

Reading the Bible in a cross cultural (South) African context

ABSTRACT

The Bible is regarded as an authoritative book in Africa, which should inform and guide Christians on grass roots level in relation to their every day lives. This poses the question of how Africans would use the Bible in their context. The *status quo* is that it is read and used in many ways. In this article a hermeneutic of relevance is suggested where both the context of the Bible and that of the reader are taken seriously. It is suggested that through building analogous bridges between these two contexts a dialogue is stimulated that would eventually lead to the integration of Biblical material into the every day life situations of the African readers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fastest growing areas of Christianity lie in South America, Africa and Asia, while the numbers in the traditional Christian areas in the northern hemisphere, especially Europe, are waning. Nevertheless, the (academic) interpretation of Scripture, both methodologically and factually, is still dominated by the guild of Biblical scholars in the Northern hemisphere.

This brings us to the question of the *relevance* of what we are doing in the guild of Biblical scholars and theologians and also to what end this scholarly work is done. In Africa the Bible and its interpretation largely belong to the community of Christian believers. The Bible serves for them as foundational religious document. They expect it to have relevant and existential appeal to their lives. African Christianity remains faithful to the basic convictions of the New Testament and tries to solve the problems of the day from within this basic framework. This orientation towards the Bible is important to most African Christians, although it could mean many things to many different people, as I will argue later it will clearly show that Christianity in Africa is inseparably linked to the Bible on all levels of society.¹

However, there is increasing reaction against the critical approach of the academic guilds in the North. Adamo, a leading African theologian, for instance, remarks that one of the aims of the currently emerging African cultural hermeneutics is to 'break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed'.² This includes a reaction to many of the accepted approaches and thought processes in what is perceived as "Western theology". As far as New Testament studies are concerned it is especially the relevance

1 Adamo (2001:37). This obviously leads to a wide variety of readings of the Bible text, ranging from readings that are sensitive to the original communication, to readings that have no interest in the original meaning at all.

2 Adamo (2001:44).

of the refined historical methodologies as well as the applicability of the results of such studies to present day situations that are questioned.³

It basically amounts to a clash of different worlds, and of different cultures having different worldviews.⁴ The questions asked, the problems addressed, the historical and mythical thinking, and so many things differ. Is it possible to bridge the gap between the Northern guilds and the existential, but rapidly emerging, Christianities of Africa? Can the cultural achievements of the North still bear positive fruit for these Christianities?

The author would like to address the possibility to reading the Bible within an African context. This involves taking at least three cultures seriously, namely, the culture of the Bible, the culture of the readers, and the culture of the academic guilds (in the North).

2. SCRIPTURE IN AFRICA AND A HERMENEUTIC OF 'CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE'

The following remarks should first be made.

2.1 A new tradition developing

In Africa an emerging theological community is currently developing its own identity. This indigenous African academic tradition⁶ is relatively young.⁷ Not until recently, after the gradual fading of the colonial period in Africa,⁸ did the formation of an independent academic tradition

3 At the 59th meeting of the SNTS in Barcelona in 2004, the presidential address was read by Prof W Meeks. He asked the question who was still listening to New Testament scholars and came to some negative conclusions. He pleaded for the continuation of historical studies and campaigned for closer co-operation with other partners. This article is based on similar sentiments.

4 Adamo (1999:1-2; 2001:37).

5 See the strong views of Maluleke (1999:1-3). Okure (1999:1) also emphasizes the 'fragmented and multi-faceted reality of the continent'. Wendland (1999:3) mentions that there are 2000 languages in Africa alone, not to speak of the great differences in history or customs, for instance, between the partilineal-patrilocal and matrilineal-matrilocal peoples of central Africa. There are, nevertheless, certain prominent scholars who still have no hesitancy in continuing to refer to African religion or theology in the singular, like Mbiti (1969; 1986), Paris (1995), Kalu (1999:8), or Manus (1999:5). Adamo (2001:8-22) refers to an 'African worldview' or 'African Indigenous tradition' in the singular although he concentrates on the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Maluleke (1999:2), however, attacks the singular use when it comes to the forms of Christianity in Africa: 'works with such titles as "Christianity in Africa", African Christian Theology", Bible and Theology in African Christianity"... are rather "colonialist" and "modernist" in scope'. Different people try to solve this problem in different ways. Paris (1995:21-22), for instance, argues that 'the traditions of African peoples... are diverse in cultural form yet united in their underlying spirituality'. As will be indicated later on our research focused on South Africa.

6 This is meant in the traditional sense of universities, colleges or similar institutions. Obviously, the intellectual tradition goes back for hundreds of years, although this was mainly transmitted in an oral manner.

7 Excluding the ancient Alexandria, as well as the older 'white' universities in South Africa, the University of Fort Hare is regarded by many as the oldest institution of tertiary education in Africa. It is little more than hundred years old (including its embryonic stage), going back to its earliest beginnings as missionary institution. Paris (1995:166) argues that serious studies of African culture by African scholars only started in the 1960's, and Adamo (2001:114) agrees. Avotri (2000:315) mentions an interesting point. He refers to the low level of critical reflection in African biblical interpretation. Following Abogunrin, he explains that the missionaries did not bring critical reflection in the true academic sense of the word to Africa, which is today still evident in some of the seminaries. This means that the development of the academic tradition in Africa is largely dependent on people who studied abroad.

8 The end of colonialisation in Africa started to dawn in 1957 with Ghana becoming independent and it reached its 'conclusion' with the election of a democratic government in South Africa in 1994. Ukpong

start to dawn in Africa.⁹ During the colonial period western academic traditions dominated the academic and intellectual stage in Africa.¹⁰ It is therefore understandable that the emergence of independent African scholarship¹¹ does not take place in a neutral context. There is a strong remaining anti-colonial feeling that shapes the academic work, especially of African theologians, although they recognise their links to ‘Western style of theology’. This 45-50 year old African academic tradition now breathes the ‘free air of Africa’ and wants to emphasise that. However, simply leaving the older academic foundations does not always lead to solid ground. It is more a matter of experimenting to find a way to a new academic identity in Africa.¹²

2.2 The use of Scripture needs to be clarified

The question, how to read the Bible in Africa, also needs to be put into perspective. Africans are tradition orientated people. Although urbanisation causes rapid changes many still ‘listen to tradition’ as a way of solving issues. This means that they are not as interested in discovering what the Bible says as individuals, rather there is a tendency to ‘believe what the pastor says’. Biblical opinion is therefore formed by pastoral opinion, which in turn is heavily dependant upon the level of education of the pastor and of course his/her creativity and imagination. Apart from that the Bible as religious book is regarded as having significant spiritual power and it is used as such. Adamo¹³, for instance, gives many examples of the Bible being used therapeutically, as protection, or to ensure success in life. Pieces of Bible text are, for instance, carried around the neck or put under the pillow by some to utilise its mystical powers that would ensure safety and protection against evil powers.¹⁴ Repetitive recitation of biblical phrases in specific situations may also ensure good results.¹⁵ In these cases, the Bible plays more of a symbolic role in a particular community than being used as source of revelation. Obviously the direct presence and exclusive guidance of the Spirit are also valued highly in this process.¹⁶ The presence of the Spirit is manifested in ways that are familiar to African cultures. In instances such as these, there would be little need for these Christians to read the Bible as an informative book within its historical context or to pay any attention to the exegetical achievements of the Northern guilds. (It is interesting that last time I checked – about 7 years ago – there was not a single department of Biblical Studies at universities

(2000:12) distinguishes three dominant phases of development, which started in the 1930’s.

- 9 In South Africa these traditions go back 30-40 years with the writing of Tutu, Boesak, Mosala, etc. Paris (1995:1-3) refers to similar changes in the USA over the past few decades. He refers to these scholars as the ‘new scholars’.
- 10 Mugambi (1999:4) traces this back to the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. See also the numerous books by missionaries of academics from western traditions describing the intellectual and cultural situation in Africa. Words like ‘primitive’, ‘naturalistic’ etc. are common in these descriptions.
- 11 African scholarship is difficult to define precisely – in this context scholars are intended who live and word in Africa, or who have direct links with this content (be it ancestry or empathic work in or on Africa).
- 12 That is why there are so many different publications and such a variety of diverging opinions on ‘reading the Bible in Africa’ today – see the most recent book edited by Adamo (2006) in which he claims to offer the current stage of development of African Biblical studies.
- 13 Adamo (2001:8ff, 47ff.).
- 14 Ps 7 should be written on pure parchment and kept under the pillow – this will protect you against witches or wizards (Adamo 2001:77).
- 15 Adamo (2001:40).
- 16 Obeng (1999:7) calls charismatic movements the most significant trend in church life in Ghana. Anum (1999:3) also refers to the ‘charismatic explosion’

in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa and its neighbours excluded. All are departments of Religious Studies that favour a broader religious approach).

Africa still has a literacy problem, although this problem is diminishing quickly. In South Africa, the second most literate country in Africa, approximately 14 million out of the 44 million people, mostly black African people, cannot or do not want to read. In the rest of Africa the picture is even bleaker. Obviously, for such persons reading the Bible is a non-issue, not to mention the exegetical work of Western academic guilds.

Not all forms of Christianity foster the reading of the Bible as central activity for its members. In areas where Protestant missionaries were dominant Africans tend to promote the importance of Bible reading. The interest of believers in reading the Bible as a primary source of revelation would be higher in these areas than in others.

2.3 Key terms: inculturation or contextualisation

What are the driving forces – on an academic level – behind this emerging African biblical tradition?

To answer this question it must be recognised that there is a basic discomfort among most African biblical scholars with what may be called the “traditional approach” to New Testament studies where so much (and even exclusive) emphasis is put on the original context, with the resultant focus on literary-historical research, without making any effort to engage hermeneutically with the situation of the present day reader. It is not that the “traditional approach” is not known or practiced by African theologians, rather it is that a different approach is required.¹⁷ The real proof of the pudding lies elsewhere. Ukpogong argues that Africans are looking for a positive encounter between the biblical text and the African context.¹⁸ The emphasis should fall more on the receivers of the text than on the producers of the original text.¹⁹ Adamo confirms this by saying that ‘the most prominent and widest characteristic of African indigenous churches is the strong interest in the use of African worldview in their mode of reading and interpreting the Bible’.²⁰ That is also the purpose of an academic reading of the Bible. The Bible must speak to and eventually through their context,²¹ since African Christians would like to hear what the Bible has to say about the pains and pleasures of their every day lives.

Contextualisation or inculturation²² should thus be regarded as key concepts in the development of a unique theological identity, as Umoh²³ puts it. To a large extent this does not only reflect a desire for hearing the Bible in everyday situations in Africa, but also to take the message of the Bible out of its “Western (colonial) clothes” and dress it in “African clothes”. It is not a matter of whether African Christians are ‘allowed by some or other guild’ to do it, ‘the fact that

17 Adamo (1999:1-2; 2001:37); Ukpogong (2000:19)

18 This need for integration between text and context is *inter alia* influenced by a holistic worldview in which the world is not divided into sections, but is seen as an interrelated and integrated whole.

19 Ukpogong (1996:190) is correct to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of this process.

20 According to Adamo (1999:1-2; 2001:37) this is what distinguishes African Christianity from Western Christianity. Asaju (2006); Manus (2006).

21 This obviously leads to a wide variety of readings of the text, ranging from readings which are sensitive to the original communication, to readings that have no interest in the original meaning at all.

22 I do not distinguish between these terms here. Ukpogong (1999:1) formulates what he calls ‘inculturation hermeneutics’ as follows: ‘This is a methodology whereby an academically trained reader reads the biblical text *with* a community of ordinary readers and *from* the perspective of the ordinary people. It is a commitment to a particular contextual starting point and wrestling with concrete societal issues.’

23 Umoh (1998:200).

these indigenous churches are making the Bible relevant to their situation in life is certain'.²⁴ The Bible is seen as a source of upliftment²⁵ in an otherwise challenging and often unfriendly environment.

Our question, however, relates to the contextualising of the *message of Scripture* in the every day lives of Christians in Africa. 'The process of overcoming the distance between ancient texts and present readers – the process of decoding and re-appropriating the original meaning of the Scriptures – is what constitutes hermeneutics proper'.²⁶ Often what is offered by African theologians as exegetical studies runs the risk, in some cases, of being so involved with and absorbed in the context of the readers, that it becomes one sided and eclectic. Reacting to such activities, Wendland remarks: 'This sort of a *relativised* "reading" – if offered as a full exegesis or interpretation of the original message – is, in my opinion, invalid'.²⁷ He rightly argues that focusing simply on the experience of the reader denies that there is anything behind or within the biblical text itself. Such an approach lacks the necessary controls or proper methodology for critical evaluation of that particular "reader experience" as an expression of "what God says according to the Bible". This again limits the potential for hermeneutical growth and development, namely, to 'enlarge upon our understanding of the biblical text by means of a distinctively African perspective and insight'.²⁸ To create a hermeneutical balance between the text and the reader seems nonnegotiable.

3. A HERMENEUTICS OF "CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE"

Applying Biblical textual information directly to present day situations is not uncommon in Africa.²⁹ For instance, qualities of figures like Moses or Isaiah are unproblematically transferred to present day figures. Obviously, direct associations like immediate communication from God, special divine powers, revelatory insights, or dreams, etc. are part of this applicative process resulting in a revitalisation of the qualities of these biblical figures in present day prophets as signs of their authenticity and authority.³⁰ From a hermeneutical perspective this procedure is of course problematic. The hermeneutical process dealing with the application of ancient texts to present day situations is more complicated than that.

24 Segovia (1999:10) uses the term 'Correspondence-of -Terms' in this regard: 'What applies in scripture applies directly in the present'. See also Obeng (1999:5-7) and Adamo (1999:10).

25 Akoto (2000), for instance, reinterpret the imagery of the Good Shepherd (John 10) from the perspective of the mother and firstborn daughter of the Ewe people in Ghana. The qualities the mother or firstborn daughter has, are paralleled with the qualities of the Shepherd, with the result that the mother and firstborn daughter can be called the Good Shepherd. In this way, the traditional qualities of the mother get religious backing and are therefore regarded as biblical and Christian. This serves as way of uplifting the people by giving them confidence in their own cultural heritage.

26 Segovia (1999:5).

27 Wendland (1999:6).

28 Wendland (1999:6-7).

29 Maluleke (1999:5).

30 Adamo (2001:23-40) describes how special dreams or experiences, powers to heal or prophetic abilities qualify a person as 'spiritually able' to lead or form a church. He further mentions that the taking of medicine by missionaries from the British Apostolic Church shocked the local believers in Nigeria to the extent that they separated from the former. The power and presence of the Spirit should have been enough to protect a believer.

How could this process of decoding and re-appropriating ancient texts be visualised? A hermeneutics of “contextual relevance”³¹ is suggested which is based on the similarities that exists between the Biblical and African worldviews and conceptual worlds.³² A hermeneutical bridge must be constructed between the world of the biblical text and the present day reader so that the two “worlds” may meet in interactive dialogue. In this dialogue the African reader with his present day context should engage with the ancient world presented in the Biblical text in such a way that the one context should not “destroy” the other, although authority should lie with the Biblical context. Both the context in which the text was produced, as well as the context in which the text is consumed, should be taken seriously and should be integrated as part of the process of interpretation on the basis of mutual *relevance*. Readers should be willing and able to approach the text with their own questions and interests (i.e. from their contexts),³³ but at the same time recognise the role the Bible plays as an authentic and authoritative partner in this process of interaction.³⁴

A key to a hermeneutics of “contextual relevance” is therefore that the reading process should start at areas where the two “worlds” connect or overlap, be it on a linguistic level (words that are similar, like God or mediation), a thematic level (kinship, patriarchal families), of everyday life (sheep farming, sowing), and a mythological level (same type of stories used to explain transcendental phenomena) etc. This “overlapping” presents a familiar entrance into the Biblical text and presents the opportunity for starting a relevant dialogue on the basis of mutual knowledge and familiarity. The reader comes with foreknowledge (and therefore has something to contribute) to meet what seems familiar in the text and therefore not as a passive partner in dialogue.³⁵

By way of metaphor it may be said that *analogies* are the beams or basic building stock for the construction of this hermeneutical bridge of “contextual relevance” between the biblical text and the present day reader. At the point where the overlapping occurs analogy will also be found. Analogy functions on the basis of simultaneous *similarity* (congruency) and *dissimilarity* (incongruency) within which the two phenomena that are related.³⁶ At the point of *similarity*, an important *point of dissimilarity* is usually found. For instance, if we read about Jesus’ disciples in John’s Gospel, there are some similarities with believers today, for instance, they stand in a special

31 This implies integration into biblical criticism of “the questions and concerns of the other paradigms on a different key, a hermeneutical key, with the situated and interested reader and interpreter always at its core” (Segovia 1995:8).

32 Abogunrin (1987:31), Pobee (1996:166), LeMarquand (2000:94), King (2000:368) and Adamo (2001:104-105) underline the fact that there are significant similarities between the Biblical and African worldviews. Igenzoza (2000:296) claims that ‘an advantage which most Africans often have is the striking similarity between their indigenous culture and worldview and the biblical – while not overlooking the differences’. Avotri (2000:315) refers to Levinson and Pope-Levinson who speak of a “hermeneutic of resonance” between the Bible and traditional African culture.’ Avotri (2000) then illustrates that demons and demon-possession as they are used in Mark’s Gospel resonate with African beliefs in malicious spirits.

33 It is a general trend among African scholars to emphasize the dialogical nature of the process. The questions and consequent contribution of the listeners or receivers are granted a privileged position in the communication process. Although this is often stressed, how this should be done and where the limits of each participant lie, are rarely described. The ideal is stated, without saying how exactly that ideal is going to be reached. See Anum (1999:11).

34 West (1999a:1-2) calls this a ‘transaction’.

35 Due to the experience in the colonial past there is sensitivity about “being told” or being put into a position of a passive receiver. Obeng (1999:6) and Adamo (1999:1), for instance, strongly warn against this. In the words of Adamo (1999:1), ‘Africans... are not passive receivers of Christianity’.

36 For a detailed explanation see Van der Watt (2000).

relationship to Jesus, they follow him, etc. There are, however, also dissimilarities. No present day believer can stand in an identical relation to Jesus as, for instance, the disciples, Peter, James or John did. The latter persons' relationship involved being with the physical Christ and following him through Galilee, etc., something that is impossible for present day believers. Their relationship functions on a different level. So, at the point of similarity we also find the point of dissimilarity. This functional quality of analogy facilitates both the "familiarity" and the "foreignness" of phenomena that are analogous.

Bridges built with beams of analogy make it possible for readers to cross over from one "world" to the other and back. In this way two separated worlds meet and interact. Their similarity allows for points of common interest that facilitate interest and initial discussion. The dissimilarity stimulates further dialogue, change, and insight into the differences between the two worlds.

But what does this process entail? A thorough knowledge is required in order to draw analogies. This should be knowledge of both the worldview of the Bible³⁷ and also that of the present day consumers of the Bible. Without this knowledge it would not be possible to responsibly identify similar and dissimilar elements. However, the *modus operandi* of acquiring knowledge of these two "worlds" differs. The biblical material is presented in ancient texts, which should be exegetically analysed. The other "text", namely, of the opinions and views of the present day readers is in flux and differs from group to group. It is largely "written" in the hearts and minds of the relevant readers. A different approach is called for here, for instance, qualitative research – an acknowledged method from the human sciences that is used in compiling social profiles³⁸ – in order to determine the religious perceptions of the relevant readers.³⁹ The information gathered through exegesis and qualitative research respectively will form the pillars on which the bridge between the two worlds could be constructed.⁴⁰

Within the hermeneutics of "contextual relevance", therefore, both the text of the Bible and the "text" of the readers are subjects of investigation and interpretation, although in different ways⁴¹ - the former by way of exegesis and the latter by way of qualitative research. Although qualitative research is not the only means of conducting such research, it is an effective means of determining the religious perceptions of a community.

37 A worldview or symbolic universe has to do with the inner convictions, the worldview of people. This worldview is their 'data basis' to which they turn to answer existential questions – in the broadest sense of the word – and that is where relevance should be looked for.

38 The assumption in this article is therefore that communities (and individuals as parts of communities) read the Bible.

39 Can anybody confidently say, "This is what people in Africa, or in a specific area of Africa think?" What is actually happening presently is that many individual authors of articles on these issues give their opinions of what *they* think the religious perceptions of people are at present. They often take refuge to older mythological stories or traditional practices to support and develop their opinions, without distinguishing, for instance between rural and urban communities or checking whether what they believe to be true is still generally accepted by present day members of a particular society. To avoid these problems an approach must be used that at least tries to match the dynamic changes taking place in the African communities today. Qualitative research answers these requirements.

40 Questions might be asked why qualitative research is necessary, since the readers bring this knowledge implicitly to the reading process in any case. That is true, but in facilitating this reading process a basic assumption is that the areas where "bridges" could be built should be identified, and more particularly that they should be understood. Since there should be similarities between the two worlds which are drawn into interaction it seems necessary to have a reliable profile of the religious perceptions and thought of the community involved in this reading process.

41 Adamo (2001:44) stresses the necessity of having a thorough knowledge of the African social cultural context.

A remark or two should first be made about the nature of qualitative research. In social sciences quantitative and/or qualitative research are used to establish the social dynamics of and perceptions within a particular society.⁴² Qualitative research is of great value in this process. With the help of several focus groups drawn from a specific community, the religious perceptions of that community are established through intensive discussions, monitoring, and evaluating. The whole process cannot be described in detail here and it is also not so important for our purposes. Suffice to say that such intensive qualitative research has been done in three important areas in South Africa (Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng and the North-West Province of South Africa),⁴³ in order to establish the current trends of religious thought among these communities.⁴⁴ Remarks in the rest of this article about the religious perceptions in South Africa are based on this research.⁴⁵

3.1 Experimental reading: hermeneutics of “contextual relevance”

Hermeneutics of “contextual relevance” aims at the engagement of the reader with the message of Scripture. This takes place within, and is determined by, the framework of the reader’s own context, presuppositions, and questions. The purpose is to find overlapping areas between the two worldviews that could serve as entrances to the bridge that is being constructed between the reader and the text. At these points of overlapping, analogy will pave the way for discovering similarities and dissimilarities, which will hopefully result in constructive dialogue between text and reader.

Let us now read some passages from John’s Gospel to illustrate the process of the hermeneutic of “contextual relevance”. The example that will be given and the presentation of the material will be as follows: first a very brief and selected description⁴⁶ will be given of the perceptions among the readers in the aforementioned areas of South Africa where the qualitative research was done (step 1). Then passages from John⁴⁷ will come under the spotlight that might serve as points of overlapping (step 2). Then the analogical process will be described (step 3) which will lead to a dialogue that is open and cannot be predicted here.

42 See, for instance, De Vos (1999).

43 The research was conducted by N. Ndwandwe, E. Mahlangu and S. Muvabandi. Intensive sessions with focus groups were aimed at determining the religious perceptions of people in Kwazulu-Natal, the Western Province and Gauteng. The discussions were carefully monitored and the results processed in seminars.

44 This research, with detailed information, will shortly be available in a book entitled: ‘Reading the Bible in an African context. Experimenting with a hermeneutic of “contextual relevance” by N. Ndwandwe, E. Mahlangu, and J van der Watt. Intensive sessions with focus groups in Kwazulu-Natal, the Western Province and Gauteng were held around certain central religious questions. The discussions were carefully monitored and the results processed in seminars. Interestingly enough, the results from these three areas were very similar.

45 What is presented is obviously only relevant for these three communities, although astonishing similarities were found in the research results. The results from the research in these three areas were basically identical with only minor differences in language, myths and names. Since these are three key areas in South Africa it creates the suspicion that these similarities might be found in most of the other areas in South Africa – and perhaps even outside the borders - too. These results will be available in a book entitled: ‘Reading the Bible in an African context. Experimenting with a hermeneutic of “contextual relevance” by N. Ndwandwe, E. Mahlangu, and J van der Watt.

46 The aim is not to give a full description, since the purpose of the material is to illustrate how the process of “contextual relevance” works and not to give a description of the current views of the groups that formed part of the research project.

47 Obviously there are differences regarding the interpretation of the Biblical material, but since the analogies occur on a broader structural level (comparison of views of God, sin, salvation, etc.) or on a metaphorical level (the use of metaphors like family, sheep, vine, etc.) fine detailed exegetical differences do not influence the process on this level.

Step 1: Identity and obedience as understood among the focus groups

In spite of the clear signs of emerging individualism, especially in urban areas, the basic and dominating social unit of the community is still believed to be the family or clan. It is still a matter of *ubuntu*⁴⁸ - referring to the fact that persons exist because they are part of a community – in other words, ‘I am because we are’⁴⁹. Individuals therefore find and shape their self-identity in relation to, and in solidarity with, their immediate community. Only within the socio-cultural network of family relations does the individual person regard him or herself as a full and whole person. This is where a person’s dignity is affirmed and the feeling of acceptance and belonging created. Values and norms are defined in terms of what the family and broader community expect.

The world of Africans may be divided into two parts, the spiritual (unseen) and physical (seen) parts, which are directly and closely linked and mutually influencing each other. *Ubuntu* is also the philosophy binding these two parts together. This is true because African cosmology consists of a unity which exists (should exist) in harmony.⁵⁰ The physical world of the African believer is therefore constantly filled with spirits and powers that are manifested in different ways (both positively and negatively). These spiritual beings and powers directly influence people, of course, which mean that the traditional believers are constantly exposed to a world full of powers stronger than themselves. Primary to these are the ancestors or living dead. The ancestors are expected to protect one’s family, but they also ensure that the family acts correctly. This is achieved through guidance and even punishment in the case of disobedience. Other spirits should be controlled and manipulated to one’s own good. This creates anxiety, which must be dealt with. Spirits, with resulting power and power manipulation are central objects or abstracts in the African traditional religion.⁵¹ This contact with the spiritual world is facilitated by the diviners.

Within the community norms and values are inculcated with the result that individuals are expected to be the embodiment of the values their families stand for. The individual’s rights and interests are always subordinated to those of the family. Obedience and subordination to the values of the family are of paramount importance. Disobedience is a trespass against the family as a whole and has a negative impact on inner-familial relations.

Step 2: Identity and obedience according to John’s Gospel

Elsewhere I have argued in detail that *family imagery* is the constitutive and pervasive imagery in John’s Gospel.⁵² Virtually all the theological themes in this Gospel are networked into this family imagery and can be described in terms of their “Bildlichkeit”.⁵³ John utilises the conventions of

48 Crafford (1996:11).

49 Mbigi (1997:31) states: ‘I can only be a person through others’. Setiloane (1975:31-32) compares it to a ‘magnet creating with other persons a complex field’. He quotes Mbiti by saying ‘I am because I belong and because I belong I am’.

50 Crafford (1996:9).

51 Cf. the discussion in Kriel (1996:93-97). He discusses the need and logic of dealing with powers and their potential.

52 Van der Watt (2000:161ff.). See also Malherbe (1995); Yarbrough (1995); Lategan (1992:257-277).

53 Zimmermann (2004) illustrated how the Christology of John is expressed in images.

ancient Mediterranean families, as he sees them.⁵⁴ The imagery should therefore be understood within its ancient conventions. Since this was done elsewhere in much detail,⁵⁵ only some of the relevant results of the analysis will be presented here.

The (F)father is the head of the family, taking responsibility for the behaviour of the family (including elements like education, securing the tradition, discipline, judgment); for feeding his family, and for protecting his family. The continuous use of this language in this Gospel constitutes a familial framework within which the actions and events of the narrative can be interpreted.

Children of the family also have responsibilities. Their identity and dignity are determined by their family affiliation which they have as a right of their birth (1:12-13; 3:1-8). They are also expected to obey the (F)father and act according to his example and expectation. His words and will should live within them and be kept alive by them. A person's deeds will therefore show whether they are part of the family or not. Family membership will also become apparent in the behaviour of other groups towards the family. If they hate the (F)father they will also hate the other members, because they are a unity (17:11-23; 15:18ff.).

On a spiritual level a person is given life through divine birth (from above – 1:12-13; 3:1-8) – thus a person becomes a child of God. Simply calling a person a *child of God* activates a whole set of socio-cultural associations relating to family life yet they also function as an analogy for what is being said on spiritual level. The social conventions mentioned above are all applied to the spiritual family of God.

Within the Gospel this creates interesting tensions. If it is true that individuals receive their identity on the basis of their family membership, belonging to two families simultaneously (a physical and spiritual family) inevitably creates problems. Which father must be obeyed, whose tradition must be followed, etc?

The author(s) of John's Gospel is acutely aware of this problem. I have also argued elsewhere⁵⁶ that John presents earthly associations (like families) in a negative light, with the exception of Jesus' mother. This should be understood in the light of the new loyalties towards the new spiritual family into which a person is born. If choices are to be made, they should be made in favour of the spiritual family as opposed to the earthly family. This might also be the reason why John develops such an elaborate family imagery in his Gospel. The earthly family is indeed replaced by the spiritual family in many important ways, although this does not lead to complete opposition towards the earthly world.

The following diagram⁵⁷ illustrates the different elements woven into a network of family related imageries⁵⁸. From the diagram it is clear that we have a complicated and extensive development of the different aspects related to ancient families.

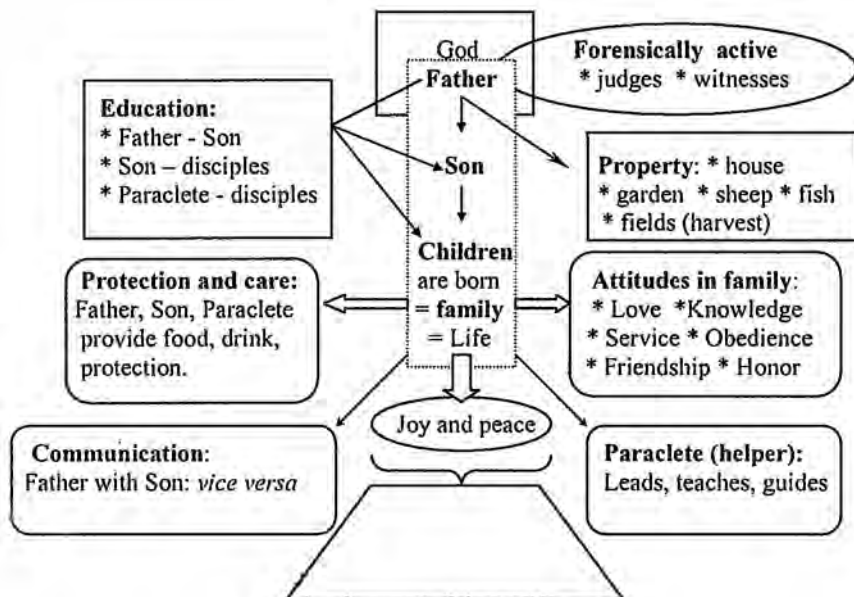
54 John provides enough material about his perception of families for the reader to construct a framework of his thought in this regard. Other ancient Mediterranean families might differ slightly, but at least we have John's opinion.

55 Detailed information may be found in Van der Watt (2000:308ff.). The arguments will not be repeated here.

56 Van der Watt (2000).

57 Adapted from Van der Watt (2000:318).

58 For a detailed description of the development of these different themes and their interrelationships, see Van der Watt (2000).



4. READING JOHN BY MEANS OF A HERMENEUTICS OF CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE.

From this brief overview similarities are evident between what is found in the focus groups in South Africa and in the presentation of family life by John's Gospel. To mention but a few:

- Both worldviews depart from the **family** as basic and determinative point of social orientation.⁵⁹
- In both cases persons get their **identity** from the group primarily as the father (as carrier of the tradition) determines it.
- In both instances the **behaviour** (conduct) of people is (or should be) determined by the group's conventions.

The similarities could be described in much finer detail, but for our purposes it is not necessary. In a hermeneutics of "contextual relevance" similarities are of significance, since they identify the "bridges" between the two worldviews. "Bridges" are those areas where the worldviews overlap and different contexts meet in an analogous way. Present day readers will say in reaction to remarks about families in John's Gospel, "We know how it is – with us it is more or less the same".

However, as will be illustrated below, these points of similarity also contain points of dissimilarity. This is how analogy works, as was explained above. Exactly at the point where present day readers might feel "at home" they recognise differences. Within communication theory the experience of conflict or tension of ideas leads to comparison, analysis and most of all (implicit or explicit) dialogue. This should then lead to the question of relevance, especially when reading

59 Avotri (2000:315-316) also notes this.

religious or authoritative texts, “What should I do with this information and how should it be done?”⁶⁰

Let us first take a general example of the centrality of the family.

The idea of a group-orientated society is a shared value in terms of which a person describes his own identity and measures his dignity and status. Having a father, that protects and educates you, and whose example you must obediently follow would be common and accepted knowledge to both groups. These similarities will present a suitable “bridge” or overlap of worldviews. We need not expand on that.

However, looking closer at the Johannine material, significant differences appear. The family in John is not an earthly family, but a heavenly family. Family membership is based on birth in the case with present day families, yet in John this is birth from God (1:12-13) through the Spirit (3:3,8). The Father, brothers and sisters are part of a spiritual family, although it is manifested on earth. The “workings” of this spiritual family is comparable with what the focus group people know in present day situations, but belonging to this spiritual family also implies significant differences on different levels.

A significant aspect would most probably relate to the implications of belonging to a second (spiritual) family that also lays claims to loyalty, obedience, etc. Which of the two (F)athers should be obeyed in the case of a conflict of opinions? Which family traditions should be followed and from which family should one take your identity? Who are your real brothers and sisters and how should you behave towards our earthly brothers and sisters if your choice of closer association falls on your spiritual brothers and sisters? Through questions like these the two worldviews overlap and challenges the participants to find the relevance of the text for their situation.

I have chosen this as an example, because in a way these questions were apparently also prevalent in John’s time. In John we find a constant choice for the spiritual family as primary society and point of orientation. Where earthly relations of families are mentioned in the Gospel they are portrayed in a negative light,⁶¹ which is significant. Although John does not argue that the believers are taken out of their earthly situations, he does argue that they should live in these situations like “children of God”. The acceptance of this situation lies with the choice of the believer. If he believes in the Son, he will become part of the spiritual eschatological family that includes all the implications of being part of such a family. That also implies a choice against the current status quo of the earthly family. In sociological terms it means accepting a new frame of social reference within a new worldview.

This brings us back to our hermeneutics of “contextual relevance”. Present day readers will feel familiar with the imagery of the group-orientated family. They will also understand perfectly what that implies in terms of loyalty, obedience, expectations, responsibility, etc. The contextual overlap will ensure this. But, and this is the big “but”, how could the Biblical material become relevant? A quick, but too easy an answer could be a direct application, namely, “Our (earthly) group is the family of God, and therefore everything said about them also applies to us”.⁶²

60 It should be noted that with the term “analogy” a certain function of the text is described. This textual function may occur in different types of literature, for instance, narratives, parables, metaphors, similes, etc. It makes it a valuable analytical tool, since all these types of literature may be used as “bridges” in the reading process. A story, or a comparison may serve as the literary framework within which the contextual overlap is facilitated.

61 Van der Watt (2000)

62 In a group-orientated society copying one’s leader is not only a real possibility, but a requirement, since supposedly all the good and positive qualities are embedded in your particular group.

However, the differences will prove this way of applying problematic. In seeking relevance the present day readers will be confronted with the same choice that the ancient Johannine community,⁶³ namely, “Which choice do I make?” They will clearly appreciate the implications and relevance of such a choice. The relevance of such a choice is indeed spelt out in John: they will be branches in the vine (15:1-8), one with the Father and the Son and with each other (17:20-23), should be recognised as followers of Jesus (13), etc. But what are the implications for their earthly families and their attitude towards them? This question should be sorted out in dialogue.

In this case the similarities opened up the possibilities of contextual overlapping, while the dissimilarities encouraged engagement and relevance.

As can be expected, the rest of the dialogue among the present day readers will differ – in parts quite significantly - from group to group.⁶⁴ Any dialogue implies circular movements – from the text to the reader and back to the text in order to clarify, adapt, make sure of the meaning and interpretation, etc. In seeking relevance, the reader could, for instance, refer the question back to the text, namely, “How should I behave towards my earthly family if I make this choice?” or “What are the implications for my interpersonal relations with non-Christians?” Questions like these will refer the reader back to the text in a circular (and hopefully a spiral) way in their effort to find the relevance of the text for them.⁶⁵ In this way contexts meet in a serious and authentic way, resulting in relevant and true dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Reading the Bible in the emerging world of African theology and properly accounting for cross-cultural differences that also determine academic activities still remains a challenge. In Africa the focus falls heavily on inculturation and contextualisation which forces exegesis to take cognisance of the reading community, their requirements, wishes and abilities. It must also be remembered that ‘biblical scholarship in Africa today is to some extent a child of these modern methods of Western biblical scholarship’.⁶⁶ Links with this type of scholarship should be treasured, which means that textual studies, also historical studies, should not be lost to the African reading community. The question is however how this could be facilitated. Using hermeneutics of contextual relevance is perhaps one such a way.

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63 Interestingly enough one can say that the author of John also used a technique that comes close to a hermeneutic of “contextual relevance” in this case.

64 This became apparent in the focus and other groups where reading was done.

65 In Africa the view is still widely accepted that the Bible is the authoritative and inspired word of God that speaks to our problems today. Contextual hermeneutics implies that this view is taken seriously, although one might not agree with it.

66 Ukpong (2000:11).

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