theology in terms of which the context of the reader is employed as guiding pointer to the relevant Biblical questions and interpretations. What he in fact suggests is a transformative *agency* of the subject and to make scripture speak accordingly so that communal accepted moral norms of social justice and human dignity may be uphold in all circumstances. The emphasis is therefore no longer on exposition to make sense in the context, but appropriation in the context to make sense of the Biblical text as transformative power. He states:

Most significant could be the use of the African comparative proverbs as an interpretive key to an historical understanding of Old Testament proverbs. Such a utilisation of the corresponding ordinary African people's social, economic, political and religious experiences and concerns could have an impact on the interpretation of proverbs, especially those referring to the poor and the marginalised in the Book of Proverbs (2008:74).

As such the imagined world of Proverbs is not challenged by Kimilike, but the way the Western tradition views that imagined world in which poverty is sanctioned as a fixed social status and caused by divine will. He is therefore also critical towards Fox (1996:238) who does not view Proverbs' statements about poverty and wealth as reflection of reality, but mere utopian and ironic materialistic infatuations. Kimilike advocates the idea that the Book of Proverbs *does* represent the social-cultural reality of poverty, though *not* as a permanent status, but rather as a grass-root perspective of the community to transform and eradicate it. And here is the point of convergence: the African worldview as well as its communal view of poverty concur with the biblical view, and both strive to eradicate poverty to achieve human dignity (cf. his taxonomy of correlations between Israelite and African culture, 2008:160-162). A pre-understanding of the morals and characteristic behaviour of humans is required to arrive at the liberating view of Proverbs regarding poverty (2008:69).

The following may serve as examples of how Kimilike goes about his transformational hermeneutics:

In Prov 13:7 [NIV: *One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth. Kimilike: There are those enriching themselves yet have nothing; others impoverishing themselves yet have great sufficiency (170)*]. His translation emphasises the African sagacious context of deception (pretense) and dishonesty in a socio-economic environment that would shy away from collective social responsibility towards well-being and interdependence. The aim of the proverb is therefore against the immorality of false pretence and does not refer to experience in which perceptions may be fooling the observer or to any confirmation of poverty as a social status.

In Prov 3:18 [NIV: *He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame; but whoever heeds correction is honoured. Kimilike: Poverty and disgrace result from neglect of*

training but the preservation of reproof is honourable (180)]. The African proverbial context and world view of communal and family instruction guide him to belief that the categories of poverty and shame are not sanctioned as reward categories, but they are rather used within communal moral instruction to emphasise positive and negative rewards in order to inculcate the value of social norms of importance to serve the social good and to eradicate poverty (187-8). In this case the training setting is highlighted and not the rewards associated with the obedience or rejection of traditional or moral instruction.

Prov 19:7 [NIV: *A poor man is shunned by all his relatives – how much more do his friends avoid him! Though he pursues them with pleading, they are nowhere to be found. Kimilike: All relatives of the poor dislike them, how much more their friends forsake them. They plead with words to secure them but they are inaccessible* (188).] According to him the verse is a reference to the cause of poverty and not the consequence thereof. Consequently, the plural of ‘poor’ is preferred as translation and the third stich is expanded so that ‘them’ refers to the ‘relatives’. The social networks (relatives) of the poor are thus reminded that they have a social responsibility in terms of holistic and corporate social responsibility to secure the position of impoverished relatives. In this way the proverb concurs with the transformational impact these grass-roots proverbs have on society: it “displays a socio-religious critical intend which provokes the addressee to reflect and appraise whether all of one’s behaviour serves the interests of the communal life for the progress of humanity” (196). The connection of this proverb with the preceding one is recognised, but wealth is not seen as a positive category of wisdom – such an assumption would be confirmation of the traditional Western elitist tradition.

Critical Assessment

I do not wish to go into details of possible criticism of presented close readings, but rather raise general aspects which seem important to highlight the clash of models. With reference to the comparison between biblical and African wisdom and prudence, the treasure of African folk wisdom, as well as its rich repository of oral performance (cf. Finnegan 2007), is an invaluable source to any reader of Proverbs.

The imagined world of the implied author (i.e. textual voice) in Proverbs should however, never be viewed as a true reflection of *the* real world. This also applies to the modern reader and images of his/her real world. A statement about experienced reality is not equal to a normative statement about reality, in this instance of poverty. Such a view according to Kimilike would decrease the possible societal transformative impact of the sayings. But should the imagined world of Proverbs be accepted as real, or be rescued by interpretative strategies?

A further factor complicating the interpretation of the ethos of Proverbs is the fact that no single socio-cultural and political setting can be identified. Certain proverbs may reflect a more communal and brother caring ethos typical of the Deuteronomist, but they certainly not always share the class of local community order. The transportation to the entire collection of proverbs to serve grass-root community values is therefore questionable.

What should also be kept in mind when one contemplates the ethics or moral instruction of Proverbs and its value to an African context, is the normative philosophy of morality in Africa. I think it is accepted too indistinctively by African Biblical scholars that ‘African’ morality (if this gross generalisation may be permitted here!) is norm-driven in terms of a morality deduced from religion or from ideas of cosmic order. Literature about ‘African’ religion and morality often tend to seek alignment with the categorical script of Western

science of religion. One of the prominent voices on 'African' religion, Setiloane (1998:79) claimed that the moral imperative and contract is to be in harmony with the community and to ensure its continuance. An act of violence is viewed as a disturbance of the equilibrium or balance of the community. Ethno-philosopher, Placid Temples (1959) emphasised the 'vital force' as cardinal value in 'African' thought and the force behind all human and non-human action. Benezet Bujo (2003) however is of the opinion that even the idea of a 'vital force' leaves too much scope for individualistic moral application. He also rejects the individualistic moral imperative within the Cartesian paradigm as well as Aquinas' natural law (*ius natural*) as foundation of moral law. Prevailing evidence reveals that 'African' morality is much more diverse and, prior to influences of the major religious traditions, generates its motivation from benevolent community performance or actions. The modes of acquisition and application of moral knowledge in most local rural communities are habituated and embedded in the action of community members and institutions of the group, and not necessarily taught as a compilation of abstract reflection (cf. Marchand 2003:46-47). This view however, does not imply that 'African' morality lacks a dialogical narrative dimension; to the contrary, moral codes and values are textualised in story, myth, ritual, custom and proverb (Nel 2008:42). Community practice and accompanying narrative textualisation make the moral imperative and its justification nearly self-evident. Bujo (2003:56) calls it the 'morality of memoria'.

What should also be incorporate in the debate of an African hermeneutic in a post-colonial context is the danger of fixity Franz Fanon (1986) alluded to. For ages Africans have fought against Westernised efforts (including the missionaries) of essentialising the 'African' character and culture through the attribution of fixed categories to Africa as *The Other*, and thereby homogenising Africanness. 'African' Biblical hermeneutics should maintain the African plurality and avoid superficial essentialisation. This holds also true for the all-to-soon accepted benevolent character of African communal society.

Although Kimilike seeks to shift the boundaries of textual appropriation in an African context and by so doing compromises the distinction between textual meaning and textual appropriation in a single hermeneutic of transformation, he does not question the authority of the Bible and the Bible's role as ultimate adjudicator. Consequently, he shares the awkward position of liberation hermeneutics, namely that liberation is seen "lodged and located in biblical texts, or in ecumenical and Christian church documents" (Sugirtharajah 2001:257). He thus falls short of a postcolonial hermeneutics which really seeks "to puncture the Christian Bible's Western protection and pretensions" (Sugirtharajah 2001:259), and deliberately interrogate both colonial and metropolitan interpretations. The postcolonial agenda seeks to intervene and interrogate accepted knowledges and destabilises their complacencies, which include rereading, inversion and even rejection of imagined worlds of the Bible.

The challenge is twofold for transformative hermeneutics: What affords wisdom a moral imperative for the current social reality when there are scholars who deny the revelatory dimension of wisdom, and those who question an assumption of a singular image of the canonical world as real? Will transformative hermeneutics be able to rescue the biblical text interpretively and avoid steps of misappropriation because of the text's non-liberating and minority-silencing aspects?

Where we have arrived at this point is where we started, namely that we are dealing currently with two model-dependent realities: the Western tradition of exposition and the critical 'African' tradition of text appropriation. One may within each model articulate nuances of commonalities and differences, but the *de facto* hermeneutic tradition of

'African' scholars challenges the current reigning model. It is of little use to defend positions. Instead, one should ask whether convergence between models is possible. At the moment there are laudable efforts of White and Black Africans (West and Musa [eds.] 2001) to genuinely engage the Bible's role in Africa by listening to local voices and by grappling with burning issues of the continent. But a centre for African hermeneutics still eludes scholars. The current tendency towards decentralising religion and spirituality and non-institutional sentiments will prevail and affect Bible reading and text appropriation in future. Consequently, fragmentation and centripetal forces will dominate text appropriation rather than a unifying hermeneutic model.

The post-colonial 'African' subjectivity is defined in terms of opposition to Western monopoly and hegemony. Biblical scholars from Africa seek wittingly and unwittingly a space diametrical opposed to Western tradition. I ignore here the softer confluences between the two articulated by so-called Western contextual readers and African 'westernised' readers.

Models (also language) structure our reality and at the moment it appears that the reality of Africa is construed in ways confirming a hermeneutic space freed from colonising knowledges. A hermeneutic is emerging which is fed by an epistemology informed by a 'gnosis' of the post-colonial subject. This model does not necessarily imply that the difference is artificially stimulated by anti-West sentiments. There may be legitimate and authentic aspects of the 'African' hermeneutic model that in fact establishes it as an alternative. 'African' scholars may be better equipped to make the taxonomy of those fundamental differences. What may be gauged quite generally is the fact that to the 'African' biblical scholar contextual appropriation forms a legitimate frame for reading the Bible. Exposure to the legacy of colonial subordination together with a keen commitment to liberate society from dehumanised remnants of the past and to restore values believed to be in accordance with local communal societal responsibility and social justice, are guiding principles. There resides no value in the Bible and its instruction if it does not serve this purpose. Scholars will also have to contemplate again the widening gap between scholarly pursuit of textual *meaning* and text *appropriation* within charismatic and even symbolic ritualised uses of the Bible on the continent. The Bible is not read from the stance of its transformative ability within the real life context of people, but the real life context 'reads' the Bible, and increasingly this context is non-institutional. The context of concrete appropriation reveals the message of Scripture. The 'African' (including African *diaspora*) model of appropriating the text within a reality construed in ways different from the West, poses an uncomfortable alternative to the so-called Western expository model.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alter, R 2010. *The Wisdom Books. A Translation with Commentary*. New York: WW Norton and Company.
- Adeyemo, T (ed.) 2006. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers.
- Brenner, A (ed.) 1995. *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Bujo, B 2003. *Foundations of an African Ethic. Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*. (Trans. B McNiel) Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.

- Bosman, H *et al* (eds.) 1991. *Plutocrats and Paupers. Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik.
- Camp, CV 1985. *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Crenshaw, JL 1981. *Old Testament Wisdom. An Introduction*. Atlanta: John Knox.
- Du Toit, CW 1998. *Faith, Science & African Culture. African Cosmology and Africa's contribution to science*. Pretoria: UNISA.
- Daly, M 1973. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a philosophy of women's liberation*. Boston: Beacon.
- Dube, M 2001. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: SBL.
- Fanon, F 1986. *Black Skins, White Masks*. Trans. CL Markmann. London: Pluto.
- Finnegan, R 2007. *The Oral and Beyond. Doing Things with Words in Africa*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Fox, MV 1996. The social location of the Book of Proverbs. In Fox, *et al* (eds.) 1996:227-239.
- Fox, MV *et al* (eds.) 1996. *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*. Wiona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Fox, MV 2009. *Proverbs 10-31 (The Anchor Bible.)* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gerstenberger, E 1965. *Wesen und Herkunft des 'apodiktitischen Rechts'*. Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Gottwald, N 1993. Social class as an analytic and hermeneutic category in biblical studies. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, 3-22.
- Kanyandago, P (ed.) 2002. *The Cries of the Poor in Africa. Questions and Responses for African Christianity*. Kisubi: Marianum Press Ltd.
- Kimilike, LP 2008. *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs. An African Transformational Hermeneutic of Proverbs on Poverty*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Kroeger, CC & Evans, MG (eds.) 2002. *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*. Illinois: Intervarsity Press.
- Lang, B 1972. *Die weisheitliche Lehrrede*. Stuttgart: KBW Verlag.
- Masenya, MJ 1996. *Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (womanhood) Perspective*. Unpublished D.Lit.et Phil. Dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Mosala, IJ 1989. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Mudimbe VY (1988) *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Murphy, RE 1998. *Proverbs. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 22*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Nel, PJ 2008. Morality and religion in African thought. *Acta Theologica* 28/2, 33-47.
- Schmid, HH 1958. *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung*. Tübingen: JCB Mohr.
- Schüssler-Fiorenza, ES 2001. *Wisdom Ways. Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Setiloane, G 1998. Towards a biocentric theology and ethic – via Africa. In Du Toit (ed.) 1998:73-84.

- Speckman MT and Kaufmann, LT (eds.) 2001. *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology. Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- Sugirtharajah, RS 2001. *The Bible and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Temples, P 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. (Transl. C King) Paris: Presence Africaine.
- Uys, PH de Vos 1967. *Reg en Geregtigheid aan die minderbevoorreegtes in die boek Spreuke*. Unpublished D.Litt dissertation, University of Stellenbosch.
- Von Rad, G 1970. *Weisheit in Israel*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- West, GO 1999. *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- West, GO 1991. *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation. Modes of reading the Bible in the South African Context*. New York: Orbis Books.
- West, GO and Dube, MW (eds.) 2001. *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- West, GO 2001. Contextual Bible Study in South Africa: A resource for reclaiming land, dignity and identity, In Speckman & Kaufmann (eds.) 2001:169-184.
- Wittenberg, GH 1986. The lexical context of the terminology for the 'poor' in the Book of Proverbs. *Scriptura* 2, 40-85.