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"I shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?": Decolonial reflection on African biblical hermeneutics

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Abstract

"I shavha i sia muinga i yafhi?" (Running away from your own path, where are you heading?). This Tshivenda proverb highlights the need for people to affirm their own roots. On the basis of the wisdom of the preceding proverb, I will argue from a decolonial perspective that African biblical scholars have to take seriously their own African heritage, the complexity of their social location, show concern for the plight of the grassroots communities, and thus do justice to their contexts rather than relying heavily on Western paradigms. In so doing they will contribute towards shaping the face of biblical hermeneutics.

Key words

Hermeneutics; African biblical hermeneutics; ancestor veneration; Western hermeneutics; decolonisation; coloniality

1. Introduction

In 2013, the honourable president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, while addressing the African National Congress manifesto forum at Wits University and speaking on the subject of e-tolls on the Gauteng highways, stated, "We can't think like Africans, in Africa, generally."[1] These words were quickly contrasted with the famous speech of the former president

1 Jacob Zuma, "The African National Congress Manifesto Forum." University of the Witwatersrand, 21 October 13. Address at the ANC Manifesto Forum at Wits University, 21 October 2011. [Online]. Available: http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Zuma-Dont-think-like-Africans-in-Africa-20150429 [Accessed 12 August 2014].

Thabo Mbeki: "I am an African."[2] Mbeki's speech reflects our indebtedness and rootedness to Africa and its heritage, while Zuma's statement reflects the continual indebtedness of Africa to Euro-Western paradigms. Furthermore, Zuma's statements highlight the postcolonial conundrum in which the historically colonized have to adopt (or adapt to) in an attempt to overcome African inferiority in order to set Africa as an equal with the former colonizing countries; yet because the world system remains un-decolonised, Africa is still entangled in global coloniality.[3]

The post-apartheid era, with its demand for transformation, has also led to the resurgence of white South Africans claiming to be African. In a speech entitled "Europe in the World – A Perspective from Africa and South Africa," F W De Klerk stated,

> First I wish to talk about my own relationship with Europe as the descendant of one of the many peoples throughout the world that trace their roots to your continent. My ancestors were Huguenots from France who came to South Africa via Holland in 1688. My language, Afrikaans… My religion derives from the Dutch Reformed Testament of Dordt in 1619. My culture, like the cultures of so many peoples throughout the world, is suffused with the unparalleled literature, art and music of Europe.

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2 Thabo Mbeki, "I Am an African," speech delivered at the adoption of the Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill, 8 May 1996. [Online]. Available: http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4322.

3 "One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administration amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myths of a 'postcolonial' world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix.' With juridical-political decolonization we moved from a period of 'global colonialism' to the current period of 'global coloniality'" (Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 [2007]: 211-223, 219). Maldonado-Torres makes the following distinction between coloniality and colonialism: "Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration" (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 [2007]: 240-270, 243).

> And yet I am an African. For centuries my ancestors have identified themselves with Africa from the moment more than 300 years ago when Hendrik Biebouw, a Dutch settler in the Cape, proudly proclaimed, "Ek ben een Afrikander!" – I am an African! One hundred and fifteen years ago my people fought one of the first and greatest anti-colonialist wars in the history of Africa.[4]

The claim to be African by the descendants of the colonial settlers, inasmuch as it is correct on the virtue of a historical migration to Africa which was intertwined with imperialism and colonialism, serves to highlight the "colonial situation" that persists in the current post-colonial era. The assumption underlying De Klerk's speech is that his racial and cultural identity, which stems from Europe, is "unparalleled." Embedded in the colonial ideology was the sense of racial and cultural superiority on the part of the colonizers. Furthermore, De Klerk seems to forget that the self-proclaimed, self-granted status of being an African by a colonial settler is itself problematic, as it is rooted on the colonial system of power. The colonizers, with the ideology of discovery or "doctrine of discovery," automatically granted themselves land rights and therefore the self-proclamation "Ek ben een Afrikander!"[5] To claim to be African by a colonial settler was intertwined with the colonial expansion and the grab of foreign lands. The Anglo-Boer War, which De Klerk and others refer to as "one of the first and greatest anticolonialist wars in the history

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4 Frederick W. De Klerk, "Europe in the World – A Perspective from Africa and South Africa," 12th Europe Lecture, The Hague, 25 October 2013. [Online]. Available: http://www.givengain.com/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=2137&news_id=118600&cat_id=1594& [Accessed 18 November 2013].

5 The definition of "the doctrine of discovery" comes through in the United States Supreme Court statement in which the Johnson court stated: "The United States… [and] its civilized inhabitants now hold this country. They hold and assert in themselves, the title by which it was acquired. They maintain, as all others have maintained, that discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or by conquest; and gave also a right to such a degree of sovereignty, as the circumstances of the people would allow them to exercise…discovery gave title to the government by whose subjects, or by whose authority, it was made against all other European governments, which title might be consummated by possession" (as quoted by Robert J. Miller, "The Doctrine of Discovery" in *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies,* ed. Robert J. Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, and Tracey Lindberg [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 4).

of Africa," can be rightly referred to as a war within colonial expansion.[6] What emerged from this war was not a decolonised South Africa; instead, it was a unified-colonial-white state, the Union of South Africa, which intensified the oppression of the black masses; and it also became the last colonial state to be dismantled in Africa in 1994.

The presence of the colonialists' bodies in Africa – first as settlers and now as Africans – in part serves to ensure the continuity of the colonial situation even in the post-colonial era. In the field of Old Testament studies in the South African environment, this presence in one way or another serves as a channel to transmit Western-European paradigms within our context. The Western-European paradigms continue to be viewed as the models that we have to reduplicate in our (South) African environment. However, it should be noted that the colonial situation is able to continue and survive in the absence of colonial administration even wearing a black face.[7]

In this paper, I will use the African (South African) proverb from the Vhavenda people, "I shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?" (literally, "If you run away from your own path, where are you headed?") to reflect on African biblical hermeneutics. The wisdom underlying this proverb is that people should not abandon their own esteemed things and run after other people's things. This calls for African biblical scholars to reconfigure their hermeneutical practices in such a way that they draw more from their African epistemologies, philosophies and frameworks, rather than relying heavily on Euro-Western paradigms. If African biblical scholars take pride in their own path(s), their scholarship will be contextual and relevant to the African communities who have to benefit from such scholarship.

In 1992, with the winds of political change blowing in the South African context, Ferdinand Deist called upon South African Old Testament scholars to develop "an indigenous South African tradition of Old Testament scholarship."[8] As Deist observed at the time, South African Old Testament

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6 See also Herman Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: C Hurst & Co., 2003), xv.

7 I am indebted here to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 144-145.

8 Ferdinand Deist, "South African Old Testament Studies and the Future," Old Testament Essays 5 (1992): 311-31. This article was again published under the same title in Old

scholars, who were predominantly white, were merely duplicating the Euro-Western paradigms in Africa and in so doing were producing nothing typically South African. In 1993, le Roux observed that South African Old Testament scholarship was too focused on the study of the biblical text as an ancient text rather than on the contemporary concerns of the biblical readers. The reflections by Deist and le Roux point to the two pertinent issues that African biblical hermeneutics has to wrestle if it is to be an equal among other hermeneutical paradigms. Masenya and I recently reviewed articles published in *Old Testament Essays* and observed that there is still a lack of focus on the current context of the biblical readers.[9]

This article is structured as follows: The first section argues that hermeneutics is not a new art for the African mind, rather it is one which Africans have been interpreting the world as a text all along and therefore the call for the veneration of our African ancestors. The second section highlights the importance of a deliberate focus on Africa and Africans, which implies that African biblical hermeneuts have to be conscious of their social location, their epistemological location, and the concerns of the African people, especially so considering the history colonialism and the continuing structures of coloniality in our African social location.

2. Reading the African way(s) – "i shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?"

In a recent article on the subject of African biblical hermeneutics, which I co-authored with Masenya, we utilize the proverb "I shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?" as one lens to reflect on African biblical hermeneutics. The other lens that we used was the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the person of Jesus, from which we argued that the written *logos* as an analogue to the human *logos* also has to become incarnate, die, and resurrect in our African context. However, it is the former lens that I intend to polish again in this paper by highlighting other aspects which can be drawn from the wisdom underlying this proverb.

Testament Essays 7.4 (1994): 35–51.

9 Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Hulisani Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of South African Old Testament Scholarship? African Qoheleths' Review of OTE 1994-2010," Old Testament Essays 25, no. 3 (2012): 598-637.

Hermeneutics is an African art

The tendency for African biblical scholars to run after Euro-Western paradigms and reduplicate them in Africa can be overcome if we as Africans realize that hermeneutics is not a foreign art. However, the colonial mind-set, which still weighs heavily on us, makes us continue to undermine our knowledge systems even in the current post-colonial era. The Euro-Western paradigms are to a large extent still the standards through which we measure and value our scholarship. Hermeneutics is commonly regarded as a major contribution of the West to the theory and practice of interpreting texts.[10] In this view, a significant shift in the development of hermeneutics was brought about by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who is commonly regarded as "the father of modern hermeneutics." Since Schleiermacher, hermeneutics has evolved from classical hermeneutics theory through philosophical hermeneutics to critical hermeneutics. This domestication of hermeneutics as a Western product is a false construct, yet it is useful in understanding Western hermeneutical developments.

In these Western hermeneutical developments, the early approaches were centred on constructing rules, methods, and techniques for interpreting written texts.[11] The term hermeneutics itself was commonly associated with biblical exegesis or the art of interpreting Scripture. However, the scope of hermeneutics, under the influence of Western philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, and others has broadened the scope of the text. As Derrida frames it, "everything is a text."[12] In this view, any system – whether it be written texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, practices – is a "text." "They are texts because they may be 'read,' understood and interpreted in a manner that is similar to our reading/

10 Anshuman Prasad, "The Contest over Meaning: Hermeneutics as an Interpretive Methodology for Understanding Texts," *Organizational Research Methods 5,* no. 1 (2002): 12-33, 24.

11 Ibid., 12-33.

12 As Smith notes, "Textuality, for Derrida, is linked to interpretation. To claim that there is nothing outside the text is to say that everything is a text, which means not that everything is a book, or that we live within a giant, all-encompassing book, but rather that everything must be interpreted in order to be experienced" (James K. A. Smith, *Who is Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 39).

understanding/interpretation of written texts."[13] The realization that the art of interpretation cannot be limited to written texts, in turn, implies that this phenomenon has been with human beings ever since the beginning.

For African biblical scholars to meaningfully contribute to the art by developing indigenous ways of reading the biblical text, it is necessary to realize that hermeneutics is not a new phenomenon to the African mind-set. The reality in which the African being(s) lived and moved was, so to speak, a text. Africans all along have been reading, understanding, and interpreting their world as a text. Therefore, it is necessary for African biblical scholars to glean from the African forms of reading, understanding, and interpretation in their engagement with the biblical text. The proverb of our interrogation serves as a reminder that Africans all along have been carving their way(s) of reading, understanding, and interpreting reality as text. Even more pertinently, the proverb should be understood as a call for decolonization to take place through the consideration of Africa's colonial history, in which African knowledge systems of reading, epistemology, philosophies, and frameworks were ploughed under as master systems were forcefully imposed upon the Africans. Therefore, African biblical scholars should heed the call for an African Renaissance. Cloete writes:

> The encounters between Western cultural imperialism and the African culture renaissance are perhaps experienced most rigorously in South Africa. Here, through apartheid, colonialism was able to sustain itself longer than anywhere else in Africa. The dramatic political reversal of the past decade has now presented a very interesting situation. It has become a site for the fusion of horizons, the interaction of cultures and the dialogue of histories.[14]

The African Renaissance in biblical hermeneutics requires us to acknowledge that much of what is taken as African biblical hermeneutics in Africa is still overwhelmingly Western or European.[15] When African biblical scholars choose to follow Western or European hermeneutical frameworks in

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13 Prasad, "Contest over Meaning," 23.

14 G. Daan Cloete, "Rainbow Hermeneutics and St Paul's Letter to the Galatians." In *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture – Past and Present,* ed. John M. Court (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 272.

15 See Masenya and Ramantswana, "Anything New," 598-637.

Africa, such hermeneutics is not African; rather, it is Western or European hermeneutics duplicated in Africa. This situation can only be overcome if African biblical scholars start paying attention to African epistemological and philosophical framework(s).

Hermeneutics calls for African ancestor veneration

The proverb of our interrogation calls for African biblical scholars to realize that their ancestors had been carving their way(s) of reading, understanding, and interpreting the text/reality ever since the beginning. Under the rhetoric of colonialism and coloniality, pre-colonial Africa is often regarded as without writing; this despite the open knowledge of ancient Egyptian civilization and the development of writing in other kingdoms as well. As Fyle notes, "It was unthinkable that one of the earliest and most elaborate civilizations in the world with its own system of writing could have been developed by Africans."[16] Other kingdoms and cultures only later came under colonial influence; however, hermeneutical treasures were transmitted through rituals, stories, sayings, songs, proverbs, and adages, among other ways, and yes, even through writings. Under Euro-Western designs of "hierarchization" of race and knowledge, as Grosfoguel notes,

> We went from the sixteenth century characterization of "people without writing" to the eighteenth and nineteenth century characterization of "people without history," to the twentieth century characterization of "people without development" and more recently, to the early twenty-first century of "people without democracy."[17]

The hierarchical designs of the world privileged the Western ancestors and continued to venerate the Western ancestors through Westernized institutions, while undermining, "inferiorizing", and destroying the African ancestors and their veneration—our patriarchs and matriarchs, and their institutions. Dussel notes that the Western myth of neutrality, objectivity, and universality goes back to the imperial dictum *conquiro, ergo sum* (I

16 C. Magbaily Fyle, "Introduction to the History of African Civilization: Precolonial Africa," Vol. 1 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 3-4.

17 Grosfoguel, "Epistemic Decolonial Turn," 214.

conquer, therefore I am), which laid the foundation for Descartes's dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am).[18] This resulted in the Western tendency to assume a god-eye view and a claim of universality of knowledge produced by the West. This, as Grosfoguel argues, has resulted in what he calls "Westernized university," which privileges knowledge produced by men from five countries: Italy, France, England, Germany, and the United States.[19] Grosfoguel further argues that the theories developed on the basis of the "experience of men of five countries constitute the foundation of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in the Westernized universities today."[20]

Another side of this epistemic privilege is epistemic inferiority. Epistemic privilege and epistemic inferiority are two sides of the same coin. The coin is called epistemic racism/sexism."[21]Such epistemic privileging of Western biblical hermeneutics is displayed by Lombaard in his article "The Relevance of Old Testament Science in/for Africa: Two False Pieties and Focused Scholarship," in which he argues that biblical studies would be best served through exegesis with the text, theology, languages, history, cultural background, and related matters as the focus.[22] For Lombaard, the call for Africanizing or contextualization or relevance is false piety, as there is nothing uniquely African in those studies that claim to be African. Underlying Lombaard's argument is the pretence that the inherited Western biblical hermeneutics is sufficient to address all the realities in the different contexts:

Our job in the Westernized university is basically reduced to that of learning these theories born from the experience and problems of a particular region of the world (five countries in Western Europe) with its own particular time/space dimension and "applying" them to other geographical locations even if the experience and time/space of the former are quite different from

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18 Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas* (New York: Continuum, 1985).

19 Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge 11,* no. 1 (2013): 74.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 74-75.

22 Christo Lombaard, "The Relevance of Old Testament Science in/for Africa: Two False Pieties and Focused Scholarship," *Old Testament Essays 19,* no. 1 (2006): 144-155.

the latter. These social theories based on the social-historical experience of western men of five countries constitute the foundation of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in the Westernized universities today as stated above.

African biblical hermeneutics provides the platform for African biblical scholars to venerate their ancestors by taking up the hermeneutical treasures inherent in their indigenous knowledge systems. Ramose also reminds us not to continually depend on Western terminology, but to start utilizing our own indigenous imageries.[23] In so doing, we connect with the ancestors and the heritage left for us. For African biblical scholars to contribute meaningfully to the global reflections on the biblical text, it is not necessary for them to abandon their path—progress comes as we seek African solutions and models for reading the text. The recent example in the economic field is Kenya's concept of *M-pesa* (*M* standing for mobile and *pesa* is a Swahili word for money), which is a mobile money transfer system that allows one to send and receive money and make payments through a mobile phone. *M-pesa* is becoming a player in the global economy, and as a result, an African term is being transformed into an economic term. The idea of *M-pesa* originated as means of addressing a local challenge of using cash and cards which is a further advancement in the mobile banking platform.

The Bible itself serves as a form of ancestor veneration. Inasmuch as it is a book of faith, it venerates the voices of the ancestors, such as those of the Torah (associated with Moses), the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi), the psalms (associated with David), wisdom (associated with Solomon), the gospel writers (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), and the letters (associated with Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude), and in their voices we also hear the voice of the chief ancestor, the saviour ancestor, Jesus Christ. The Bible comes to us as the other into our African context, but not to nullify the voices of our ancestors.

23 Mogobe B. Ramose, "African Renaissance: A Northbound Gaze," *Politeia* 19, no. 3 (2000): 47-63.

It cannot be that in our current context the Bible be utilized to silence our ancestors' voices as it did during the colonial era. It is also noteworthy that the Bible within its pages venerates the African ancestors. Inasmuch as it comes as the Other into our African context, it is itself a product of the sons and daughters from Africa, as the book itself testifies: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1; cf. Exod 4:22-23).[24] This constitutive event of the Israelite nation is one which was re-enacted in the life of Jesus Christ, who is the *logos* (Mt 2:15). The re-enactment through the human *logos* was, however, preceded by another significant moment in which out of Africa came the Septuagint (LXX), which was translated in Egypt. Post the human *logos,* during the second century, Africa again delivered to the world the Old Latin version, which originated in North Africa. The presence of the written *logos* in Africa on a much more grand scale than in the earlier deliveries calls for such a re-enactment yet again—out of Africa, the written *logos* has to go to the world. This calls for Africa to contribute meaningfully by delivering to the world a life-giving *logos* that transforms the grassroots communities. Africa is the ancestral hub of the Bible out of which it came to be transformed into Greek and Latin. It is out of Africa that the written *logos* started speaking in other languages. The current context, unlike the previous contexts in which the Northern African pocket contributed, Africa has the potential to contribute on a grand scale from all its four corners: north, west, east, and south. This potential is there particularly considering the claims that the centre of Christianity has moved to the global South.[25] This move in Christianity has to be accompanied by the necessary hermeneutical foundations from within the African context.

One way among many

The proverb of our interrogation also serves as a reminder that there are many ways of reading. African biblical hermeneutics is one way of reading among many other ways of reading, be they readings from the West, the

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24 Adamo's works remind us of the significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible, see for example David T. Adamo, *Africa and African in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006); *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001); "Africa and Africans in the Old Testament Scheme of Salvation," *Theologia Viatorum* 35, no. 1 (2011): 137-166.

25 Elijah JF Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

East, or the North. This fact calls for acknowledgement on the one hand of other ways of reading and on the other for self-assertion. In learning from the other, engagement and dialogue are opened up. As the Ganda proverb has it, "*Atannayita: y'atenda nnyina obufumbi (=okufumba)*" (The person who has never travelled widely thinks his mother is the only cook [= the best cook]). This proverb highlights the fact that we can learn from others; however, learning from others does not mean that once we have tasted others' food we have to abandon our mother's. The traveller still goes back home and continually eats from the mother's dish. Another Tshivenda proverb comes to mind here: "Nwana wa mbevha ha hangwi mukwita" (A rat's baby does not forget its path), meaning that one always finds a way back home. However, it should be noted that under the dictates of coloniality with the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge, African biblical hermeneutics as an art of reading that is produced from a non-Western perspective has to wrestle with the inferiority complex imposed on it. It is no wonder that biblical hermeneutics such as African biblical hermeneutics, Asian biblical hermeneutics, Hispanic American biblical interpretation, and *mujerista* biblical interpretation are commonly classified as "contextual approaches,"[26] which further fuels the myth of Western hermeneutics as universal.[27]

The classification of certain approaches as "contextual" sets those approaches apart as "inferior," as they are not considered as forming part of the canon of thought. Thus, the burden lies in the Africanized university to transcend the notion of inferiority by seeking hermeneutical justice by taking Africa and the concerns of African people as the preferential

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26 See for example John H. Hayes (ed.) *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 297-340.

27 Grosfoguel warns us against "epistemological racism" that is "intrinsic to a Western 'abstract universalism' which conceals who speaks and from where they speak" (Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripherial Cultural Production fo the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 3 [2012]: 87-104, 95-96). This epistemic racism as Grosfoguel notes, "operates through the privileging of an essentialist (identity) politics of 'Western' male elites, that is, the hegemonic tradition of thought of Western philosophy and social theory that almost never includes 'Western' Women and never includes 'non-Western' philosophers/philosophies and social scientist" (Ramón Grosfoguel, "Epistemic Islamophobia and Colonial Social Sciences," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 8, no. 2 [2010]: 29-38, 29).

option of our hermeneutics. From a decolonial perspective, Maldonado-Torres speaks about "decolonial justice," which he describes as justice that "opposes the preferential option for the imperial Man by the preferential option of the *damné* or condemned of the earth."[28] The decolonial preference in this regard sets out to confront the power structures of coloniality – racial, gender, sexual, economic, geographical, political, and epistemological hierarchies set up by Euro-Western colonialism and modernity. The insistence on the confrontation should not be reduced to simply a matter of African biblical hermeneutics defining itself against Western hermeneutics; rather, it is to take seriously such historical and structural patterns of modernity as imperialism, colonialism, coloniality, and global coloniality, which are part of the backdrop that gave rise to the African biblical hermeneutics.

A deliberate focus on Africa and Africans

The proverb of our interrogation not only serves as a call for biblical scholars to read using our African optic lense(s), what Ukpong calls reading the Bible "with African eyes,"[29] but to read with the concerns for the African peoples at heart. Ukpong in his address to the New Testament Society in 2001 argued that contextual approaches present a new revolution to biblical interpretation. In this new revolution, there is a deliberate shift of focus from the context of the text to the context of the readers. African readings have to be contextual due primarily to "historical and ideological" reasons: the coming of the Bible to Africa meant the denigration of African culture and African peoples, and such callous practices as colonialism, apartheid, and the slave trade were done in the name of the Bible. The transparency of the reading subject and the geopolitics of the world in which he/she finds himself/herself challenges the traditional hermeneutical distinction between the Bible as a source and our situation to which the Bible is applied as inadequate and even misleading. The deliberate focus on the reading subject and his/her world imply that reading becomes a two-way process in which the text is read in terms of our experiences and our experiences are read in terms of the text.

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28 Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," 260.

29 Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3-14.

The proverb of our interrogation, "I shavha i sia muinga i ya fhi?" should also serve to highlight the need for African biblical scholars to be fully conscious of their social location, their epistemological location, and the concerns of the African people:

Social location

The wisdom underlying our proverb reminds us that we are socially located readers. To be an African is to belong to a place. Africa is our social location. Thus, as African biblical scholars, we are positioned readers, flesh-and-blood persons reading and interpreting from different and highly complex social locations.[30] As socially located readers, we engage with the biblical text from Africa in its complexity. We are not neutral and disinterested readers of the text; rather, we are compelled to read the text with the interests and concerns of the African people(s) at heart. As Gadamer also reminds us: "The interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all."[31]

The idea of social location, as important as it is, does not necessarily address all the underlying hermeneutical issues. This is especially important because the forces of coloniality are operative in Africa as our social location, as Maldonado-Torres notes:

> Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.[32]

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30 Fernando F. Segovia, "And They Began to Speak in Tongues," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States,* vol. 1, ed. Fernando F Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 31.

31 Hans-Georg, Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weissheimer and Donald G Marshall (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 324.

32 Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," 243.

Being socially located in Africa does not necessarily imply producing alternative knowledge or an alternative hermeneutic practice. Deist, reflecting in 1992 on the state of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa and its future, observed that South African Old Testament scholars were making frequent visits to Europe (Kampen, Basel, Groningen, Leiden, Göttingen, Tübingen, Münster, Bonn, Marburg, Cambridge, Oxford, and London), and later to the United States; up to the 1950s they were following the lead of Amsterdam and Princeton and have since been following every move of scholars in Europe and the United States; from the late sixties they were following the hermeneutical approaches and scrutinising the philosophical and hermeneutical assumptions of the West; they pride their society for having been addressed by international scholars such as Th C Vriezen (Utrecht), G Fohrer (Erlangen), J Bright (Richmond), A Malamat (Jerusalem), J Barr (Manchester) and A S Herbert (Birmingham), and for having eighteen honorary international members in the society.[33] Following these observations, Deist wrote: "It is therefore not surprising that the present South African scene of Old Testament studies does not look very different from that in Europe or the USA… We have in the meantime all but duplicated European and American academic environments here."[34] For Deist, Old Testament scholars were continuing to measure their scholarship against the standard of European and American scholarship, and as a result, they had failed to produce anything typically South African.[35] Deist pointedly expressed his frustrations when he wrote:

> I must confess that I am sometimes irritated by a certain colonial inferiority complex that still haunts our academic work. This complex is best illustrated by a tendency in our work to accept and follow without due critical assessment every "latest trend" from abroad as gospel for biblical interpretation. We are so busy "keeping up with the Joneses" that we not consciously ask ourselves whether what we are importing has any relevance whatsoever for our own questions, and whether what we are accepting as valid can indeed be viewed as such from our cultural perspective. Our inferiority

33 Deist, "South African Old Testament Studies," 311-331.

34 Ibid., 313-314.

35 Ibid., 314, 315.

> complex makes it important for us to be "one up" on our colleagues at the next congress. So we feverishly ride our individually imported hobby horses and memorise the latest jaw-breakers of *our* theory of biblical interpretation … only to lose sight of our continent and the contribution we can make from its perspective.[36]

Twenty years later, Masenya and I, reflecting on the state of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa concluded:

> The nature and pattern of OT studies since the inception of Theology/OT in Stellenbosch some 152 years ago seems, to the African Qoheleths, to remain unchanged. From the perspective of the African Qoheleths, Deist's call to abandon the Eurocentric station has not been heeded; rather Le Roux's call to pursue the historical critical trajectory appears to have captured the hearts of SA OT scholars. We, SA OT scholars, in choosing to remain at the Eurocentric station, do not simply alienate ourselves from our African-South African contexts, but we end up attempting to enforce Western paradigms on our context.[37]

The decolonial option, which in my view is and should be part and parcel of the task of African biblical hermeneutics, should wake us up from the slumber of assuming that reading from this place (Africa) necessarily implies producing alternative knowledge. Reading from Africa while thinking within the Euro-Western systems in our scholarship is simply to continue within the colonial matrix of power. As Grosfoguel points out, "the success of modern/colonial world-system consists in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions."[38]

It is, therefore, necessary both to interrogate the epistemological perspective through which the text is read and to ask whose interests are served through such reading, especially considering the continuity of the relationship between the West and the others, which is one of colonial domination.[39]

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36 Ibid., 315-316.

37 Masenya and Ramantswana, "Anything New Under the Sun," 634.

38 Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn," 213.

39 Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 168-178, 169.

Epistemic location

It should be noted, however, that it is not sufficient to only speak of "social location," especially considering the continuity of the patterns that derive from colonialism which continue to undermine the African forms of knowledge. Quijano rightly notes that the "colonization of the imagination of the dominated" was particularly

> over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural. These beliefs and images served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but also a very efficient means of social and cultural control, when the immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic.[40]

The colonialists, as Smith notes, supposed that those they colonized could not use their minds or intellects, could not invent things, could not create institutions or history, could not produce anything of value, did not know how to use land and other natural resources, and could not practice the "arts" of civilization.[41] The colonialists did not simply undermine the intellect or the mind of the indigenous people; they also aimed to convert the indigenous people through their institutions (churches, academic institutions, and governing structures) by imposing their religion, culture, political paradigms, economic paradigms, and knowledge into the indigenous minds. Therefore, given this historical context of imperialism, colonialism, and modernity, it is necessary to enquire about the epistemic location of knowledge of the biblical reader/interpreter in our African context. It cannot be assumed that to be black in Africa automatically equates to being African epistemologically, nor does to be white African equate to being African epistemologically. The situation of white (South) Africans, the "colonial remnants," is worsened by their inseparability from

40 Ibid., 169.

41 Linda T Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 25.

colonial-apartheid domination. The colonial remnants, as Snyman points out, have to reconstruct their identity considering their loss of prevalence.[42] Snyman therefore suggests the hermeneutics of vulnerability, which focuses on the ethics of reading by insisting that the interpreter of the Bible should be responsible for the consequences of his particular interpretation. By focusing on the consequences, Snyman focuses on the end results of knowledge production. Knowledge production does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it stems from a particular location in the world system.

Epistemic location of knowledge, as Grosfoguel argues, has to do with the location of knowledge in the colonial knowledge structure or geopolitics of knowledge—the hegemonic and the oppressed/subaltern sides.[43] Thus, it is necessary to differentiate between knowledge that is located on the hegemonic side and epistemic thinking that is located on the subaltern side in the colonial knowledge structures. Our social location in the subaltern region in the colonial power structure or geopolitical structure does not necessarily imply that knowledge produced from the subaltern location is automatically subaltern epistemic knowledge. As already noted above, in the South African context, Old Testament scholarship has to a large extent been producing or reproducing hegemonic epistemic knowledge in a subaltern location.

Epistemic location as a heuristic device in African biblical hermeneutics necessitates the following: epistemic delinking, epistemic disobedience, and epistemic situatedness.

First, African biblical scholars have to engage in what Mignolo refers to as *epistemic delinking:* "a delinking from the web of imperial/modern knowledge and from the colonial matrix of power."[44] The delinking process denounces the Eurocentric tendency with its pretence of "universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), and located in a specific part of the

42 Gerrie Snyman, "Empire and a Hermeneutics of Vulnerability," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37 (2011): 1-20; "'n Etiek van Bybellees en 'n hermeneutiek van weerloosheid," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 45, no. 2 (2011): 259-282.

43 Grosfoguel, "Epistemic Decolonial Turn," 213.

44 See Walter D Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 449-514; "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2009 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159-181.

planet (geo-politics)."[45] The delinking process is the initial step and not the final step. In the context of biblical interpretation, delinking is a deliberate attempt to think from outside the Euro-Western canon. African biblical scholars without delinking themselves run the risk of continuing the trend of reduplicating Euro-Western hermeneutical practices in our African context.

The delinking process, however, does not, in turn, imply that African biblical scholars cannot learn and draw from Western biblical scholars. African biblical scholars can learn and draw from the West; however, they must do so not out of an inferiority complex or in an attempt to remain within the Western canon of thought to appease the West. If the learning and drawing from the West result in us "running away from our own path," we continue to reproduce the forces of coloniality in the absence of an external colonial force.

Second, *epistemic disobedience* refers to the unwillingness to conform to the colonial dictates of knowledge production.[46] As Walsh notes, "Coloniality and the geopolitics of knowledge have worked to enable modernity as the 'civilization' project of the West, a project that has systematically worked to subordinate and negate 'other' frames, 'other' knowledges, and 'other' subjects and thinkers."[47] Epistemic disobedience is the refusal to play the game under the same rules and conditions of modernity. This is a refusal to fall into the Western trap or trap of modernity. As Mignolo notes:

> To fall into the trap of the rhetoric of modernity is to finally believe that you *either have to have modernity, you have to be modern or you fall out of history.* And Western science is one of the measuring sticks and desirable goals. Science in other words, is not only a necessity and a wonderful space of human creativity, but above all is a commodity desired by those who feel left out of or behind by "modernity".[48]

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45 Mignolo, "Delinking," 449-514.

46 I am indebted here to Mignolo for the concept of *epistemic disobedience.* See Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience," 159-181.

47 Catherine Walsh, "Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 224-239, 234.

48 Walter D Mignolo, "Prophets Facing Sidewise: The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge and Culture and*

African biblical scholars have to "rethink biblical hermeneutics from within," this considering the Eurocentric narratives that continue to orient most of our university programs.

Third, *epistemic situatedness* refers to the situatedness of all knowledge production. As Castro-Gómez reminds us, Cartesian philosophy assumed a "point zero" or "zero point" epistemology from which an observer has a "god-eye view."[49] From the "zero point" the observer has no point of view, yet claims to have a point of view that is superior to other points of view. From this superior "zero point" epistemology emerged the colonial structure of knowledge brought about by the Western monopolization, which established the West as the source of and authority over knowledge. This, in turn, gave rise to the claim of the Western intellectual mind able to produce universal knowledge which applies to everyone everywhere. For Castro-Gómez, we, unfortunately, continue to live where the epistemological hierarchies created by modern colonialism have not disappeared, but are being reorganized under postmodern coloniality.[50]

There is a need to recognize and value epistemological plurality in our world system and disciplines rather than to attempt to silence other epistemological perspectives.[51] African biblical hermeneutics is an epistemological perspective through which the biblical text is approached, yet it is not the sole perspective—it is one amongst equals. This calls for African biblical scholars to privilege their own African epistemic perspective(s) rather than to continue to run after the Euro-Western epistemic perspectives and to reproduce Western readings in our context. African biblical hermeneutics has to be viewed as an African-minded reading of the biblical text by allowing experiences, culture, and knowledge systems to influence our reading of the text.

Policy 19, no. 1 (2006): 111-127, 121. Emphasis in original.

49 Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La Hybris del Punto Cero. Ciencia, Raza e ILustración en la Nueva Granada, 1750-1816* (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Javeriana, 2005).

50 Santiago Castro-Gómez, "The Missing Chapter of the Empire: Postmodern Reorganization of Coloniality and Post-Fordist Capitalism," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 428-448.

51 Ibid., 428.

There is, however, a tendency amongst African biblical scholars to admit to the necessity of reading from this place, yet again to revert to thinking "within" Western hermeneutics by reducing African biblical interpretation to simply a matter of contextualizing of the biblical text or application of the text to our African context. The task of African biblical interpretation is often reduced to that of decoding the biblical truths and applying them to our African contexts rather than understanding the biblical text as influenced by our own epistemological location, which would enable African biblical scholars to become producers of knowledge in their own right.

The concerns of the African people(s)

African biblical hermeneutics has a preference for the *wretched of the earth* in its location. Thus, African biblical hermeneutics, like Black Theology, is concerned with the plight of the poor, oppressed, and suffering. In the colonial-apartheid era, this was particularly situated in the black experience. It was the black experience that provided black theologians with the framework of reading the biblical text.[52] This framework remains relevant even in our current post-colonial, post-apartheid situation in which life-denying realities continue to stare us in the face: poverty, landlessness, diseases, abuse, racism, xenophobia, tribal wars, genocide, and political and economic domination not only at the national level but also at the global level. As Tutu reminds us, "Liberation theologians have too much evidence that the removal of one oppressor often means replacement by another; yesterday's victim quite rapidly becomes today's dictator. Liberation theologians know only too well the recalcitrance of human nature and so accept the traditional doctrine of the fall and original sin, but they also know that God has provided a remedy in Jesus Christ."[53]

The late Gunther H. Wittenberg emphasized the need for biblical scholars to read with ordinary people in the grassroots communities.[54] The reading

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52 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Kampen: JH Kok, 1976), 16.

53 Desmond Tutu, "The Theology of Liberation in Africa." In *African Theology en route*, ed. K Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 162-68.

54 Gunther H Wittenberg, *I Have Heard the Cry of My People: A Study Guide to Exodus 1-15* (Bible in Context 1; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991); *Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy* (Bible in Context 2; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

from below is further championed by Gerald West. It is a deliberate attempt to read with ordinary people and to place their concerns front and centre in the reading process. For West, it is in this process of reading that the biblical scholar is to be born from below.[55] For Wittenberg and West, the biblical scholar takes as his/her primary interlocutors the poor, the working class, and the marginalized. In the same vein with Wittenberg, West, and others, Musa W Dube became dissatisfied with the historical-critical readings of the Bible for their failure to address challenges of the modern readers. [56] For Dube, it is the social setting of the ordinary, which the biblical hermeneuts should engage – the social setting of HIV/AIDS, sicknesses, fear and discrimination, etc.[57] Thus, for Dube the aim of biblical interpretation is not to get to the single meaning of the text; rather the biblical texts generate multiple meanings depending on the issues that the hermeneut may want to address.[58] Dube also noted that "If all reading is socially conditioned, academic interpretations may be no 'better' than the readings of the untrained readers"[59] For Dube, the task of a biblical hermeneut should involve on the one hand a "reading with" the ordinary readers of the Bible, and on the other, a "reading from" the ordinary readers of the Bible.[60] The reading with and the reading from the ordinary African people is not simply a matter of identifying with them and their situation, it is also to acknowledge them and their lived experiences as source of knowledge and wisdom. This further implies appropriating the African provers, songs, folktales in our reading of the Bible as a way of resisting

55 Gerald O West, "Some Parameters of the Hermeneutic Debate in the South African Context," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 80 (1992): 3-11; "The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship," *Old Testament Essay* 19/1 (2006): 307-33; see also Gerald O. West (ed.), Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities (Atlanta: SBL, 2007).

56 Musa W Dube, "Current Issues in Biblical Interpretation." In *Theological Education in Contemporary Africa* (Grant LeMarquand and Joseph D. Galgalo, eds.; Eldoref/ Nairobi: Zapf, 2004), 50.

57 Musa W Dube, "Little Girl, Get Up: An Introduction." In *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W Dube; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 3-24.

58 Dube, "Current Issues in Biblical Interpretation," 50.

59 Ibid.

60 Musa W Dube, "An Introduction: How We Came to "Read With", *Semeia* 73 (1996): 111-129.

"the colonizing use of the Bible and seeks liberation by reading the Bible with, and not above, other world cultures."[61]

Dube along with Jeremy Punt have also championed postcolonial reading of the Bible in the African context. Dube's postcolonial works embed within them feminist agenda.[62] For Punt post-colonial biblical interpretation "include and gives voice to the voiceless, the muted voices of the colonised, the marginalised, and the oppressed. Postcolonial investigations of disproportionate power relationships at geo-political as well as subsidiary levels, and at social and personal levels of the powerful ruler and the subaltern, remain un(der)utilized".[63] This calls African biblical hermeneuts to pay attention the previously silenced voices of our ancestors and activating those voices in our reading of the biblical texts. This, as already argued, requires epistemic disobedience – the refusal to continue to be muted, undermined, and marginalized.

Finally, the scope of African biblical hermeneutics should be broad if it is to contribute to the enhancement of the prophetic voice in Africa. The Old Testament is a prophetic book through and through – the Torah is associated with Moses, Israel's prophet *par excellence,* while the rest of the books are also prophetic. The voices of African biblical scholars need not only speak against, but also to speak with, and to speak for as they seek to engage at all levels of our society. African biblical hermeneutics needs to activate the prophetic voice of "The Lord says" at all levels of our African societies.

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61 Musa W Dube, "Post-Colonial Biblical Interpretation." In *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation,* Vol. 2 (ed. John H. Hayes; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 299-303.

62 Musa W Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

63 Jeremy Punt, "Conversations in Africa: Postcolonial and Marxist Hermeneutics, and a Psychoanalytical Fulcrum?" In *Psychoanalytical Mediations between Marxist and Postcolonial Readings of the Bible* (ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew and Erin Runions; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 19. See also Jeremy Punt, "Empire as Material Setting and Heuristic Grid for New Testament Interpretation: Comments on the Value of Postcolonial Criticism" *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66/1 (2010), Art. #330, 7 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v66i1.330.

3. Conclusion

The way forward for African biblical hermeneutics is to remain loyal to the African path and to the African people. This, however, does not mean that African biblical scholars cannot and should not learn from others, nor does this imply a blind dismissal of the gains that have been made through the ages in hermeneutics in our global village. As le Roux reminds us, the West has contributed immensely to the way that we read the biblical text.[64] However, the future for African biblical hermeneutics is not in the adaptation (or adoption) of Western paradigms in Africa; rather, the future is in Africans digging deep into their African heritage to develop indigenous ways of reading and to develop new ways of reading in a context in which we realize that our way(s) of reading are not the only way(s) of reading. The scientific study of the Bible or the critical nature of reading the Biblical text cannot simply remain behind the text or in the text without coming in front of the text. We read from this place, Africa, through our African lenses, and so effectively read with the concerns of the African people at heart.

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64 Jurie le Roux, "Africa and the Future of Our Scholarly Past," Pages 307-323. In *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest for Meaning,* ed. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

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