

The Word is life: African theology as biblical and contextual theology¹

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Abstract

This article reflects on the development of African theology from its beginning up to the end of the twentieth century. A critical assessment of this development and the current state of African theology is given. The future and possible shortcomings of African theology are also discussed. It is argued that for African theology to make a difference in a multi-cultural and multi-contextual Africa, it should consider being contextual and Biblical. For Christians the Word means life, is life, and promises life in its fullness. If African theology purports to be Christian, this should also be one of its premises.

1. INTRODUCTION

From a non-African perspective, this article reflects on the past and current state of African theology and hermeneutics, as well as its future. First, the historical development of African theology is traced since its beginning in more or less the first half of the twentieth century. In its beginning African theology was mostly reactive and apologetic, and consisted mainly of comparative studies. In the latter half of the twentieth century this religious studies framework was replaced by a theological framework: African theologians concentrated on liberation theology, and the first efforts to produce an inculturated African theology can be traced. At the end of the twentieth century African theology became more assertive and proactive. During this period African theologians concentrated on the African context as subject for the interpretation of the Bible. This development is critically

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assessed, where after a few suggestions are made (from a non-African perspective) with regard to the possible task and focus of African theology in the future.

2. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN AFRICA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 Introductory remarks

The earliest Christian attempts for a systematic Biblical interpretation can be traced back to Africa (Ukpong 2000:3)². The exegetical development in Biblical studies after the Enlightenment is well recognized: The allegorical method of interpretation was first replaced by the historical-critical reading of the Biblical text (the eighteenth century), and then by an array of literary approaches in the nineteenth century (e. g., colon analysis, structural analysis, speech-act theory, reader-response criticism, semiotics, narratology). To this, certain “post-modern” readings of the Biblical text like deconstruction and social-scientific criticism can also be added.

In Africa south of the Sahara the impact of these modern methods began to be felt more or less in the middle of the twentieth century,³ and by the 1970’s the use of these methods in Biblical interpretation (especially in academic circles) became the norm (Ukpong 2000:4). Thus, although (systematic) Biblical interpretation has its roots in Africa, Biblical interpretation in Africa today is mostly the product of the modern methods of Western interpretation and exegesis.

In spite of this, however, Biblical scholars in Africa have developed a parallel method of exegesis which, in the words of Ukpong (2000:3) has as its main focus the “encounter between the Biblical text and the African context.” In this method(s) the Biblical text is linked to the African context in such a way that the focus of interpretation is on the communities that receive the text rather than on those communities that created the text, or the text itself. This

² The earliest attempts in this regard can be traced back to the city of Alexandria and the work of inter alia Clement of Alexandria and Origen (second to third centuries), and patriarchs such as Athanasius and Cyril (fourth to fifth centuries; Trigg 1988:21, Gibellini 1994b:1). Although allegorical and uncritical (in the modern sense), the foundation laid by this tradition lasted in the Western church till the onset of the Enlightenment (Trigg 1988:21; see also Ukpong 2000:3). It was also the church in Alexandria that, in the middle of the fourth century, brought Christianity to Ethiopia (Gibellini 1994b:2). Also, the first translation of the Old Testament into Greek (Septuagint) took place in Africa (Alexandria; Mbiti 1994:27; see also Abogunrin 2000:36).

³ According to Ukpong (2000:4) this date corresponds with the period of political independence in most African states and the founding of African universities where these modes of Biblical interpretation were taught.

method, developed for Africa in Africa, can broadly be referred to as inculturation hermeneutics.

We now turn to a more concise description of the developments that have taken place in the method of Biblical interpretation in Africa. The purpose of this description is twofold: Firstly, to trace the developments that have taken place in an African reading or comprehension of the Bible (in other words: What do we have), and secondly, to critically assess if any contribution can be made to such a reading of the Bible from a non-African standpoint (in other words: What can be done).

2.2 The development of Biblical interpretation in Africa

According to Ukpong (1999a:281-289, 2000:5-18) the developments that have advanced in an African reading of the Bible can be divided into three phases, namely 1930 to the 1970's, the 1970's to the 1990's, and from the 1990's onwards.

2.2.1 Reactive and apologetic (1930-1970s)

The origin of modern African Biblical studies can be seen as a response to the condemnation of African religion and culture by Western Christian missionaries: African culture and religion was seen as demonic and immoral, and treated with the intent to destroy it before any Christianity could take roots in Africa (Ukpong 2000:5). In a reactive and apologetic manner, attention was focused on legitimizing African religion and culture, by way of comparative studies which took the form of showing continuities and discontinuities between the culture of Africa and the Bible, especially the Old Testament (Ukpong 1999a:282-284).⁴

Comparative studies carried out in this period were, for example, the possible physical contact between Africa and the ancient Hebrews, correlations between the Hebrew language and certain African languages (see Williams 1930) and similarities between aspects of African culture and that of the Hebrews (such as the sense of community, sacrifices and the conception of God (Williams 1976). The result of these comparative studies was that African traditional religion came to be seen as "Africa's Old Testament", a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*, a fertile ground for sowing the gospel message.

Several objections have been raised to the legitimacy of these comparative studies, since ancient Israel and contemporary Africa are not

⁴ According to Dickson (1984:181) the New Testament shares the same cultural world view as the Old Testament, and therefore work done on the Old Testament was considered to extend to the New Testament also. Literature in this regard, however, indicates otherwise.

only geographically but also temporally far apart.⁵ Ukpong (1999a:283), nonetheless, argues that these studies can be justified since it only focused on existential and not essential continuities and discontinuities between ancient Israel and contemporary Africa. One weakness, however, is that no hermeneutic conclusions were drawn to show how the results of these studies affect Christian life and thought in the concrete (Ukpong 1999a:283).

2.2.2 First steps towards inculturation and liberation (1970s-1990s)

In the mid 1970's the reactive approach gave way for a more proactive approach: The context of Africa started to emerge in the hermeneutic encounter with the Bible, and a more theological framework replaced the religious studies framework.⁶ From this new approach two ways of reading Scripture crystallized: The inculturation approach and liberation theology⁷ (Ukpong 2000:7; see also Gibellini 1994b:6; Du Toit 1998:378-380).

In the inculturation approach the main emphasis is the desire to make Christianity relevant to the African religio-cultural context (Ukpong 2000:7). It focuses on two methods of reading Scripture, namely, *Africa-in-the-Bible* studies and *evaluative* studies.

In the Africa-in-the-Bible studies⁸ the emphasis lies firstly to rectify the negative images about Africa and its people that are embedded in certain

⁵ To this can be added the opinion of Tienou (1990:75): not only is the assumption that African culture and that of ancient Israel are very similar debatable, but also one can ask if one can speak of "African culture", since contemporary Africa (culturally wise) is as complex as any other country in the world.

⁶ Onwu (1984:35-37) is of the opinion that this shift in Biblical studies in Africa already occurred as early as the 1960's. With the formation of the AACC (All African Conference of Churches) in 1963 in Kampala it became clear that the Western church (in its missionary work in Africa thus far) had not only been speaking in Africa to Africans in a "strange or partially understood" language (Onwu 1984:35), but also (and as result of this) that the church in Africa should attain selfhood by researching the primary sources themselves and express what is understood from these sources in African accents. It was time to rethink the Christian faith that was received from Western missionaries, especially in terms of Africa's socioeconomic and political experiences such as human rights, freedom, poverty and hunger. This new perspective gave way for the dominant themes that would occupy African theology for the decades to come: liberation, salvation, mission and Christology.

⁷ Ukpong (1999a:280) describes the difference between the methodologies of the inculturation approach and the liberation approach as follows: inculturation models focus on world-view, cultural identity, cultural values and disvalues as well as oppression as issues within the context, and the Bible is studied in relation to these. In the liberation model/approach the focus is oppression, since the context is understood as situations of societal tension, oppression and marginalization.

⁸ This kind of research is often inspired by the movement referred to as "Afrocentrism", which seeks to articulate the role and contribution of Africa in world history (Ukpong 2000:7).

traditional readings of some Biblical texts,⁹ and the identifying of the presence of Africa and its people in the Bible and their contribution in Biblical history¹⁰ (see Ukpong 1999a:284-286). The focal point of evaluative studies, on the other hand, is to evaluate the encounter between African religion, culture, and the Bible, and evaluate this encounter in terms of an African understanding of the Bible. The purpose of this method is to facilitate the communication of the message of the Bible within the African context, from which a new understanding of Christianity can evolve that is both Christian and African (Ukpong 1999a:286, 2000:9). This method characteristically makes use of the historical-critical method to analyze the Biblical text, and anthropological and sociological approaches to analyze the African context.

At least five different approaches can be identified within the evaluative method (see Ukpong 1999a:286-289, 2000:9-11):

- Elements of African culture, religion, beliefs, concepts or practices (that are taken for granted) are evaluated in terms of the Biblical text, to arrive at a Christian understanding and practical application thereof.
- By using a Biblical text or Biblical theme, elements of African culture and religion are challenged. In principle this approach is critical towards issues in society and the church.
- Texts are interpreted against the background of African culture and religion, aiming to arrive at a new understanding of the text that would be African and Christian.
- The use of concepts from either Scripture or African culture to show the continuity between African culture and Christianity.

⁹ An important theme in this regard, which has appeared in different versions, is the so-called curse of Ham. In Genesis 9:18-27 Ham sees his father Noah drunk and naked, and instead of covering him he reports this to his two brothers Shem and Japheth, who cover their father. By doing this Ham, following Hebrew tradition, committed an act of disrespect towards his father. Because of this, Noah curses Canaan, Ham's son. A fifth century Midrash, as well as the Babylonian Talmud interpret this text in such a way as to indicate that Africans are cursed and black because of the curse of Ham. For a comprehensive study on the interpretation of this and other relevant texts (e. g., Gn 10:1-14 and 1 Chr 1:8-16), as well as the ideological basis of domination that underlies such a reading of this narrative, see Peterson (1978), Rice (1972:17-25) and Isaac (1980:4-5).

¹⁰ These studies are a direct reaction on the de-emphasis and exclusion by Western scholarship of Africa and its contribution to Biblical history; such as the point of view found in many Biblical studies that Egypt belong to the ancient Near East rather than Africa. An example of this kind of study is that of Mafico (1989) and Adamo (1987, 1992) that seeks to confirm Africa's presence and influence for example on the religion of the patriarchs.

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- The study of Biblical texts to identify Biblical models or Biblical foundations for aspects of contemporary church life and practice in Africa.¹¹

Liberation theology, on the other hand, evolved out of the influence of socialist ideology which arose a greater consciousness about the need for theology to show concern for secular issues (Ukpong 2000:7). Theology, if it wants to be African theology, has to say something about oppression, poverty and marginalization. This liberation approach is expressed in liberation theology (hermeneutics), black theology and feminist hermeneutics. *Liberation hermeneutics* uses Scripture “as a resource for struggle against oppression of any kind based on the Biblical witness that God does not sanction oppression but rather always stands on the side of the oppressed to liberate them” (Ukpong 1999a:292, 2000:12; see also West 1997:111).¹² The account of God’s political liberation of Israel from Egypt in Exodus is seen as the ground text for the hermeneutics of political liberation,¹³ and texts such as Exodus 23:11 (God’s calls on Israel to take special care of the poor amongst them), Amos 2:6-6 and 5:21-24 (God’s call to deal justly with all) and Luke 4:18-19 and 6:20-21 (Jesus’ sympathetic attitude to and teachings in favor of the poor) are used as support for a hermeneutics of economic liberation.

Black theology is a form of liberation hermeneutics that focused especially on the issues of apartheid and racial discrimination that prevailed in South Africa until 1994 (Ukpong 1999a:292; 2000:12; Mushete 1994:22-23; West 1997:111). Black theology (with its focus on issues such as race, class and gender) intended to make Africans aware of their situation of oppression based on their skin colour, the need to analyze their situation, and the need to struggle against it. In this kind of hermeneutics, liberative themes in the Bible are used as a resource of empowerment for the struggle for liberation.

Feminist theology, on the other hand, focuses on the oppression of women not only in contemporary society, but also in the life of the church. In

¹¹ These evaluative approaches resulted in the insight that African culture and religion should not only be seen as a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*, but “*indispensable resources in the interpretation of the gospel message and the development of African Christianity*” (Ukpong 2000:11; his italics).

¹² The theme “liberation” has been criticised by Mbiti (1978:72-75) on the ground that it is very often discussed with only a few scriptural references.

¹³ Mugambi (1974:41-42) has correctly indicated that the idea of liberation is inherent to the concept of salvation. He argues that in the African context (and in any context, for that matter – EvE), and in the Bible, salvation as a theological concept cannot be complete without liberation as a socio-political concept, since there is a political ingredient in the Bible that cannot be ignored if one is to remain faithful to the Biblical narrative (see also Boesak 1979:173-174).

an attempt to liberate woman from this situation, feminist theologians have particularly paid attention to the following topics: A critique of the androcentrism by which the Bible is sometimes interpreted, a critique on androcentrism in the Bible itself, and the interpreting of Scripture from the perspective of the African women's experience (a recovery of the sometimes forgotten and muted voices;¹⁴ see Ukpong 1999a:293-294).

2.2.3 Inculturation hermeneutics and contextual Bible study (1990s-)

Since the 1990's Biblical studies in Africa became more assertive and proactive, and started to make an independent contribution. Especially the approaches of inculturation and liberation that crystallized in the previous period were carried forward with new orientations. Two of these orientations are the role that the ordinary African reader started to play in the academic reading of the Bible (contextual Bible study), and the second orientation seeks to make the African context the subject for the interpretation of the Bible. Thus, since the 1990's the African context is used both as critical resource for Biblical interpretation and the subject of interpretation (see Ukpong 1999a:289-290, 1999b:320-321, 2000:15).

In regard to *contextual Bible study*, the Bible is read against a specific and concrete (human) situation such as oppression or poverty with the purpose of personal and social transformation. This approach shares the purpose, for example, of black theology, but recognizes specifically the input and concerns of the ordinary African reader. It also incorporates the interaction between an ordinary and academic reading of the Bible.¹⁵

Some of the criticism regarding inculturation hermeneutics done up to 1990 was its lack of attention to social issues like poverty, oppression and marginalization (Ukpong 2000:16). With reference to liberation hermeneutics, the main criticism was its lack of attention given to specific African religio-cultural issues such as the belief in ancestors, spirits, spirit possession and witchcraft (Ukpong 2000:16). Since 1990 inculturation hermeneutics thus started to follow a more holistic approach to culture whereby both secular and religious aspects of culture are taken into consideration: The Bible is to be read not only within a religious context, but also in terms of the economic, social and political contexts of Africa (see Ukpong 1999a:281; Mushete

¹⁴ According to Ukpong (1999a:293-294, 2000:14-15) at least five approaches to feminist hermeneutics by African theologians are discernable: the challenging of the conventional androcentric interpretation of Scripture; the reinterpretation of Biblical texts that are oppressive to women; analysis of texts that are positive towards the role of women in the history of salvation and the life of the church; the identifying of basic principles in the Bible that affirms the basic equality of man and woman; and the interpretation of Scripture in terms of the experience of the African woman.

¹⁵ For examples of such readings of the Biblical text see West (1993; 1996:21-41; 2002).

1994:16). Understood as such, the African context forms the subject of interpretation of Scripture. This means that certain basic assumptions that belong to the root paradigm of African culture (e. g., Africa's unitive view of reality whereby reality is not seen as composed of matter and spirit, the sacred and the profane is a unity and visible, and the sense of community whereby a person's identity is defined by the group) play a role when the Biblical text is analyzed. Ukpong (2000:17) defines the basic hermeneutic theory at work of this kind of inculturation hermeneutics as follows: "the meaning of a text is a function of the interaction between the text in its context and the reader in his/her context".¹⁶ Only when the Biblical text is analyzed from this point of departure, can the Bible be read in a way that it reflects the viewpoints, life concerns and issues (economic, political and sociological) that are important for African Christians.¹⁷ Or, in the words of Mushete (1994:20): "African theology (must be a theology that – EvE) validity operates on the basis of the cultural and religious experience of the African peoples, a theology that responds to the questions posed by African society."

3. AFRICAN THEOLOGY AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF INCULTURATION: WHERE DO WE STAND?

As indicated above, African theology has developed considerably during the past century. First the approach was reactive and apologetic, then liberation theology and the beginnings of an inculturation theology came to the fore. Finally, a hermeneutic of inculturation became the focus point. The reason for this specific development in African theology is evident: In the work of African scholars the context of Africa started to play an increasing role. This process resulted in a theology by Africans in Africa for Africa: African theology is only African if the African context is used both as resource for interpretation as well as the subject of interpretation.

The question, however, can rightly be asked if African theology, based on a hermeneutic of inculturation, has amply developed hitherto that it has really made a difference in African society and the church, and for that matter, in South Africa. African scholars are divided on this point. While some believe that African theology is thriving, others are of the opinion that there is still a long way to go.

¹⁶ Elsewhere, Ukpong (1994:41) defines inculturation hermeneutic as follows: An inculturation hermeneutic is characterized by "the utilization of the resources of the culture being evangelized in expressing the Christian faith", the Bible is read in such a way that it "challenges and animates culture", and this is done "from the perspective of the culture and through the agency of an insider or insiders in the culture".

¹⁷ See the article of Ukpong (1995:3-14), *Rereading the Bible with African eyes*, in which this exegetical method is explained in full and practically applied.

According to West (1997:115), if the above development of African hermeneutics is taken into consideration (as described in section 2), we do not stand on the eve of an African Bible studies, we are well into its dawn. What is needed now is that Biblical scholars and ordinary people from poor and marginalized communities should work jointly in reading the Bible and commit themselves to practice theology in our South African context (West 1996:22-23). The struggle against apartheid indeed demanded new readings and theologies. The struggle for full liberation and life continues, and that requires that African Biblical scholars build on what they have learned. The great danger is that the readings and theologies that resourced the struggle of the oppressed and marginalized are in danger of being forgotten as the church heaves a sigh and begins to pick up the patterns of the past. This, according to West (1996:23), "is our deepening interpretive crisis".

How can this "crisis" be addressed? Only when the Bible is critically read *from* and *with* the perspective of the marginalized and the poor, and this reading of the Bible remains related to social transformation (West 1996:28). Or, in other words: When "community consciousness" (the needs, experiences, questions, interests and reading and resources of the community) and "critical consciousness" (the work of socially engaged Biblical scholars) are equal partners in reading the Bible (West 1996:28).

In this regard Biblical scholars have a lot to offer, especially a critical reading of the Bible and a critical appropriation thereof. What are also needed in this endeavor are not only the readings of the Bible by the poor and the marginalized, but also a willingness to break "their culture of silence". Grass root communities that read the Bible must be willing to articulate what they believe, experience, and hope. According to West (1996:32), contextual Bible study (in which both academics and community take part on an equal basis) provides the setting and circumstances in which this can happen. When Biblical scholars read the Bible with ordinary readers, these readers can take and use what they need to empower them, whilst Biblical scholars concurrently can be positively influenced by the experiences, interest, questions, resources and readings of those on the margins (see West 1996:38).¹⁸

Muzorewa (1990:168) agrees with West in regard to the current state of African theology. African theologians are beyond the stage of being pedantic

¹⁸ West (1996:26-27) argues that at least three "threads" within Biblical studies can facilitate the connection between Biblical scholars and ordinary communities that read the Bible: African theology requires contact with the experiences of ordinary communities, the post-modern shift allows Biblical scholars to abandon their quest for the certainty of the "right" reading in favour of more useful readings, and reader response criticism has introduced Biblical scholars to a reader that is no longer perceived as a passive receiver of authorial or textual meaning.

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over the definition of African theology: African theology has emerged from a new African hermeneutic that addresses questions that are African and its answers speak to the African situation in the light of the Word of God (Muzorewa 1990:168).¹⁹ African theologians, however, need to review some of the tools they have used since the rise of African theology, and also consider other tools they could use to ensure the originality, continuity, authenticity and relevance of African theology.

In the first place African theologians must abandon borrowing theological concepts and tools such as Western philosophy, since it cannot serve African religious needs (Muzorewa 1990:169). By using borrowed theologies Christianity remains foreign to the African people. Secondly, African theology must place human existence before faith, since the African is first human being and then believer. In doing this, African theology will focus on the importance of belief in the God that creates and sustains the African people. Many Africans live at a subsistence level, and therefore most of their actions are motivated by the will and desire to survive both physically and spiritually now, and then eternally. In the third place, African theology must seek for continuity between Christianity (what Muzorewa [1990:170] calls “special revelation”) and traditional African religion (general revelation), since most Africans experience a higher developed understanding of their faith through the framework of their indigenous religious beliefs (Muzorewa 1990:170-171). Moreover, in African theology general revelation should take precedence over special revelation.²⁰ Finally, African theology must emanate from insights gained from everyday incidents in our lives (Muzorewa 1985, 1990:174).

Du Toit (1998:374) also argues that an African inculturation hermeneutic that does not also include traditional African culture and religion

¹⁹ Muzorewa (1990:174) defines African theology as follows: “African theology is a reflective interpretation of what the biblical God is doing to enhance African survival through the agency of people who are informed by Scripture and traditional concepts of the God who is revealed to us through the faith and the life of Jesus Christ.”

²⁰ In this regard, Muzorewa (1990:172-174) argues as follows: Can African theology be both genuinely true to African tradition and Christianity without contradiction or compromise? Muzorewa answers this question positively. In most African patriarchal communities, for example, the son is only known by reference to his father. This we also find in John 3:16. Also, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the Father and the Son is one and God is three in one. Why does traditional religion accept this? In Western Christianity God acts in history as Father, Son or Holy Spirit. For the indigenous African God also acts in history, and what matters for them is not the mode of being involved, but that action is divine. African theologians, therefore, should do theology starting out with general revelation, since the African person relates more readily to that what he considers as his own.

as a resource for doing theology, will never produce a real African theology.²¹ He agrees that most African theologians involve themselves in liberation issues and the post-colonial urge to find what is typical of African theology (Du Toit 1998:395). This, of course, is understandable. If one's history is colonial and filled with apartheid, poverty, enslavement, exploitation, suffering and oppression, African theology, to be contextual, must address these issues. An emphasis on these issues only (i. e., liberation), however, has led to at least three shortcomings in current African theology: To much emphasis is put on economic and political liberation at the expense of the spiritual (Du Toit 1998:378), African theology is too concerned with ways to construct an African theology totally different and independent of its Western theological influences (Du Toit 1998:379), and African theology does not take traditional African culture and religion seriously in consideration in their hermeneutic encounter with the Bible²² (Du Toit 1998:381).

Du Toit (1998:380-85) argues that a theology that can be called African should at least take the following into consideration:

- It must be understood that the text that is analyzed by African hermeneutics is much wider than the Biblical text. The African world as text should be taken more seriously, since, in African traditional religion and culture, the "unwritten script" (e.g., riddles and proverbs, song and dancing, rites and ceremonies, myths and folk-tales, shrines and sacred places) should also be taken into account. The African world is a world of spiritual forces (good and evil), a world of charms and

²¹ Uka (1991:157-160) and Parratt (1983:90) argues that traditional African religion can be described in terms of experience, revelation, Scripture, tradition, culture and reason: Africans know and encounter the mysterious dimensions of life (reflected for example in myths); revelation does not only come via Scripture, but is also revealed in nature, at special places through symbols, myths and idols; the text of traditional African religion is not written, since "scripture" is also found in songs, arts, symbols, sayings, beliefs and customs, prayers, names, riddles and places; traditions that are orally transmitted from generation to generation form an essential part of traditional African religion; and African reason is integrated with all other faculties of the human being (e.g., African believe in God and spirits, but are not interested in rationally defining these realities).

²² In terms of including traditional African culture and religion as a resource for doing theology, Du Toit (1998:395-396) divides the work of African scholars in two categories. The so-called "old guard" (that includes scholars like Fashole-Luke, Idowu, Mbiti, Mosala and Sawyer) focuses mainly on liberation issues. They have taken Western Christian theology, developed it in African terms, and called it "indigenization" (Du Toit 1998:395). African traditional values and experiences are passive partners, and a Western form of hermeneutics is used that does not suit the African context. They also stress the centrality of the Bible as the only source for the development of an African theology, especially the Old Testament. In such a theology, for example, the African concept of time and history cannot play a role. "New guard" theologians (that include scholars like Boulaga, Ela, Moyo, Bediako and Oduyoye [1979]), on the other hand, reject the so called indigenization process by affirming traditional African values. The new guard theologians freely make use of African traditional values, and follow a style of confrontation towards anything that is oppressive to that what is African.

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amulets, sacrifices, ancestral worship and witches and wizards (see Zahan 2000:3-25). Understood as such, African hermeneutics is a religion without a book, but not without a text: A text that not only consists of suffering and dependence, but also a specific culture, self understanding and world view. Moreover, many Biblical concepts simply do not exist in African culture, or have a totally different meaning.

- African hermeneutics, in the second place, would be sterile if it is not a hermeneutics of protest: It should protest against anything and anyone that hinders the restoration of the identity and ethos of the *homo africanus*.
- Following from the point above, African theology should be a hermeneutics of sociocritical theory: A hermeneutics that exposes the role of institutions, traditions and texts as instruments of power, domination and social manipulation. In this regard, for example, economic upliftment must be of high importance.
- The close relationship between the Biblical world and that of traditional Africa (such as demon possession, healings and miracles) should be appropriated in a more structural manner.
- Additionally, African theology should aid proper education, a culture of learning and work ethics.
- Finally, African hermeneutics should realize that African theology, although studied by a minister of religion or a theologian, actually belongs to the community. In African context, hermeneutics is the *indaba* of the community.

In short: Africa must find its identity in the religion typical of Africa – only then will theology and church be able to play a meaningful role in the social life of the people of Africa.

This, of course, does not mean that neither the Bible nor Western theology should be simply brushed aside (Du Toit 1998:375-376). The Bible should not be too easily interpreted in the light of traditional African religions, rather than according to its own canons. A return to the original languages of the Bible and functional exegesis of the Biblical text are still necessary. Also, much can still be learned from Western theology, exegesis and hermeneutics.

In regard to the current state of African hermeneutics and theology, Tienou (1990:73-77) agrees with Du Toit on several points. Tienou (1990:73)

is of the opinion that African theology, thus far, had little impact on the daily grassroots church life in Africa. The modern quest for an inculturated African theology had two starting points: European colonialism and Western missionary efforts in the past century (both which can be seen as foreign forms of control/domination in terms of *inter alia* politics and economics). African theology still struggles with the context of this birth, and too many African theologians cannot understand African theology apart from these events. Moreover, the fact that the beginnings of African theology arose in a setting of political, cultural and religious domination means that from its very inception the African theological movement had an apologetic dimension (Tienou 1990:74).²³ African theologies were “theologies of antithesis: African theology is what European theology is not” (Tienou 1990:74).²⁴ Also, African theology is too academic and abstract. Tienou is therefore not surprised that African theology had failed to produce a theology that is practical and speaks to African people at grass root level. Likewise, in its current phase, African theology still seems to battle with the context of its naissance, still seems to be in its infancy, and an uphill road is lying ahead.

For Tienou the way forward for African theology (to be really African and practical) is the following: The Africanness of African theology should not be measured by its degree of dissimilarity with Western theology. Rather, the Africanness of any theology that purports to be African should be measured *by the degree to which it speaks to the needs of Africans (and South Africans) in their total context* (Tienou 1990:76; my italics).

[The] correctness of indigenous African theologies should be judged by the degree to which they are faithful to the Christian Scripture. In that sense, African theologies have the same reference point as any other Christian theology. If we maintain the double concern of relating the totality of biblical revelation to the

²³ Because of this, some scholars have suggested that African theology is inscribed in the movement of political and cultural emancipation of the African peoples. Tienou (1990:74) stresses this characteristic of African theology by indicating that African theology, especially in its beginnings in the 1950's, not only seek to legitimize the existence of an African indigenous theology, but was also directed not to the African church, but to the mentors and peers of African theologians.

²⁴ There are many examples of African theologies that are written on the premise of the existence of an essential cultural (and philosophical) difference between Africa and the West. Mbiti, for example, proposes that eschatology should be built on an African concept of time; Sawyerr and Sundkler focuses on the African concept of family as basis for African ecclesiology; and others have developed a Christology that portrays Jesus Christ as the great ancestor or the master of initiation rites (see Tienou 1990:75). In this process of taking the so-called African tradition seriously, however, some of these scholars appear at times to be more apologists for non-Christian theology and religion. Moreover, often the implicit assumption of scholars to attach great value to African traditional cultures seems to be that Biblical cultures and religions and African ones are similar (Tienou 1990:75).

totality of the situation of African Christians, African theology will truly become a discipline at the service of the church.

4. AFRICAN THEOLOGY AS BIBLICAL AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY: THE WORD IS LIFE

Understanding (and knowledge) is always contextually (and socially) based and related to specific social circumstances. In the words of Mushete (1994:19): "All theology is culturally and socially situated." This is also the case in any hermeneutic endeavor. We understand and interpret the way we do because "we are we." African theology, therefore, is no different from Western theology in the sense that both theologies are contextually and ideologically driven. What is important in any hermeneutic enterprise is not the correctness of its interpretations or results, but the critical realistic honesty by which it is undertaken.

There always are good reasons why people understand the way they do. Hermeneutics does not only help us to understand why people differ, it also shows us the (power) strategies people use to get their point across and accepted. The differences that emerge from the hermeneutic enterprise remind us that texts are interpreted by different people from different contexts with different ideologies. The task of hermeneutics therefore is not to undermine creative and individual understandings, but to make us aware "of our specific culture of understanding, of possible logical mistakes in the process of interpreting, and of possible power strategies underlying our style of interpretation" (Du Toit 1998:376). Hermeneutics also helps us to understand ourselves and others and the way we are influenced, for example, by culture, religion, pre-understanding and ideology. Hermeneutics concerns our worldview: The way we try to find meaning in our lives, it concerns our understanding of God, our relationships with other humans, it concerns our present difficulties and challenges (see Du Toit 1998:378). As such, African hermeneutics will only produce an African theology if it is critically realistic in terms of its context and purpose.

In this regard, the argument that African theology should be different from and abandon anything that is Western (see e.g. Muzorewa 1990:169) needs some rethinking. African theology does not need to be different, it needs to be contextual. The question should not be "what is different", but rather "is it contextual?" By contextual is meant a contextual critical reading of Scripture and the critical appropriation thereof, or, diversely, a theology that arises from the African context, in that context for that context (West 1996:32). African theology should be, like any other theology, purpose and context

driven. Only then will it speak on behalf of the people for the people, and will it make a difference in society and church.

The worth of any theology can never be assessed by the margin in which it differs from other theologies; its worth lies in the difference it makes in a specific context for the people that live in that context. Liberation theology (which made use *inter alia* of the Western historical-critical method as a form of exegesis) did exactly that: It made a difference. It was a contextual theology, a practical theology for a specific context, and a specific situation. I therefore fully agree with Tienou's (1990) argument that African theology, as long as it ideologically and not contextually driven (read: It must be different than Western theology), will fail to produce a theology that is practical and which will make a difference for Africans in Africa. What we need is a theology that addresses the context in which Africans live, not a theology that say it is different.²⁵

Secondly, African hermeneutics, if it wants to produce an African Christian theology, should be Biblical. Christianity does not belief in the Bible, but in the God of the Bible. Christians believe however, that this God speaks, and has spoken to them through his Word, and therefore see Scripture as the first and foremost source for theology and a Christian life. In this regard Parratt (1983:92) urges African theologians to take a genuine Biblical hermeneutics seriously, as a good deal that passes as African theology is inadequate since it lacks a solid foundation in Biblical exegesis. Some African theologians concentrate so exclusively on traditional African religions as their source, that they discard the Bible altogether.

African theology, if it wants to be Christian, should be Biblical. In the Bible the life (words and deeds) of Jesus Christ, as the Word, speaks of God as the Creator of new life. He is our Savior from sin and from ourselves. The message of Jesus, although fundamentally religious in its essence, indeed had social and political implications. Jesus proclaimed, *inter alia*, that God is available to all his people, also the so-called social outcasts, the lame, the sick and blind, and the unclean. In his kingdom everybody was equal, women were welcome, and He practiced an open table. His household was open to all, everybody was welcome, everybody was equal, and nobody was excluded. To become part of this new household meant true life, implied taking care of others, and living this new household meant protest against anything that was unjust. It was a kingdom of protest.

²⁵ Efforts to reread the Bible through African eyes sometimes simply reverse the politics of privilege, amounting to nothing more than an anti-Western bias (Fanon, in Wan 2000:111). In fact, such a rereading sometimes fall prey to the tendency to use the object of discontent as a legitimating agent: claiming Biblical sanction (Punt 2004:142).

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African theology, if it wants to make a difference for Africans in Africa (and for that matter in South Africa) should be exactly that: A theology of protest. It should protest, on a Biblical basis, against everything in its context and social life that is not Biblical: Corruption, poverty, crime, not caring for the sick (especially those with HIV/Aids), nepotism, misuse of (political) power, the abuse of women, to name but a few. It must, however, also attend to the spiritual needs of people.

In short: African theology, if it wants to make a difference in Africa for Africa, should be contextual and Biblical, and be able to address the needs of the people who live in that specific context. In the words of West (1996:24; my italics):

The South African context is a *context* in which *biblical* interpretations do matter; they shape our world. As the South African *context* constantly reminds us, *biblical* interpretations have life and death consequences; they *shape* the type of responses the state, church, and ordinary people make to particular social realities.

Only in Jesus Christ new life is possible, and only Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The Word, therefore, is life. And as West (1996:24) reminds us, Biblical interpretations have life and death consequences. A theology that is not Biblical, does not address the needs of the people, and does not give life to people in the context they live in, is worthless.

Many African scholars are already following this road. Mugambi (1974:37; 2001:19) and Boesak (1979:173-174), for example, correctly argue that the idea of liberation is inherent to the Biblical concept of salvation, and that salvation as a Biblical concept cannot be complete without liberation as a spiritual and sociopolitical concept. Masamba ma Mpolo (1983:19-40), in a historical-critical analysis of the Gospel of John, has indicated that Jesus as the Bread of Life, Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, Living Word, Truth and Life is the One that brings an all encompassing salvation. And Sawyerr, Mbiti and Enang (see Onwu 1984:38) have indicated that the Biblical concept of salvation not only underscores the need for deliverance from sin, but also from sickness, poverty and evil forces.

A last case in point: In a historical-critical and literary study on the Lucan view of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, Abogunrin (2000:27-43) concludes that, although the idea of political liberation indeed is present in Luke, a liberation more complete that leads to the total well-being of God's people is intended. Abogunrin correctly argues that the cultural context in which the Gospel was first preached is very similar to most African contexts. The African worldview is still dominated by belief in the reality of spirits,

witches, wizards, ancestors and divinities. The wearing of charms, rings and amulets by various categories of people reveals the nature of this belief. In the Lucan gospel the salvation by Jesus Christ is related to the person's body, health, victory over demonic powers, provision of daily needs, and the total well-being of the society in which the person lives. Jesus' salvation turned his environment upside down. Luke, according to Abogunrin (2000:36), teaches us that for one who has been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, "the visible and invisible, the known and unknown, can no longer have any terror because Jesus the crucified risen Lord now fills the whole universe as Redeemer and Lord." This study of Abogunrin is Biblical,²⁶ practical, contextual and applicable. Moreover, the hermeneutics applied is African in the sense that it is contextual.

5. THE WAY FORWARD? CAUTIOUS OBSERVATIONS FROM A NON-AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Tienou (1990:76) is of the opinion that the history of African theology, as well as its contents, thus far has revealed that the establishment of a genuine African Christian theology is still in the future tense. This is debatable. African theology has come a long way, and has made an impact on the theological world, as well as in the life of many people of Africa. African theology can look back on many fruits, especially political and social liberation. African theology, however, currently finds itself in a situation, politically and socially, that differs in many ways from the situation in which it was born. Political liberation has

²⁶ Ukpong (1994:43) identifies five different approaches to Christology in African theology: 1) the *incarnational approach* based on the doctrine of Christ, the eternal Word of God, taking human nature in Jesus. The presupposition of this approach is that just as the eternal Word of God became incarnate in human nature to bring redemption to humanity and creation, God's word and the Christian faith must become "incarnated" in human cultures; 2) the *logos spermatikos (seeds of the word) approach* which uses the idea of the eternal Logos (Word) – in whom all things were created – to show that Christ pervades in all human cultures, even if he is not known or identified as such. To attain its fullness of meaning, cultures must be opened and converted to Christ; 3) the *functional analogy approach* which seeks to describe Jesus' redemptive functions in terms of analogous African thought categories (such as Jesus being the greatest ancestor or brother-ancestor [see e.g. Kabasélé 1991a:116-127], Jesus being the master of initiation [Sanon 1991:85-102], Jesus as chief [Kabasélé 1991b:103-115], and Jesus as healer [Kolié 1991:128-150]); 4) the *paschal mystery approach* which uses the death and resurrection of Jesus as the centre and starting point of Christology. This Christology works with the understanding that Jesus, after his death and resurrection, belongs to all cultures and can identify with them through the proclamation of the gospel; and 5) the *Biblical approach* which is based on New Testament statements about the universal dimension of Christ and Jesus' identity with the Father (for a different categorization and description of African Christology see *inter alia* Onwu 1984:42; Nyamiti 1991:3-23; Waruta 1991:52-64]). The work of Abogunrin, clearly, is not Biblical as in the Biblical approach described above. It is Biblical in the sense that, like the work of Ukpong (1994), it takes its cue from the basic outline of Jesus' ministry of preaching (that the kingdom of God as new and different), healing (e.g., his healing of illnesses that were considered as spirit possession) and teaching (the parables he spoke which he drew from his hearers' culture and daily life experiences).

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been accomplished in most contexts, and a new postcolonial context with its challenges has to be addressed. The spiritual needs of the people of Africa are now the most important need on the continent, and should get its rightful attention. To this can be added the providing of Africa and all its people with Biblical moral values, as well as a solid work ethics. In regard to these identified needs, the following cautious suggestions are made which can be helpful on the road that awaits African theology:

- African theology must be Biblical and contextual. The Africanness of any theology (that purports to be Christian) should be measured by the degree to which it speaks to the needs of Africans in their total context, and be judged by the degree to which it is faithful to the Christian Scripture. Understood as such, African theologies have the same reference point as any other Christian theology.
- For African theology the relationship between theology and secular activity should be extremely important. The final worth of African theology (and for that matter any theology) should not be measured in terms of a “correct” and “outogeneous” hermeneutics and theology or dogmatic belief, but rather in imperatives for action. In the words of Mushete (1994:25): “Will Christians in Africa be counted among those agents who are inactive and ineffective in promoting social and human development?” In Africa and South Africa all Christians (theologians, ministers, church and community) should aim to follow the example set by Jesus: Jesus (and the apostles) proclaimed the gospel to the Jewish people from within the perspective of the Jewish culture and challenged that culture to respond to the gospel. His message turned the environment and cultural protocols upside down (see Abogunrin 2000:31). Inculturation is not new: It was part of the missionary activities of Jesus (Ukpong 1994:40).
- The need for African theology to be contextual also relates to the fact that it seems to be impossible to talk of culture in Africa in the present day without coming against the question whether one should speak of African culture or cultures. In the words of Tienou (1990:75): “it is well-known that contemporary Africa is as complex as any other continent in the world. Africa of the twentieth century may rightly be regarded as the home of hybrids of cultures”. This also holds true for the different contexts Africans find themselves in. The South African context, and culture, for example, has changed considerably over the past 10 years.

A theology and hermeneutics that are able to address the social and spiritual needs to whom it is addressed, should therefore not only be specific related, but also adaptable. In the African context, especially, a theology that is able to identify changing needs and situations should be a prerequisite.

- The impression one gets when reading the work done thus far by African theologians is that, at least in the majority of cases, the Old Testament features very prominently. Taking the political and social history of Africa into consideration, this state of affairs is in a certain sense understandable. The time, however, has come for African theology to also focus on the New Testament and its message of salvation in Jesus Christ (with all its consequences). The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed has definite social implications for Africa today. The New Testament, moreover, has a lot to say about the spiritual needs of the African people. Paul's understanding of the Christ event in terms of justification by faith, reconciliation, and love, to be new in Christ and to have peace with God, must become an essential part of African theology, at least if it wants to be Christian.
- From what have been said thus far, it is quite obvious that not much attention has been paid to the relationship between Christianity and traditional African religion. The reason for this is the complexity of this relationship. Many questions in this regard are still to a large extent problematic: Where should one start when doing theology in Africa? Should one start with indigenous religious belief, or with the Bible? Which should take precedence: General revelation or special revelation? African culture, for example, has a unitive view of reality, a specific understanding of the divine origin of the universe and time, and puts emphasis on the concrete rather on the abstract. Reality is filled with witchcraft, ancestry, sacred places and time, spirits and divinities and many other elements that are foreign to "outsiders". How seriously should African theology take the message of the Bible that Jesus Christ not only delivered us from sin, but also, for example, from evil forces leading to a total well-being, to serve God without hindrance? The New Testament is clear on the fact that the message of Jesus turned the culture and environment of his day upside down. Should this have any implications for the relationship between Christianity and African traditional indigenous beliefs? Should African theology be Christian, or only partly Christian? Are African theologians critical enough towards

certain indigenous cultural beliefs? More specifically: Can the Biblical message of the final coming of Christ, the end of all things and the beginning of something new, be shoved aside because African culture has a different (cyclical) concept of time? Can Jesus be God and also the eldest or most important brother? Moreover: How Christian should African theology be? Or, put more bluntly: Can an African theology, which insists on building primarily on the foundation of traditional beliefs, be called Christian at all? These very difficult questions need serious attention. A starting point to address these problems may lie in the warning of Tienou (1990:75): In taking seriously the so-called African traditional culture some theologians produce a theology that appears at times to be not only apologetic in essence, but also non-Christian. Maybe we should all rethink the way in which culture shapes and influences the theologizing process.

- Some African theologians should also rethink their open hostility towards Western exegetical methods. African theology in the past has made fruitful use of various “Western” exegetical methods (see section 2 above). In the recent past, Khathide (2003) for example, has employed a social scientific analysis to study spirit possession in the first century Jewish world and Africa. The results of this study are worth taking notice of.
- A final remark: Theological education in Africa should contribute, in no small way, to establish a Biblical and contextual African theology. Curricula should make provision for African theology and exegesis. When teaching, theologians should always be willing to rethink own cultural assumptions. Moreover, students from an African background should qualify themselves to such an extent that they themselves can become lecturers.

To conclude: If African theology wants to be Christian, it should be Biblical and contextual. The first and foremost resource for African theology, as in any other theology that purports to be Christian, should be the word of God. The results of African theology should make a difference in all walks of life. Understood as such, the Word indeed means life, is life, and promises life in its fullness.

That was what Jesus the Savior did – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, giving hope to the hopeless, and warmly receiving those

rejected by society and making them new people. The message of the Gospel will be more meaningful if the church does not compromise its prophetic voice in Africa (and South Africa – EvE), but speaks as the mouthpiece of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the poor, the homeless, and the hungry ... The message must be followed by concrete examples in meeting most of the needs as much as possible. Jesus provides total liberation. This work of the church is the only way the message can become meaningful in Africa and the rest of the world.

(Abogunrin 2000:43)²⁷

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²⁷ To this the following remark of Onwu (1984:46) can be added: "In Africa, vulnerability and underdevelopment are basic. Coincidentally, these were also problems that angered Jesus in his own day. They should be the core concerns of Africans in Biblical studies today. ... We Biblical scholars cannot claim to have done our work well until our ... insights have been communicated with vital interest and power to congregations in our land and abroad."

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