

READING THE BIBLE IN AFRICA: Accounting for some trends Part I¹

Jeremy Punt
University of Fort Hare

1. Introduction

In theology African culture, thought and worldview had to wait until the demise of colonialism to be fully explored.² In post-colonial (or neocolonial, Martey 1993) Africa there is an ever-increasing emphasis on theology as perceived and done in Africa: also in the field of the academic study of the Bible. Equally, the demise of Apartheid heralded an increased emphasis on African theological- and African biblical studies in South Africa, if theological journals are anything to go by.

There is no doubt that the discovery of the contribution Africa can make to biblical studies is, even if a belated, a very rightful and necessary one although the study of the Bible seemingly does not rank amongst the priorities of African Theology.³ As in all efforts to make the Bible address contemporary settings and concerns, many dangers accompany the efforts to relate the Bible to African culture and more especially vice versa: the attempt to establish Africa as the most only! appropriate setting or context for understanding the Bible.⁴ At best, studies on the relationship between Africa and the Bible will then become a fad.⁵ At worse, these kind of studies can leave nothing intact or distinct of either the Biblical

-
1. Part II of this article will be published in a forthcoming edition of *Scriptura*
 2. According to Fiensy (1987:73) the comparison between the Old Testament and 'primitive cultures' has been taking place for the 'past two hundred years', but 'modern, anthropological' study started at the beginning of the 20th century. Turner (1980:9-11) questioned the productivity and relevance of South African 'theological scholarship': in biblical studies there is a reluctance to deal with controversial issues.
 3. Contrary to the claims of Mbiti (1978:72-85) and others. (Parratt 1983:88) Mbiti (1978:81,83) does argue that in certain areas in African Theology prominently so in the case of liberation there exist a 'neglect of ... biblical backing'. On the latter, cf. the similiar complaint by Wambudta (1980:31) who accuses American Black Theology of 'politicised dipping only to find support in the Scriptures'; and, the complaint by De Villiers (1993:23) that he often fails 'to understand exactly why Contextual Theologians refer to the Bible in their critical reflection on liberating praxis'.

African Theology is used here in reference to both the liberationist (Black Theology) and inculturationist (African Theology) theological streams in Africa, except where the differences especially in their usage of the Bible informs my argument.

4. Cf. Ben-Jochannan's attempt (1991) to establish Africa as the 'origin' of the 'major Western Religions': Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Many other attempts to hear the voice of Africa, are currently found, but, unfortunately, some of these attempts create the image of superficiality: stressing the 'blackness' of Ethiopians, and so on.
5. JS Pobee (1992b:61) refers to publishers who knowingly abuse the term 'African culture', when they allow publications about particular African societies to sell 'under the epithet 'African' in the universal sense of the word while knowing that the reference is to a particular culture. This adds to ignorance and confusion, and smacks of 'ethnocentrism'.

Cf. also Hargrave's concern with 'uncritical contextualization' harbouring on 'reverencing the faith-convictions of non-Christian traditions', which can be ascribed to the 'discovery' of the value of indigenous cultures 'as well as regret over past prejudice and mistreatment'. (1993:3-11)

One is worried that this simplistic and generalising tendency might be a symptom of a wider ranging trend, namely the realisation that 'Africa sells', especially in post-Apartheid South Africa. In the academic sphere it translates as: Africa is 'publishable'. Surely the answer to this problem is not to ignore African theological concerns, but to search for the most appropriate and adequate ways of addressing these concerns!

writings and its setting⁶ or African culture(s).⁷

This contribution aims to contribute to the current debate on biblical studies in Africa, by mapping out a few contours of the Bible's appropriation in Africa in the past as well as some general perceptions within the debate, all of which takes place within the context of African culture. It is therefore advisable to begin the discussion with a few brief comments on culture, especially the African variety(-ies).

2. On culture and Africa

2.1 Defining culture?

The perceived close relationship between the Bible and African culture in interpreting and appropriating the Bible makes it necessary to briefly reflect on the admittedly polyvalent and polysemic concept 'culture': it is simply difficult notoriously difficult to define culture.⁸ Moulder (1992:17-19), stressing the nonexistence of an uncontroversial definition of culture, takes his cue from an etymological view on the Latin *cultura* and then characterises culture along two broad lines: 'a deliberate and intentional interference with nature', and 'something created artificially and experimentally.'

As for a definition, Moulder employs various definitions⁹ to stress the following inherent qualities of all cultures: culture touches five dimensions of our lives: our nature, orientation to time, relationship to nature, primary purpose in life, and primary relationship to each other;¹⁰ one's culture is acquired; all cultures are continuously changing; and no culture is ever entirely unique.

In summarising his views on culture, Moulder adds the following two implications of these features: because not all members of a cultural group are fully 'homogeneous', new groups constantly appear and vanish; and, because our culture determines our whole life (i.e. beliefs, thoughts, actions, etc.) no person can easily change his or her inherited and acquired culture. These comments go a long way towards acknowledging the difficulty in

6. Ironically, in using sociological methods in parallel studies these methods' emphasis on the 'pastness of the past' is often disregarded and sometimes even deliberately abrogated. Cf. Houlden (1989:407) and his warning of anachronism being 'our oldest and most persistent enemy'. In the field of biblical studies Malina frequently refers to this danger, alongside of ethnocentrism, from the perspective of social-scientific criticism of the Bible. (e.g. 1991:23; 1993:11)

However, the extent to which modern heuristic tools employed by social scientists can mislead the biblical exegete into over-generalisation, stereotyping, false analogies and anachronisms, among others, is perhaps not always fully appreciated leading to a lack, and often even absence of the necessary caution in engaging Scripture and modesty about social methods' 'results'.

7. The potentially negative impact of 'Bible-in-Africa' studies is exacerbated by many factors: a colonialist attitude of preserving biblical studies within a 'Western ghetto'; a romanticist notion re. Africa that smacks of erstwhile ideas like the 'noble savages' of Africa; a lack of sustained and clear arguments; a lack of clear and concise work-definitions of issues, etc.

Cf. Maluleke (1996:25-27) on the dangers of romanticising African culture; equally Moyo (1992:56) 'African traditional society was not perfect'; and, Nthamburi (1992:107-108) who stresses Africa's own contribution to its hardships. Also Collet (1994:25-37).

8. Perhaps because this concept is used (abused?) for political, ideological and many other purposes? Or perhaps because human identity evades precise description? Or perhaps simply because of the contingency of human existence and experience? Collet (1994:32) mentions that more than 300 definitions of culture exist. Cf. Thornton (quoted in Ackermann 1994:218) who argues that an attempt at defining culture is tantamount to 'a declaration of what it is to be human'; and Hargrave (1993:3-4) who suggests that the recent emphasis on aboriginal or indigenous culture might be caused by 'political correctness'.

9. Of respectively Kluckholm (1953), Benedict (1934), Singer (1987) and Hoijer (1954).

10. Cf. the WCC definition of culture, quoted in Byaruhanga-Akiiki (1994:34) 'that which holds a community together, giving it a common framework of meaning'.

pinning down culture in fool-proof definitions, as well as stressing the socially acquired nature of culture and the fact that culture is never static.¹¹

Clifford Geertz distinguishes between social systems and culture. The former is the perceivable, the concrete actions and 'interactive behaviour' of people: 'the actually existing network of social relations'. Culture, on the other hand, is the 'fabric of meaning', the guiding framework or worldview of people according to which they 'understand' and 'explain' life and live their lives.

Culture in the view of Geertz then is as much a comprehensive (holistic) as well as a complex phenomenon:

'... the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgements ...'¹²

Linking up with Geertz, Meeks (1986:15) calls culture 'an elaborate set of signs, a system of communication', comprising of ethos¹³, worldview¹⁴ and religious symbols.¹⁵ The difficulties in understanding culture are related to those encountered in the attempt to understand a foreign language.

Culture can be viewed from various angles, and therefore Nengwekhulu (1994:18-19) argues for broad and narrower definitions, and even refers to 'artistic culture'. However, for this discussion another more immediate concern is the function of culture.

2.2 Functions of culture

Mazrui (1980:46-69) identifies seven functions of culture of which two are important here: culture provides a certain worldview or perspective on reality, and culture defines identity.¹⁶ Mazrui is especially intent on showing the ways in which western norms, values and ideals have made an impact on Africa often with disastrous consequences to the traditional values of Africa. Mazrui describes the western influence on the worldview of Africans, in terms of a revolutionary (Kuhnian) paradigm change. Concerning the position of religion in this change, Mazrui argues that it contributed towards the inculcation of a 'theology of submission', only recently to have been replaced with a theology of liberation. In as far as identity is moulded by culture, the western influences in Africa not always

11. Cf. Mothlabi (1986:98) who argues that changes in traditional African morality can be ascribed to the ever changing nature of (also) Africa culture.

12. Quoted in Witbooi (1986:101).

13. The 'tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is their underlying attitude towards themselves and their world that life reflects'. (Meeks 1986:15, quoting Geertz). Cf. Schtz (1976:289): 'the tone and style of a group's (or culture's) entire range of values, the quality of its life.'

14. The 'picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society'. (Meeks 1986:15, quoting Geertz) Cf. Schtz (1976:289): 'a perception of actuality in its many dimensions'; Schtz argues convincingly for the reciprocity between worldview and ethos.

Chidester (1991:16) argues that worldview comprises of more than a system of beliefs, and 'is a multidimensional network of strategies for negotiating person and place in a world of discourse, practice, and association. For an attempt to describe the African worldview as a 'system of beliefs and action', cf. Hammond-Tooke (1974:318-363).

15. Schtz (1976:289) argues that 'sacred symbols' coordinate ethos and worldview, and encourage their mutual influence.

16. The other functions of culture according to Mazrui are: providing motivational conditioning; moral criteria; enabling communication; encouraging a particular social stratification; and, linking up with economics ('means of production').

Cf. Baum (1994:102) who also subscribe to culture's function of defining 'a community's collective identity', and adds that culture 'determines the interaction of the members among themselves'.

consciously, according to Mazrui have led to an increased 'race consciousness' and a strong sense of individualism.

Although culture is acquired, consciously but certainly mostly unconsciously, in Africa we find a situation which can aptly be described as 'cultural rape'. Byaruhanga-Akiiki (1993:179-181) refers to a possible three-fold cultural interaction: cultural 'diffusion, borrowing, and rape', the first two of which he describes as 'natural and healthy'. 'Cultural rape' is a negative, or destructive, form of interaction which occurs where 'a self-conceived superior culture superimposes itself on a weaker one'.

In specifically African Christianity the latter, argues Byaruhanga-Akiiki, took place with the introduction of the institutionalised church with all its rigid and 'sacred' vestments and traditions into Africa. The reaction which followed was an ever-increasing attempt to relate traditional African values to the Gospel message which again led to a number of different strategies:

indigenisation, Africanisation, contextualisation, inculturation and so on.¹⁷ This reaction was to be expected as the dynamism of culture is exemplified by a dynamic view of tradition, also in the relationship between tradition and religion, 'for tradition is the response of specific institutions to specific challenges of particular times to the faith.' (Pobee 1993:197)

Amidst the identification of how African culture has been oppressed, deculturised, raped and 'developmentally discontinued' (Nengwekhulu 1994:20), the one-sided and prejudiced influencing of African culture by Western culture are, however slowly, and admittedly so far only in limited sense starting to give way to the mutual influencing of Western and African cultures.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the Western influence, some of the more traditional African cultural elements in as far as worldview and identity is concerned, have survived.¹⁹ Not only can cultures be oppressed by the oppressors' cultures, but people's culture can in itself become oppressive. Therefore, as will be argued below, it is imperative for these elements of cultures to be recognised and appropriately used for Africans but also to the benefit of non-Africans and the rest of the world.

2.3 Approaching 'African culture'

The majority of studies in the biblical sciences exploiting the relationship between the Bible and Africa tend to be 'etic' rather than 'emic'.²⁰ In a recent (emic) study,²¹ the New

17. For an overview and criticism of terminology in this regard, cf. Pobee (1992b:23-41); also, the different contributions in Costa (1988); and the view of Wambudta (1980:30).

18. Cf. Mazrui (1980:69) who mentions 'counterpenetration'; and, Bediako (1995; 1996) and Felder (1994/5) on multiculturalism.

19. Cf. e.g. Knig (1994:306) and Maimela (1991:4) arguing for the continuing existence of an African anthropology, in at least a qualified sense.

20. Parratt (1980:88) argues that very little work on biblical studies is done by African theologians; Anderson (1995:286) bemoans the same fact as far as research into African Independent Churches is concerned.

Cf. the warnings by Platvoet (quoted in Pobee 1992b:64) on the need to 'constantly revise' our etic theories to avoid the danger of arranging the data to fit the theory; Anderson (1995:285-286) argues for a mutually benefitting fusion of emic and etic perspectives in research.

On the emic-etic distinction as such, however, Craffert (1995:33) from a cultural-anthropological point of view, argues that the crucial question is not the distinction between 'the subjects' or 'the scientist's' concepts, but 'whether the interpretive process contributes towards avoiding ethnocentrism and bridging the gap between cultures successfully.' This would challenge Ukpong's contention that an 'inculturation

Testament scholar JS Pobee offers concise criticism of the way in which the term 'African culture' is employed in academic studies today. 'Africa' comprises a huge continent and vast and different groups of peoples.²² Pobee (1992b:8) states that '... Africa is a poly-ethnic continent as well as polyracial'.²³

Pobee stresses the difficulty in defining and describing even the culture of one 'fairly homogeneous' group in Ghana, the Akan. Addressing 'African culture' in the broad sense becomes 'infinitely difficult'. The usual way of describing 'African culture' is to inductively study a particular cultural group, and then deductively make that applicable to African culture as a whole.²⁴ Although Pobee views this procedure 'analytically permissible and useful', he warns that it is also fraught with danger especially in the ethnically and racially diverse Africa.²⁵

The nature and extensive scope of studying a particular culture and then attempting a 'verifying of traits' with other African cultures, so as to venture upon 'broad generalisations' leads Pobee to despair of the effort: a 'quixotic task'.²⁶ His clear expression of caution in, if not impossibility of, the universalising task is not thoroughly heeded by Pobee, and he proceeds with a characterisation of Akan culture while implying that this can be seen as descriptive of 'African culture':²⁷

- 'a religious ontology and epistemology';²⁸
- 'a sense of the finitude of human beings';

hermeneutic' 'requires that the reader be an 'insider' in the culture that is the subject of interpretation' (1995); cf. Muzorewa (1990:169,173).

21. JS Pobee is from the Akan people of Ghana, from which he proceeds in his thoughts about African culture.

22. According to Pobee (1992b:28,58) 'Africa is a vast continent with an area of ... 28,497.409 (sic) sq kilometres, offering great diversities and differences of geography, vegetation, temperament, cultures, politics, orientation etc. ... and therefore 'African' is a 'nebulous term', expected to 'infest the implementation of it in the religious sphere'. 700 languages are found on the continent.

Cf. Sawyer's definition of 'Africa' as 'a mythological term, expressive of love for a continent or commitment to an ideal'. (1987:25)

23. Pobee uses the characterisation of Wheeler (1973) in describing five 'main groups' in Africa (Aboriginal Bushmen, Hottentots, pygmies; 'true Negroes'; 'Bantu Negroes'; 'Hamitic Negroes'; and non-Negroids), to which Pobee adds the 'Caucasian settlers' in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia who 'knows no other home'. (Pobee 1992b:28,58,164 n13)

24. Pobee refers to studies of Busia (1962), Abraham (1967), Awolowo (1977). Similarly, Fashol-Luke (1975:75) argues for African theologies 'for our own particular ethnic group'.

25. Cf. the warnings by Kawale (1995:18) on 'cultural diversity' in Africa which makes 'meaningful interpretations' difficult.

26. A number of other issues exacerbate the difficulty: some cultures have not been studied at all, and the information on others is 'untrustworthy'. (Pobee 1992a:60)

27. In related way, Dyrness (1990:43-52) is a good example of the attempt to describe some 'common elements' found in African culture.

28. Cf. also Lategan (1993:28, 32) who mentions the 'incurable religiosity' of African society, where religion 'still exerts considerable influence'; Martey (1993:39) 'Religion permeates every aspect of African life'; Pobee (1985:26) who names the 'African's religious ontology' as among the 'roots of the homo africanus'; Waruta (1994:78): 'In African ontology, 'to be' is 'to be religious''. On South Africa, cf. also Turner (1980:3-4); Van Zyl (1994:366).

However, Muzorewa (1990:169,174) argues that the 'religiosity' of African people does not imply a disregard of the physical, but to the contrary: 'the African is first a human being and then (sic, sc. then) a believer', and therefore '(s)urvival in this physical life and our spiritual bodies is a top priority in African life and thought.'

Recently some (atheist) African scholars have challenged the idea that African traditional society is consistently religious. (cf. Keith 1995:32)

- ‘communalism’;
- ‘extensive and excessive ceremonialism’;
- an emphasis on ‘kinship’;
- the ‘importance of chiefship and its symbolic significance’;
- and ‘art forms’. (Pobee 1992b:58-70)

Naturally, there is a need to generalise when discussing matters like culture, but not in absolute or unqualified sense. Generalisations need to be recognised for what they are, and have to be functional as they are used for analytical and comparative reasons. To treat African culture in a generalised and (over-) simplified way increases the likelihood of seeing not only culture but then specifically African culture as monolithic and static which is not the usual perception or treatment of Western culture. Culture is dynamic and always in a process of change, responding to the needs of people, changing times and other factors.

‘Culture is historical, it develops, it changes, there are continuous aspects as well as innovative ones.’ (Oduyoye 1995:79)

Not infrequently African culture and theological appropriations of the Bible and Christianity are idealised or romanticised.²⁹ The romanticising tendency found in many theologian and non-theologian proponents of African culture can largely be explained from the deliberate process of ‘deculturation’ to which most of Africa was subjected during the colonialist period of its history. (Maimela 1994:5-7) It seems, however, as if the warning expressed by Collet (1994:31) is not always heeded when the theological and cultural ‘vandalism’ of earlier years through ‘an uncritical identification of Western Christianity with the gospel’ is replaced with a theological and cultural ‘romanticism’, where only positive and no critical comments are made for fear of being perceived as arrogant and contemptuous towards the indigenous culture.

Lately the opposite trend to that of stressing the positive value to the extent of romanticising African culture, can be found in the emphasis on the (at least possible) oppressive nature of culture, including the African variety(-ies).³⁰

‘Culture and religion can become instruments of and justifications for oppression and exploitation, or instruments of liberation and freedom.’ (Nengwekhulu 1994:23)

The use of and reference to (traditional) African culture to ensure the continuation of the

29. The challenges this romanticist notion poses to intellectual honesty, is exemplified e.g. in Waruta (1994:87) who argues for the liberative nature of traditional African religious beliefs and practices, yet have to admit to the concurrent presence of certain atrocities. His attempt to rationalise the dichotomy by taking a shot at the ‘individualistic lifestyle’ of ‘modern life’ does not serve to explain and account for the oppressive practices found even in ATRs, which today still impact on the lives of people in the subordinate position of women, etc. Elsewhere Waruta has a perhaps more realistic approach! (1994:79)

Cf. also the notion by Nolan (1996:10) that although black people can have racial prejudice against whites, they cannot be racist.

30. The studies edited by Maimela (1994) are virtually all an example of the emphasis of the ‘negative’ side of culture. It seems, however, that these studies originate from a Black Theology-context, with its emphasis on liberation in the socio-political sense, wherein culture especially in the way its attributed in African Theology (centering on inculturation) is often accused of collusion with the status quo. This emphasis on the negative and oppressive nature, or experience of culture by (some) African scholars seems to contradict the intention of the studies, which is ‘a conscious attempt ... to bridge the theological gap which separated the two theological camps’: African Theology with the emphasis on inculturation, and Black Theology stressing liberation. (1994:vii) Maimela’s elation that the collected papers are evidence of ‘gulf that separated African theologians’ has been bridged, might be premature. (1994:viii)

subordinate role of women is often referred to. African culture can be employed in an oppressive way, to oppress both those of one's own culture or to intimidate with one's own culture those of others.

Another important facet in understanding contemporary African culture and the influence of deculturation is stressed by Baum who underscore the pervasiveness of secondary culture. (1994:104-106; cf. Pillay 1994:321) His contention is based on the distinction between primary culture, into which a child is born, and secondary culture which is 'promoted by the major institutions of modern society'.³¹ Baum argues that the secondary culture is powerful and pervasive especially in the power of assimilation it exerts and that this is concealed by 'the multicultural discourse'. Although secondary culture has potential beneficial aspects positive democratic notions and values when disguised by multicultural discourse, it leads to the destruction of primary cultures. In Africa there is an increasing proliferation of the secondary culture as manifested in values related to the market system's individualism and consumptionist ideals of happiness propagated by mass media, largely influencing also primary cultures, norms and values.

In what follows the preceding comments on culture will form the backdrop of the discussion, especially to the extent that culture are continually in a state of contextualisation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation and the importance of this for interpreting the biblical documents will be emphasised.

3. Biblical Scholarship in Africa: taking stock

'The Bible ... is recognized by African theologians as the basic source of African theology.' (Martey 1993:71)³²

Although biblical scholarship has always been strongly represented in white South African theological circles, Mbiti (1986:17-18) despairs of their studies because it is 'in many ways very conservative theologically and politically, and closed to the realities of African presence ... Unfortunately, this small strand of Christianity has shut themselves off from the life and thought of African peoples, pushing itself into a form of ghetto where it protects itself and the segregated life of its adherents.'³³

Recently, however, theologians from some HWU's (Historically White Universities) have reached out to their African context and discovered that the Bible is alive and well in (black) Africa too.³⁴ Combrink (1991:86-88) refers to a number of theological associations and their affiliates in Africa and Madagascar and the important contributions they make to biblical studies in general but particularly to biblical studies in Africa.

Martey (1993:71-72) argues that the Bible is considered by African theologians not only the primary 'source and norm of all Christian knowledge and the evidence of the divine will toward all humanity', but also the 'diving board' or platform³⁵ from which African

31. Cf. the contributions by Nthamburi and others in the 1992 collection of essays edited by Mugambi & Nasimiyu-Wasike.

32. Also Muzorewa (1990:172). Cf. Fashol-Luke (1975:78), who also identifies three different ways in which the biblical texts are used in theology in Africa.

33. Cf. also the comments of Turner in note 1.

34. A quasi-report and digesting of the experiences of this group is recorded by Combrink (1991) in a contribution entitled 'Die Bybel lewe in Afrika' (The Bible is alive in Africa).

35. 'Jumping pad' according to Wambudta (1980:33).

theologians initiate their efforts.³⁶

The central role claimed for the Bible in African theology is not balanced with an equally central role for biblical studies in Africa. According to the views of Parratt (1983:88-94) biblical studies is lagging far behind other aspects of theological study in Africa in some instances biblical studies becomes a mere 'appendage'. (Wambudta 1980:36) Indeed, Parratt contends that there

'... is a lack of widespread genuine biblical scholarship on the part of African theologians'

and that

'... for most African countries biblical scholarship is a recent phenomenon'. (1983:88)³⁷

Parratt reasons that the lack of biblical scholarship is due to the recognition of religious plurality³⁸ in Africa which demands a proportionately smaller slice of attention to the Bible, the lack of teaching programmes in the biblical languages and the paucity of indigenous staff-members at institutions where biblical studies is taught.³⁹

Wambudta (1980:32-33) ascribes the lack of a clear biblical hermeneutic for African reading of the Bible primarily to the post-colonial penchant for humanism.

'In this detracting influence of humanism, the development of biblical studies which is the jumping pad of true African Christian theology has suffered most for it is not allowed to stand on its own ground except as it assumes the sociological dimension ...'

But perhaps the failure to appropriate the Bible for all its worth in African theology derives from the lack of a genuine, relevant and creative biblical hermeneutic in and for African citizens. Whether or not this conclusion is true, the need for such an African hermeneutic is clear.

4. The Bible in Africa: a history of abuse⁴⁰

'In no instance ... have the Bible and interpretations of it led to such murder physical, psychological, social, and spiritual as in the case of Black people.' (Copher 1989:106)

36. Strangely enough, Martey fails to account for the importance of the translation of the Bible into the African vernaculars. On the latter, cf. e.g. Bediako (1996:6-8); Combrink (1996a); Mbiti (1986:22-45); Parratt (1983:88); and, Ukpog (1995:3).

Combrink (1996a:282) argues that the translating of the Bible into vernaculars leads 'towards a grater (sic, sc. greater) degree of independence of the indigenous Christians.'

37. Cf. Onwu (1984/5:35) 'Biblical studies in Africa is still in its infancy, and 1960 may be regarded as the beginning of such an enterprise'; a similiar lament derives from Ntreh (1990:249).

38. Wambudta (1980:33) argues that denominationalism has also impinged negatively upon the development of a biblical theological approach in Africa in Nigeria for example biblical studies had to be replaced by social studies.

39. In South Africa, the lack of, or phasing out of compulsory (biblical) language requirements for theology students to a large extent contributes to the extremely limited numbers of indigenous biblical scholars. Cf. also the comments on the necessity of knowledge of the biblical languages for African scholars, e.g. Fashol-Luke (1975:80); Kawale (1995:26); Ntreh (1990:249); and, Wambudta (1980:35-36) 'the African stands a better chance of recapturing the biblical mood and concepts by going directly to the originals.'

Tienou (1983:100) argues for more attention to biblical study in stead of those 'resources wasted in teaching the traditional attributes of God'.

40. Cf. Copher (1989:105-128) for a historical overview of the interpretation of the 'black presence' in the Bible, and the accompanying prejudiced readings of blackness.

In Africa there are also theologians especially those who emphasise 'liberation' as the central theological theme for Africa who argue that the problem is not so much with the use of the Bible, but the biblical documents themselves are believed to contain

'stories and texts which are basically oppressive and whose interpretation (not misinterpretation) only serves the cause of oppression.' (Mofokeng 1988:37)

Mofokeng therefore disputes the notion that the Bible is essentially about liberation and refers as examples of this conviction to the

'well-known Pauline position on slavery and on the social position and behaviour of women'.

Although a reading of Scripture at face-value could understandably be seen to provide oppressive results, the evaluation of the 'inherent nature(s)' of the biblical texts cannot adequately take place without concerning oneself with traditions or histories of interpretation. As Brueggemann (1991:130) argues,

'... the marginalization of pain and poverty is not intrinsic to the canonical literature but is imposed on the text by the political process of canonical interpretation by the dominant community'

The need to identify these traditions and their influence on the understanding of the Bible, and to account for it, will in the future become increasingly important. It will no longer be sufficient to merely state that

'(t)he Bible and not Western Christian heritage remains a most viable source for a definition of theology for the African theologian ...' (Muzorewa 1990:172)

It is crucially important to realise that

'Christians are not free to derive their own meanings from scripture, they are bound to the community who created and continue transmitting the Bible.' (Combrink 1996b:299, quoting Bird)

The specific influence exerted on the reading of Scripture by our common as much as we might like or dislike it! 'heritage' needs to be carefully considered, especially its influence on if not formation of certain interpretive frameworks.

Many examples exist of the abusive influence of interpretive traditions of the Bible, but two 'selective-purposeful' readings of the Bible are quite prominent in South Africa and will suffice here. The strong overwhelming emphasis on a individualist-salvationist reading of the Pauline epistles deriving from the Euro-American theological tradition stresses the 'otherworldliness' of the Pauline message and allows if not advocates disinterestedness in 'this world'. The Black-Liberationist reading encountered in the Two-thirds World concentrates on the exodus-narratives as a paradigm for the various political liberation-struggles and often has to deal with the accusation of abusing and despiritualising the Bible (and Christian faith).

Apart from all the many differences on various levels, certain similarities also exist between these two interpretive frameworks. The purpose here is to stress one comparison between the two, viz. to argue that prominently these two examples are ample illustration of how an interpretive grid can govern the reading and interpretation of the rest of Scripture. It is generally accepted in most theological circles that all readings of Scripture are necessarily subjective and biased readings, coloured by our presuppositions and assumptions. However, unless one wants to allow for a free-for-all relativism, some sort of 'ethics of

reading/interpretation', some kind of accountability and responsibility in the interpretive process is required.

This responsibility in reading the Bible is an essential element lacking in the use of the Bible in the struggle against oppression, where there is frequently not enough consideration given to the biblical documents, their literary nature, their historical circumstances, and very important, the role of the reader and his/her community. One, perhaps well-known, example is the use of the Exodus-paradigm which stresses the account of the liberation of the people of Israel but seemingly leaving aside the narratives of an indiscriminatory violent and equally people-oppressive result of 'the conquest of Canaan'. To question the 'obvious' oppressive texts of the Bible in favour of the 'obvious' liberatory texts seems very often to constitute an anomaly, and eventually mitigates against this reading-style.

The same lack of responsibility in reading if then not lack of attempts to account for the contextuality and textuality of the Bible is encountered in the other example of the individualist-salvationist framework imposed particularly on the Pauline literature, where the communal nature of Paul's pastoral writings is frequently avoided or simply ignored because that framework mitigates against such reading. For example, Paul's instructions to the Corinthians are primarily read on the individualistic level, whereas the Corinthian community seems to be the more immediate focus. Moreover, recently the traditional emphasis on individual salvation within the 'justification by faith'-framework derived from or ascribed to Paul has been questioned by proponents of the New Perspective on Paul, who see the Pauline emphasis located rather in his attempt to reconcile differences between different (socio-cultural-religious) groups among the first-century followers of Christ.

5. Conclusion

In this contribution a few initial comments were made intent on identifying some perimeters in the discussion on the use of the Bible in Africa, and it seems that a number of considerations emerge. There is increasingly a need to concentrate on a particular African cultural group with its particular differences, within which generalisations are to be avoided as far as possible. Etic studies are to be supplemented as far as possible with emic studies. Recognition, respect as well as fair criticism for the various 'traditions of reception' of the Bible should be encouraged, especially against the background of the deplorable abuse to which both the Bible and the African continent and her people has been subjected.

As the danger lying before biblical interpreters is often described as anachronism, the study of culture will also be forced to be content with an equally destructive peril, a twin-headed hydra: over-simplification and generalisation. The attempt at simplifying and generalising is perhaps necessary for analytical and especially for synthesising purposes, but lends itself to grave dangers as well. The one common and very popular assumption in current African theological circles is the marked or decidedly religious consciousness of African people. Platvoet's argument that there are many more irreligious aspects to African culture than religious ones might be due to his 'methodological agnosticism' or 'metaphysical neutrality' that leads him to this conclusion. However, one can safely say that the presence of a religious consciousness is as fundamental for human existence as breathing and eating and drinking. If the above claim about the African religious consciousness intends to indicate that this differs in attitude, nature, intensity, ritual, and so forth, from religious consciousnesses the world over, then it must be stated in that way, with substantiation.

The way in which cultural assumptions, beliefs and values play a role in African theology can perhaps best be seen in the often neglected field of African biblical studies. Although the neglect or often unconcern with biblical studies in Africa can be ascribed to various factors, and the legacy of the abuse of the Bible in Africa will probably be with us for some time, the equally important aspect of the continuing reading and appropriation of the Bible in Africa as seen for instance in the AICs, cannot be ignored. Attempts to correct the legacy of the abuse of the Bible against African people and values, have been addressed within the broader debate on Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. These matters are in need of further elaboration and will be addressed in a further discussion on some perimeters for the Bible in Africa-debate!