Did someone say 'history'?
In Africa we say 'His story'!
A study in African Biblical hermeneutics with reference to the book of Daniel

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to make a contribution related to the issue of what constitutes an African approach to the biblical text. While considering previous contributions in this respect it wants to draw attention to the promises hold by an epistemic framework that manifests among others in myths and oral tradition. From these an outline can be established to serve on the one hand as criterion for an approach claiming to be African, and on the other hand to be utilised in synthesising 'traditional' and 'modern' modes of understanding. In this article attention is limited to the first aspect when a contribution to a recent commentary is evaluated against this criterion. It is indicated that the contribution fails to exhibit an African approach because it is informed by an outdated form of modern (Western) epistemology. A further suggestion that this article makes is that when it comes to a practical application of what is proposed here only in theory, a literary approach to the text seems to be a more fruitful point of departure than a historical approach.

A   INTRODUCTION

The notion of an authentic African approach to the interpretation of the Bible has been much debated in recent years. Questions have ranged from who may partake in such an endeavour (cf. *inter alia* Masenya 2002a, 2002b; Snyman 2002, 2003a; Mugambe 2003), to whether such an exercise is not ultimately impossible (Lombaard 2006a:149-151). Other contributions to the debate, when scrutinised, exhibit a certain ambiguity. A good example in this regard is the contribution by Habtu (2006) in the *Africa Bible Commentary* (*ABC*) where he (2006:572) laments the fact that 'some biblical scholars' discard the prologue to the book of Job due to its mythological character. Such a view, he claims, 'reflect[s] a world view fostered by the European Enlightenment, with its insistence on erecting a wall between the empirical world and the spiritual world'. He is much more comfortable within an African world view that allows for 'traffic between the world of humanity and the spiritual world'. This is a valid point, but, when it comes to dealing with the text itself, it seems as if Habtu misuses the notion of an African world view to fall back on an older or at least alternative form of Western thought. In his discussion he erroneously

equates an older, realistic style of Western thought to mythical African thought patterns. The present article investigates the promises held by the latter, while at the same time critiquing dubious contributions parading as African.

The title of the much debated book by Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa. How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (1996), in a peculiar way has a bearing on the argument presented here. In this book the author contests the Afrocentric notion that much of Ancient Greek culture and philosophy, which form by and large the foundation of modern (Western) society, was in fact stolen from Africa (Egypt) by the Greeks. In the present article it is suggested that the work done by some scholars under the 'Africa' banner, in fact betrays an authentic African legacy in favour of a Eurocentric approach.

In order to achieve this goal, we shall consider first of all what constitutes an authentic African legacy. In the following section this will be done by reflecting extensively on the richness provided by cultural goods in the form of myths and stories from the African continent. From this discussion it will become clear that the notion of (oral) history and its understanding in the African context also have to be addressed. This is done in a subsequent section, followed by an evaluation of the way in which the authentic African ideas that were described are represented, or not, in one of the contributions to a recent Bible commentary. The study is concluded by suggesting how a literary approach to the biblical text may provide the bridge to link authentic African and so-called Western lines of interpretation.

B   STORIES OUT OF AFRICA

In his masterful work on the book of Genesis, Claus Westermann (1992:4) reminds the reader that in some way all religions are concerned with a primeval event. This dictum could be extended by replacing the word 'religions' with 'cultures'. Many, if not all, cultures are concerned with the origin of the physical reality people are confronted by from the moment of birth. Answers to questions such as: 'Where does it all come from?' or, 'Why are we part of this?' abound among peoples from all over the world. In many of these myths the attention falls especially on the origins of humankind, much the same as is the case with the older of the two biblical creation stories (Genesis 2:4b-25).

Focusing the attention on an African context we find similar evidence of the rich imaginative powers of human beings. Hence we learn from the Nguni peoples in Southern Africa that humans were created from water plants. In a large, aptly named swamp 'to the North', called *Uhlanga*, there grew many types of reeds. One morning the sky-god, *Umvelinqangi*, descended from heaven and married *Uhlanga*. He also broke off pairs of reeds and formed them into people (cf. Knappert 1977:37). Towards the west of where the Zulu live, among the Xhosa people, this myth was altered somewhat. Since the Xhosa

word *Umhlanga* may also refer to a cave, it is told that humans and animals came into this world through a cave (Belcher 2005:244).

Among the Shona people in Zimbabwe a god known among other names as *Mwari* created the world and filled it with humans, animals and plants. Although it is deduced that he has a very remote existence, his power is still seen in the procreation of all the things he created. For their daily business humans can call on the Great Spirit, *Chaminuka*, who taught the people among other things to be self-sufficient as regards their food and drink, as well as the art of blacksmith (Belcher 2005:239-240).

From the Igbo people in West Africa comes the story of *Eri*, who descended from heaven after *Chukwu* created all things. The familiar themes of water, the need for food, founding communities, divine / human contact, as well as fixing calendar patterns (e.g. four / five day weeks in the case of myths from West Africa) are also found here (Belcher 2005:287-288).[1] A slightly different version of this myth is extant among the Yoruba people in Nigeria. In this case assistance from the animal kingdom is brought in to help make the marshy land dry. This happened prior to humans being sent from heaven, where they were created, to inhabit the new world. In Benin evidence was found of twin gods, *Mawu-Lisa*, who became the parents of seven pairs of gods, each of whom was given a specific domain and function in the worldly realm (Parrinder 1982:21-23).

These myths of origin in African societies not only focus on the beginning of life, but may also explain the origin of death. This suggests that death is not seen as something 'natural', but rather as a result of some error that usually gets blamed on a creature from the animal kingdom, like the dog or chameleon (Parrinder 1982:56). A story from the Kono in Sierra Leone tells that the dog was entrusted by the Supreme Being to deliver to the humans a batch of new skins that would ensure their eternal living. However, on his way a snake snatched these skins and henceforth humans suffered the fate of death. According to the Nuba from Sudan, when the first man died God gave people the assurance that he was only asleep – so they kept the body in the hope that the next day it will wake up. A hare came along and told the people to rather bury the body as to not anger God. This action had the opposite effect because when God learned about what the humans had done, he became very angry and declared that in future people would die and not return (Parrinder 1982:56-57).

Another myth from Sierra Leone, recorded among the Mende people, has two messengers, a dog and a toad, sent by the Supreme Being to the human race. The dog carried the message that they would not die, whereas the toad had to

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[1]   Cf. Belcher's (2005) anthology for summaries of a large number of myths of origin from the African continent.

deliver a less favourable message. The dog stopped on the way for some food, which meant that the toad arrived first at the town and delivered his short message: 'Death has come.' Immediately thereafter the dog arrived and bellowed: 'Life has come!', but as all know, he was too late (Parrinder 1982:57). What is interesting about this myth is its connection with a similar myth among the Zulu in Southern Africa. In this instance the Creator decided that humans should live for ever. He called the chameleon to convey this decision to humankind. But, when God saw how the people multiplied, he had second thoughts and called upon the lizard to convey to the humans that they would die after all. The lizard moves much quicker than the chameleon and the rest, as they say, is history (Belcher 2005:245). Or is it? How are these myths of origin viewed and understood in an African context? Furthermore, what influence does the way of understanding these myths have of the understanding of a text, like the Bible, in the same context?

In Biblical Studies during the latter half of the 18th century the 'historicity' of the biblical material came to be questioned. D. F. Strauss made readers aware that the Bible cannot be used as a mere record of historical events, but that it should rather be categorised under different types of myths (Dorrien 1997:34-36). Surely, also in the African context none of the myths among any of the peoples mentioned are taken as presenting a historical description of real events. Hence, Parrinder (1982:16) can state: 'Myths are stories, the product of fertile imagination, sometimes simple, often containing profound truths.' They are told and understood for what they are – true stories defining a group (Belcher 2005:xv). Although sometimes entertaining, and decidedly non-rational, these explanations of how things are, or how they are perceived to have become what they are, are not told merely for their entertainment value. Such would be the case only with regard to folk tales.

It is furthermore found that myths were expanded whenever the experiential horizon of the people themselves expanded (Belcher 2005:xix). An example from the South African context can serve as illustration: the reason for the material wealth of Whites vis-à-vis the Bantu and the Khoi is explained in a myth that must date from the time when the Zulu and European cultures met in Southern Africa (Belcher 2005:245-246).

Myths were transmitted orally and recorded only from the middle of the 19th century onward. Belcher (2005:473) finds it strange that the Southern African myths do not represent what can be called an ideological foundation:

> It would appear that the political upheavals associated with the establishment of the Zulu state at the start of the nineteenth century (or possibly the intrusion of settlers and missionaries from the eighteenth century on) have dissipated what politically orientated myths of origin did exist, and what is left now are historical narratives of the relatively recent past.

Be that as it may, one should always remember when dealing with orally transmitted myth that it is 'reconfigured with every new generation that learns it ... is reformulated and combined with new elements as they arise. … What is transmitted, then, is what is relevant to the present of the tellers' (Belcher 2005:xvii-xviii).

Structurally many of these myths seem to be quite similar. Committing them to writing meant that they became fixed as regards content as well. Once in written form, the myths became objects of academic enquiry. Especially the development of formalism and structuralism during the 20th century made the African myths prime candidates for study among literary scholars and anthropologists (Okpewho 1992:175-181; cf. Dorson 1972). Freezing these myths in written form also meant that they lost their inherent quality of constantly being retold and updated. It is important to remember on this point that strictly speaking a myth is not inviting interpretation or reinterpretation. In oral cultures myths are in themselves 'a dialogue of the present with the past, in which the present seeks to find its roots in what is remembered, or invented, of the past' (Belcher 2005:xviii). In literate societies this dialogue occurs only on the level of interpretation. In the field of biblical studies and under influence of the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, the borders between text and interpretation have been blurred while considering the role played by human imagination in both processes of text production and interpretation (cf. Brueggemann 2003:7-13).

In this section we looked at myths and their meanings in an African context. When considering biblical scholars' claims to an authentic 'African' approach, these views should be kept in mind as criteria against which to measure such claims. Another criterion to consider in this regard is the notion of history.

C   HISTORY AND STORY

After establishing the role of myths of origin in African societies, we are in the position to introduce the notion of 'history' as reflected in the title of this article. In African societies prior to the 20th century 'history' meant oral traditions passed on from one generation to the next (cf. Tisani 1994:169). These traditions were collected from the mid-19th century onwards also by 'amateur collectors … [who were] patriotic and committed to the preservation of traditional knowledge' (Alagoa 1993:8). Compared to myths of origin, these histories seem to remain more stable in their transmission. This does not mean that the histories of a specific region are all precisely the same. The differences, however, unlike those found among myths, are not merely the result of changes to a present context. The changes in oral accounts of history result from different perspectives on past events given by different subgroups in a society (cf. Fikry-Atallah 1972:237-253). Vansina (1985:190) relates this phenomenon to what he labels 'selectivity' in oral accounts. Hereby past events are selectively recounted according to their significance in the present. Thus, these differences

may involve issues of land claims or first occupancy and differ depending on which stratum in society is interviewed. Each subgroup maintains its own oral traditions, even in the face of counter claims by other groups. This is part of the dynamic within oral societies. Tisani (1994:169) remarks that '[o]ral tradition, therefore, is group property, reflective of the collective minds to which it belongs'. Furthermore, oral history is not only concerned with the dominant actors, but includes information on the histories of other communities in a region (Tisani 1994:173). It was only with the introduction of New Historicism and Postcolonial Studies that such an approach also found its way into academic departments of history – albeit that these still exist mostly on the margins of scholarship.

Our views on what is labelled 'oral history' are deeply influenced by the way we understand science and research as such. Many scholars perceive a dichotomy between traditional (African) thought patterns and what is labelled 'Western science'. On closer inspection, though, these distinctions are not altogether valid. Take for instance the example of Habtu (2001) referred to above. The fact that he is dealing with a myth *in written form* meant that he abandoned, albeit unwittingly, the idea of what 'myth' in the African context actually is. Instead, he smuggled in an outdated Western view of what 'text' is, namely that it indeed mirrors reality. This is taking the referential character of 'text' to its extreme – an idea totally foreign to traditional African thought. Instead, such ideas should rather be linked to a form of Common Sense Realism (cf. Deist 1994:127-135). In the case of Habtu, Western thought patterns informed his understanding of myth.

The other side of the coin, namely incorporating traditional thought patterns in a modern understanding of the world, is discussed at length by Robin Horton (cf. Horton 1993). He indicates from an opposite angle that the two sets of views, namely traditional and modern, are perhaps not that far removed from each other. A powerful example he employs in an earlier contribution [1967] is one that today could be labelled 'mental well-being' (cf. Horton 1993:200-207). In Western (modern) societies healing practices from African (traditional) contexts are often frowned upon due to their relation to the unseen world of the spiritual. However, in Western orientated societies rituals varying from gymnasium membership to yoga classes are employed to curb the hidden (unseen) notion of 'stress levels'. This is done due to the link, perceived or otherwise, between physical health and the absence of the entity called 'stress'. Now Horton's argument is that the *impersonal* language (e.g. 'stress') Westerners employ to characterise the sources of their mental and eventually physical discomforts, is on the same par as the *personal* language (e.g. 'ancestral spirits') used in other contexts.

A similar sentiment is noted by Kwasi Wiredu (1998:195) when he observes that 'rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West nor is

superstition a peculiarity of the African peoples'. What he does find alarming, though, is what is labelled 'uncritical habits of thought' among African people – and he suggests that African traditional thinking rather be compared to Western folk knowledge, which he finds on the same par (Wiredu 1998:197). The phenomenon of a lack of criticism is linked by Goody (1977:37) to the absence of a culture of literacy among African peoples and he goes so as far to suggest that the terms 'oral' and 'literate' be opposed, rather than 'traditional' and 'modern' (:43). He sees the written word as inviting criticism, opening up other alternatives and this he finds absent in oral communities. In this instance he perhaps goes too far: in oral societies, as already noted, alternatives are included and supplied in the various forms of myths of origins and accounts known through oral history. It is the fixing of these forms in writing that indeed prompts the imaginative powers of the human mind to question and search for alternatives. In oral communities these alternatives are readily supplied in imaginative re-enactments that form what Vansina (1985:196) refers to as 'collective interpretation'.

The introduction of writing to oral communities meant, according to Goody (1977:46), that 'the magic of the printed word has in a sense replaced the magic of the spoken one'. The awe of signs on paper carrying messages became the subject of a number of anecdotes usually at the expense of pre-literate societies (cf. Brink 2006:20-22). What was not realised, though, is that these awe-inspiring signs created a more fixed reality than the one prevailing among the pre-literate communities. This fixed universe tolerates inconsistencies and even contradictions to a much lesser degree than freer and accommodating oral worlds. This was indicated convincingly by Goody (1977:48-49) with reference to the memorable work on the history of science by Thomas Kuhn (1962).

This section brought the following into sharper perspective: In traditional African societies, being non-literate, the understanding and the use of myth and oral tradition are much more prevalent than in Western orientated societies. This state of affairs began to change, however, with the introduction of writing to these societies.[2] Still, it is possible to establish a reciprocal relationship between the African and Western patterns of thought. The only limiting factor seems to be whether African scholars are willing to apply their unique indigenous knowledge and command of issues such as myth and orality when it comes to interpreting texts like Bible. Although Lombaard (2006a:149-151) stands critical as to whether any form of unique African scholarship is attainable this writer believes, in light of the present discussion, that such a route

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[2] For a much more detailed discussion of this issue in different societies, cf. Goody (1987).

needs further exploration before the search is called off.[3] It does seem, though, that African scholars owe the scholarly community in this regard.[4] The following section serves as an illustration that the unique contributions to be made to Old Testament scholarship and stemming from an African epistemology as outlined above, are sometimes ignored by African scholars who let themselves be overwhelmed by a Western epistemic model.

D   THE BOOK OF DANIEL IN AFRICA

To illustrate the need for an authentic African engagement with the text on the one hand, as well as the current lack of reflection in this regard on the other, a critical look is taken at a specific contribution (on the book of Daniel) to the recently published *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC) (2006).* Although its mission statement mentions that the commentary does not wish to 'delve into critical and exegetical details' (2006:x), it understands itself to be scholarly and certainly exclaims to be African. Indeed, it is explicitly stated that by 'acknowledging the centrality of Scripture to our identity does not mean that we demonize our traditional culture' (Bediako, 2006:3). Unfortunately, the claim of being African in the sense delineated above is not always substantiated by all the material found in this work. A few cursory examples from the commentary on the book of Daniel will illustrate this point:

- Under the heading 'authorship and date' the author refers to 'sceptics' who claim a second century date for the book because they refuse to accept predictive elements and the revelation of 'minute details of future events' in Scripture. Contra to this sceptical point of view, Daniel is identified as author of the book (Adeyemo 2006:989).
- The message of the Aramaic section is viewed as 'largely historical, showing God's dealing with the Gentile empires' (Adeyemo 2006:989).
- The improvement in the physical condition of the four young Jews in a mere ten days after refusing the king's food (Daniel 1) is indicative of 'divine intervention' (Adeyemo 2006:992).
- No mention is made of the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the commentary on Daniel 7 (:1002-1003); rather the reader is informed that 'commentators agree' the little horn of Daniel 7 as representing the antichrist of the New Testament (:1004).

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[3]   Lombaard stresses the universal character of scholarship to the detriment of the particular. The previous discussion of Horton in fact indicates how a link on a universal level is manifested in radically different (linguistic and even ontological) conceptualizations.

[4]   The present study does not wish to re-open the debate on who can and cannot participate in African Biblical Studies. This article points to the fact that a unique African contribution to the field is still to be made. For an example of a contribution along the lines suggested here, cf. Dibeela (2001).

- Antiochus IV is only introduced in the commentary on Daniel 8 where it is also (erroneously) stated with reference to 1 Maccabees 2:59 (?) that the prophecy of Daniel in fact contributed to the Maccabean revolt (:1005). Collins (1993:69) summarises scholarly opinion in this regard as follows: '… [i]t is not at all clear that Daniel supported the Maccabees'.

- In Daniel 10 the man dressed in linen is 'likely … the pre-incarnate Christ' (:1006), whereas the prince of Persia 'must be a messenger of Satan' (:1007).

There are similar statements, but these should suffice to illustrate that this contribution to the volume does not live up to its stated purpose of being African. The reader finds no hint at the richness that a truly African approach, conversant in myth and oral tradition, can provide.[5] The fixed text is taken as a true and realistic representation of reality. It is not seen as a mere fixed form of what was once a dialogue between an ancient present and an even further distant past. Hence, even where the text itself, due to its apocalyptic nature, defies a realistic interpretation, the exegete is forced to look to typology and allegory to provide meaning.

To be sure, it is not suggested here that African scholars merely should embrace so-called Western sceptical scholarship. However, if a scholarly conversation with this line of thought is suggested, it should at least be founded on an African metaphor and not in outdated forms of Western thought that exhibit a form of fundamentalism described by Barr more than two decades ago (cf. Barr 1984).[6] The suggested scepticism noted in the 'Western' tradition is precisely the result of the fixed form of the written text. Trying to avoid this scepticism by hiding behind an older form of Western epistemology (introduced by Western missionaries? – cf. Snyman 2003b:384, 401) does not solve anything, but only adds to the problem. A more convincing solution could only come about if the freer and unfixed epistemic model in truly traditional African thought can be brought to bear on the problems in the text. This would mean that the text in its fixed form is interrogated from the vantage point of it not being a mere mirror of (a historical) reality, but *a conversation with reality at a given point in time*. As will be pointed out below the development in African Bible interpretation labelled by Ukpong (2001:23) as 'inculturation hermeneutics' bears some resemblance to the present suggestion (cf. also West 2001:34). In this regard Ukpong (2001:24) remarks: 'The basic hermeneutic theory at work is that the *meaning of a text is a function of the interaction between the*

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[5]   As McEntire (2001:255) rightly notes: 'A literal understanding … appears to prevent a mythic understanding.'

[6]   Cf. Snyman (2003:408) for a similar objection to some of contributions in West & Dube (2001).

text and its context and the reader in his/her context' (italics – Ukpong). A way to unlock the text's meaning(s) would entail a similar process of imaginative creativeness that one finds in oral communities.

Furthermore, this would mean that the text cannot be seen as merely communicating historical events, but more as a form of 'realistic narrative' in the words of Hans Frei (1974).[7] Seeing the text as a window on past events would seriously limit the potential communicative value locked into the text. Hence the proposal that, in order to enable a reading closer to the traditional African paradigm, the text should be seen for what it is – a story. In fact, in the book of Daniel there are a number of telltale signs that should prompt the reader to realise that what lies in front of him/her is not a historical account dating from the sixth century BCE. These literary features, inviting a reading severed from notions of realistic, historical descriptions, are highlighted in the next section. To illustrate, then, that the book of Daniel resembles a story-like dialogue between an ancient present and its own past, more than a description of history, we take a look the reading of the Bible in Africa.

E   READING THE BIBLE IN AFRICA

It has been noted that contributions in a major volume on different issues related to the Bible in Africa do in fact hint at where the current proposal may find a place among hermeneutical developments on the continent (Ukpong 2001) and even provide an example along the lines suggested here (Dibeela 2001). However, the distinction that Ukpong (2001:11-12) draws between academic readings in the Western pattern and others who link the text with an African context, is too stark for what is proposed here. In fact, the present contribution seeks a way to link these two currents.[8] Wright (2006:72) reminds us that '[T]he humanities are, by their very nature, both specific and universal'. Hence the dichotomy between Afrocentric (specific) / Eurocentric (universal) approaches in the humanities, emphasising either the one or the other element, cannot lead to a proper engagement with the objects of study.

In the South African context a consistent literary approach to the biblical text never quite took hold.[9] The only exception in this regard is the text imma-

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[7]   Comstock (1986:120) gives the following summary of Frei's notion: 'Realistic narratives are … [a]t once ordinary and extra-ordinary. They mingle noble and serious themes with casual, everyday occurrences.'

[8]   Holter (1998:250) suggested that the South African context creates unique possibilities in this regard.

[9]   West (2005:49-50) argues that among African biblical scholars historical-critical methods are generally preferred, adding that recently an interest in sociological approaches developed. He goes on to note, however, 'that African biblical scholarship

nent work done at the University of Pretoria with its focus on the book of Psalms. Recently, the attempt to understand the Old Testament from a literary point of view was (again) questioned by a South African scholar (Lombaard, 2008).[10] He offers the reader a (tongue-in-the-cheek?) narratological reading of a text, without keeping his bias toward a historical approach always in check. Not surprisingly, he faults his own 'little narratological' reading on a number of points. On basis of his analysis he suggests that biblical scholars cannot stay within the confines of the text and suggests that a historical (comparative) dimension be added in order to go beyond the 'first step' in narratological analysis.

The focus of the present article is not on yet another polemic about methodology. However, one of the more serious concerns raised regarding literary approaches does warrant comment. This is the often stated (philosophical) concern that narratological theories in general are restricted by their narrow referential borders. These borders coincide with limits of the text and its world (Thiselton 1992:472-473). Especially when it comes to religious texts the self-referential character of the text seems to limit its value in believing communities.[11] Precisely such concerns prompted Comstock (1986) to place 'meaning' and 'truth' as manifested in the works of two well-known scholars, Frei and Ricoeur, in opposition to each other. What he sought was a 'theoretical justification for narrative hermeneutics' (Comstock 1986:121). Comstock (1986:139) in the end concludes that from Ricoeur's point of view the biblical stories do not refer merely to themselves:

> They refer to a *possible world* opened up between text and reader. This world is inseparable from the text's depiction of agents and events; it arises only in the story's rendering of character and action. But it is always possible for *someone*; it is in part the result of a reader's imaginative response' (emphasis added).

The thorny issue of a text's self-referentiality thus has been addressed and appears to be surmountable.

In closing, a few examples from the book of Daniel are listed in order to indicate the book's invitation to be read as 'literature' (i. e. from a literary perspective) and not as an historical account. Such a reading offers a better opportunity to develop and utilise a reading paradigm in which African perspectives related to among others myth and oral history are fully utilised as herme-

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[should] engage more substantially than it has to date with literary modes of interpretation' (West 2005:59).

[10]   Cf. also his earlier criticism (Lombaard 2006b:20-24).

[11]   As often stated in *The Bible in Africa* (2001) such an approach will not be welcomed in the African context.

neutic keys. It does this by bracketing historical aspects that may lure the reader into a different 'epistemic mode' from the one which may open richer perspectives on meaning.

In this brief excursion aimed at illustrating the literary merit of the text, the focus falls only on the character of the foreign emperor as presented and employed in especially the first chapter of the book of Daniel.[12] Characterisation is one of many avenues to explore when a narratological reading of a text is undertaken.[13] A narrator employs this technique to sketch the main character(s) in the narrative for the purpose of presenting a specific point of view. If successful, the narrator would have convinced the reader to entertain certain ideas about the(se) character(s), namely to side with a specific character / group, against another character / group. The purpose of the characterisation of foreign emperors in the narratives in the book of Daniel is to undermine the authority of these rulers by means of comedic representations.

In the very first chapter the reader is introduced to the undermining activities of one of the young Jewish captives at the Babylonian court. Daniel's disregard for the king's command and his food (v. 8) nevertheless brings him the highest accolades from the very person he is undermining (vv. 19-20). This introductory story in the book of Daniel can be summarised as follows:

The main story (1:8-16) is framed by an outer and an inner frame. The outer frame (vv. 1-2; and v. 21) sketches the context that the narrator creates for the narrative, and in fact for the book as a whole, namely that of the 6th century exile – between the reigns of the Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, the Persian Emperor. The inner frame (vv. 3-7; vv. 17-20) introduces the reader to the specific context for this first story when the reader meets the main Jewish protagonists and learns about their rise to fame and success at the Babylonian court. In the central section of the chapter, the reader encounters the main story (vv. 8-16). In this story the authority of the king is undermined by Daniel and his three friends who refused the 'royal food' that the king ordered for his young trainees.

Daniel undermines not only the king's authority, but also that of the palace master. The first time Daniel's speech is reported by the narrator, is when

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[12]   As such this theme is worthy of an extensive investigation on its own. What is proposed here are mere outlines for such a study indicating that the text lends itself to a form of reading that focuses more on the text and not on issues 'behind' the text. It does suggest an alternative to the form of reading found in *ABC*, but at the same time it should not be taken as an example of an authentic African reading pleaded for in this article. Such an endeavour falls outside the scope of the present article.

[13]   For an overview of characterisation in biblical narratives, cf. Van der Bergh 2008:181-186.

he asks the lowest ranking official in the story to change their diet (v. 11). The reader cannot help but grin at the subtle, but simple manner in which the mighty Nebuchadnezzar is misled, only later to hear about his amazement at these four youths (v. 20) who, in fact, have undermined him all along.

Finally, a few very brief comments are made about the comedic portrayal of the foreign ruler in the rest of the narratives in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 2 the king is sketched as totally unreasonable in expecting his counsellors to tell him a dream that he had forgotten and to give its interpretation (cf. Goldingay 1989:43). After three attempts to persuade the king to come to other insights (vv. 4-11) he orders all his counsellors to be executed – again the reader cannot help but smile: just how this tactic is going to solve the king's problem, we are left wondering. In Daniel 3 the comedic function of the so-called list genre has already been commented upon (cf. Avalos 1991). The character of the king again is sketched in such a way that the reader is left with a huge question mark as regards the competence of this man (cf. vv. 1-2, 13, 19, 24-25). In Daniel 4 the haughty king ends up eating grass like a wild animal (v. 33), while in Daniel 5 the ruler loses his continence (v. 6 – cf. Wolters 1991:119-120), and in Daniel 6 he is made into a pathetic figure easily manipulated by his officials (vv. 7-10). One of the aims of these narratives, read from a narratological perspective, is to serve the subversive function of belittling a foreign ruler. This is done by means of comedic caricatures created by the narrator.

These examples merely hint at some of the possibilities that open up when the text is approached from a consistent literary point of view. As such these examples are not related to an authentic African reading of the text. It aims to indicate the type of 'modern' approach that would perhaps render the best results when it is dovetailed with a 'traditional' approach. Such a reading still has to be suggested.

F   CONCLUSION

This article investigated the richness offered by an African worldview to the academic study of the Bible as it is manifested in, among others, myths and oral history. The epistemic foundation informing such a worldview, which differs from that of a Western worldview, was suggested as a criterion for defining a contribution in the field of biblical studies as African or not. An example of one such contribution claiming to be African was found not to meet this expectation, but rather was based on a form of Western epistemology. It is thus suggested that scholars working towards an integrated African (particular) and Western (general) reading explore a literary approach to the text. Not only does the biblical text investigated in this article invite such an approach, but the literary approach itself stands closer to a particular African epistemic model. Bringing to the text the knowledge and ability to understand and interpret a

non-literary world can only enhance the field of Old Testament scholarship on this continent. In this way 'His[14] story' can become an authentic story 'out of Africa'.

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[14]   The author is quite aware of the lack of gender sensitivity in this term. Here it is used for a rhetorical purpose and not to make any gender claims, although in the African context, as elsewhere, the deity is often related to a male persona.

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