

A Gender-Sensitive Ethical Reading of Old Testament Texts: The Role of African Women as Characters in the Text and Exponents of the Text

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines the contribution of African women towards a gender-sensitive ethical reading of the OT texts at two levels. First, the story of Moses' African wife who is rejected by her in-laws in Num 12, draws a picture of an African woman as a character in the text. Secondly, the essay proceeds to highlight the Talitha Cum hermeneutic, which entails various contributions such as: inculturation, post-colonialism, the hermeneutic of life and the bosadi hermeneutic from some African women, both academic and grass roots, as exponents of the text. It is further argued in the essay that Talitha Cum, is an excellent example of African women's gender-sensitive ethical readings of biblical texts because it helps to assert the position of women and more specifically African women wherever they are. It is also observed that the Talitha Cum hermeneutics lays the foundation for a life-centered ethic that serves to promote the dignity of women and the entire humanity. Consequently, I present an example of Talitha Cum in action. It is the case of Angelina Atyam, an African woman from northern Uganda who refuses to look on after the abduction of her daughter but instead forms a self-support group for her and other affected parents. The essay concludes that with the presence of Talitha Cum, African women are in a position to re-awaken their strength.

A INTRODUCTION

The study and interpretation of the OT has a long history. During the last decades approaches to academic OT studies have evolved from the traditional historical critical methods of source or literary criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism to new trends for reading and interpreting the OT texts.¹

¹ Cf. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (rev. and enlarged ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) for a details on the use of the traditional historical critical methods for Old Testament interpretation.

Gender issues in reading the OT is part of this development. Such issues have existed as part of the feminist web and have been loosely categorised as "liberation theologies" for many years now.² This essay focuses on a gender-sensitive ethical reading of OT texts and articulates the roles of African women as characters in the text and exponents of the text. My objective is to articulate African women's roles in a gender-sensitive ethical reading of the OT texts. The essay is arranged as follows:

First I define key concepts as used in this essay. Then I explore the identity of the African woman in relation to OT readers from two perspectives: African women as characters in the OT and the OT texts as interpreted by African women. Next I discuss the hermeneutical approaches of African women to reading the OT texts. Then I underline *Talitha Cum* perspectives as a kind of gender-sensitive ethical readings of the OT texts. Finally, I conclude by calling for a re-awakening of the position and strength of Moses' Cushite wife in the OT through the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutic which empowers African women to read the OT texts in ways that promote dignity for them and the entire humanity.

B EXPLANATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

An interface with present scholarship shows that "gender" is central to contemporary OT hermeneutics. The use of the term "gender" in OT scholarship shows that it is not a static concept. It is a dynamic concept and has to be understood and interpreted continuously in concrete social-cultural contexts. Gender is sometimes viewed as simply being synonymous with women.³ It has also been understood as forming a continuum with the term sex.⁴ In this essay the term "gender" is used in reference to the social and cultural differences between male and female individuals with regard to non-biological differences.⁵

² Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, "Introduction," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katherine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Westminster: John Knox Press, 2006), xi.

³ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *AHR* 5 (1986): 1056.

⁴ Mary M. Talbot, *Language and Gender: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 12-13. Those who viewed gender as a continuum were influenced by the extent of differing sexuality orientations of people regardless of their biological makeup. In the categories are hermaphrodites, homosexuals and lesbians among others.

⁵ Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson eds., "Gender," *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004), 592.

The second core concept from the title of this essay is the term "ethical." "Ethical" has generally been used in reference to the principles of conduct that are considered correct in a given context. The use of the term "ethical" in OT studies mostly follows a consequentialist approach whereby an interpretation is said to be "ethical" or not, depending on the choice of theoretical interpretative models and the consequences resulting from a text's subsequent interpretation.⁶ Like Schüssler-Fiorenza, Daniel Patte uses the terms responsibility and accountability when he talks about how biblical exegesis should be performed.⁷ Barton argues that an "ethical" interpretation can be measured in a more coherent sense if interpreted as that which rests on the idea of natural law than on any other model.⁸ Barton uses the term "natural law" in reference to various moral principles and ethical considerations of different communities.⁹ In this essay, the "ethical" reading of a text is determined by how much a reader pays attention to the issues affecting an interpretative community and the consequences of a particular interpretation on a particular interpretative community.

"Old Testament text" in this essay is used in its traditional sense to refer to the Hebrew texts which form the first part of the Christian Bible. However, there is an on-going debate within the field of biblical scholarship on whether or not "Old Testament" is an appropriate name for this part of the scriptures. Those who argue against this term hold the view that "Old" seems to render Judaism null and void as it suggests that the coming of the "New" Testament takes away the authority of the "Old" Testament.¹⁰ Other biblical scholars avoid the Christian term "Old Testament" so as not to offend Jewish scholars who label this part of the scriptures as Hebrew Bible. I use the term "Old Testament" as a Christian to reveal the Christian interpretive context in which I write.

In this essay, I use the concept of "African women," to mean all those women, academic and non-academic, middle class and poor, born and unborn, young and old, black and of all colours who identify with the cultural beliefs and practices that pertain to being African. It has been stated before that the majority of people who study the Bible in Africa are ordinary readers.¹¹ For

⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 28.

⁷ Cf. Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

⁸ John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 39.

⁹ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 38.

¹⁰ Day and Pressler, "Introduction," ix.

¹¹ Cf. David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 4; Madipoane J. Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in*

that matter, my articulation of the role of "African women" will not only focus on women scholars but also the grassroots women who through their reading, have contributed to the field of biblical hermeneutics and interpretation. Consequently in the next section, I present the case of an African woman in the OT.

C THE CASE OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Many studies have been done on investigating the portrayal of Africa and Africans in the OT. In various studies, Africa has been identified as Cush or Ethiopia in the OT while Africans are known as the Cushites.¹² For example, according to Holter, Cush is geographically thought of as a huge land south of Egypt (Ezek 29:10), and anthropologically connected with black tall people (Isa 18:2).¹³

In the present context – which focuses on "the role of African women" – I will illustrate, although briefly the position and identity of an African woman in the OT namely, Moses' Cushite wife in Num 12:1.¹⁴

*While they were at Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married for he had indeed married a Cushite woman.*¹⁵

In this text, we encounter Moses' Cushite – that is African – wife who is a source of criticism for Moses from Miriam and Aaron. This Cushite woman is not only resented, but she is also unnamed and no further reference is made of her. She is kept in the background and she is abandoned.

African-South Africa (BTA 4; New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 8.

¹² For other studies on Africa being Cush and consequently Cushite for Africans, cf. David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001; Marta H. Lavik, *A People Tall and Smooth-Skinned: The Rhetoric of Isaiah 18* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Knut Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2008); and Phillip Lokel, "Moses and his Cushite Wife: Reading Numbers 12:1 with Undergraduate Students of Makerere University," in *Let my People Stay!: Researching the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Knut Holter; Nairobi: Acton, 2006), 191-202.

¹³ Knut Holter, *Yahweh in Africa: Essays on Africa and the Old Testament* (BTA 1; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 1.

¹⁴ For a discussion of how the Hebrew term כִּשְׁתָּה is dealt with in the OT, see Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*; Lokel, "Moses and his Cushite Wife," and Holter, *Contextualised*.

¹⁵ All biblical texts in this paper are in accordance with the New Revised Standard Version.

Several studies have been done to try and establish the actual cause of the resentment of the Cushite wife of Moses referred to in Num 12:1. The Nigerian OT scholar David T. Adamo holds the view that the resentment is not because this woman is black, but because she does not know Yahweh.¹⁶ Adamo's interpretation is representative of what Madipoane Masenya has referred to as dominant patriarchal contexts of Africa, where the biblical text has been read from male perspectives which in most cases only help to keep the patriarchal status quo intact.¹⁷ Moses' Cushite wife is a case which demonstrates how women, and not least African women, are kept at the lowest level of the patriarchal ladder. Their humanity is defined mostly by relating their identity to their husbands . . . *wife of so and so*, and similarly the Bible is interpreted for them.¹⁸

While Adamo says that she is rejected because she does not know Yahweh, he does not recognise that elsewhere in the OT, Cushites are presented as working together with the Israelites in service to Yahweh (Pss 68:31, Jer 38:7-13, Zeph 1:1), and therefore, textually speaking, his view is difficult to comprehend. Rather, in my opinion it is a case where a woman is ignored irrespective of her being a member of a community. The Ugandan OT scholar Phillip Lokel on the other hand, argues that the complaints against Moses' Cushite wife could be a result of stereotypes which people hold against each other.¹⁹ However, Lokel does not go further to investigate the root causes of this stereotyping and he, like Adamo, leaves the woman abandoned in her patriarchal setting of rejection.

From these two African male scholars cited above, we see that Adamo is quick to argue that colour is not the reason why the woman is resented. For Lokel, the resentment is simply explained to be a result of stereotyping. Worthy of note is the fact that in the responses of Adamo and Lokel to the text of Num 12, there seems to be a deliberate effort to protect the African image. Yet both scholars are not concerned with the fact that this African is a woman and this woman is not named – which strongly symbolises rejection in the African culture where naming is a central aspect of identity.²⁰

I would like to argue that the text about Moses' Cushite wife can serve

¹⁶ David, T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1998), 70.

¹⁷ Masenya, *How Worthy?*, 5.

¹⁸ Cf. Masenya, *How Worthy?*, 2.

¹⁹ Lokel, "Moses and his Cushite Wife," 192.

²⁰ Cf. Gerhard W. van Der Merwe and Justine Burns, "What's in a Name? Racial Identity and Altruism in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *SAJE* 76 (2008): 266–275, for the importance of having a name and being called by it.

as a representation of the contemporary African woman. I find common elements between the narrative of Moses' unnamed Cushite wife, and the contemporary African woman who is kept in the background by the gender roles assigned to her by her culture. Bearing the pranks of very often violent male dominant interpretations, this woman is a passive sufferer.

For the past three decades, however, African women have contributed to gender-sensitive ethical readings of this and other OT texts. These women have read the OT texts with a focus of strengthening and promoting the dignity of women and humanity. They have developed different hermeneutics for reading OT texts and in so doing they have created a space where the voice of the African woman can be heard.

D HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES OF AFRICAN WOMEN TO READING THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

Even though African women's biblical interpretations are as old as Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, African women's academic biblical readings are said to be less than thirty years old. The struggle towards gender-sensitive ethical readings of biblical texts in Africa did not develop in a vacuum and cannot be treated in isolation. It has evolved out of a long history.²¹

1 Growth of Gender-Sensitive Readings of Old Testament Texts

The feminist interpretation of the OT can be said to have started with the works of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott²² and it became more open with Phyllis Trible.²³

²¹ The long history of African women's biblical interpretation goes as far back as the 1700, with Kimpa Vita, a Congolese woman who embraced Christianity and was baptised, thus becoming Dona Beatrice. This woman moved to Christianity with her Congolese heritage, she tried to identify biblical figures who were close to her heritage, referred to herself as a Congolese saint Anthony and repainted Jesus black. This act made her to be viewed as a heretic and eventually lead to her martyrdom in 1706. See Musa W. Dube, "Talitha Cum Hermeneutics of Liberation: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," in *Post-Colonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbivu and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; GPBS 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 30-33. Cited 19 July 2013. Online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/060813P.front.pdf>. For a detailed understanding of Kimpa Vita, cf. John K. Thornton, *The Congolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²² Cf. Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

²³ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT 1; Philadelphia: Fortress,

The field started with three root approaches that included: first, literary readings in search for women in the texts, secondly, readings that seek liberating themes in the text for the benefit of women, and thirdly, historical cultural readings that investigate the women behind the text in their historical conditions.²⁴ It has now grown to encompass new approaches. This growth is a result of the emerging realisation that the feminist movement of the time was liberating only to the western middle class women but ignoring the plight of the poor women, women of color and women in other countries. This paved the way for the womanist approaches from African American feminists.²⁵ The search for the feminist identity expanded further in the United States as the Latina women named their approach to feminist theology *Mujerista*, a Spanish term for women embedded into with their cultural appreciation of motherhood.²⁶

Soon African women also joined the debate. Having seen loopholes in the existing feminist hermeneutics, African women theologians and scholars also got busy searching for and discovering their un-written voices by articulating theological and ethical concerns.²⁷ This hermeneutics is what has now come to be known as the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life.²⁸ *Talitha Cum* is drawn from the Markan story of Mark 5: 21-43, and it simply means "little girl, I say wake up." The *Talitha Cum* life affirming theologies and ethics by African women was inaugurated in 1989 at the launch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – a pan-African women's movement founded by Mercy Amba Oduyoye with the aim of ensuring that their many unrecorded experiences, perspectives and reflections in different fields of theology and ethics become visible in bookstores and on shelves of whoever cares to hear them speak.²⁹

1978).

²⁴ Cf. Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katherine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Westminster: John Knox Press, 2006), 19.

²⁵ Cf. Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Woman's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

²⁶ Cf. Maria I. Ada, "By the Rivers of Babylon: Exile as a Way of Life," in *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (vol. 1 of *Reading from this place*; ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 149-163.

²⁷ Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Bible and African Christianity: A Curse or a Blessing?" in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), vii.

²⁸ Dube, "Talitha Cum," 29. *Talitha cum* is drawn from the Markan story of Mark 5: 21-43, and it simply means "little girl, I say wake up." See Dube, "Talitha Cum," 34.

²⁹ Cf. Njoroge, "Bible and African Christianity," 5.

2 Talitha Cum African Women's Hermeneutics

Dube describes the *Talitha Cum* African women's hermeneutics of liberation and life as the practice of living daily in confrontation with international oppression, gender oppression, physical wounds and confrontation with sickness and death, which must all give way to healing and life.³⁰ While *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics has seen the contributions from many African women, both academic and grass roots. In some cases African women have picked on existing branches of African biblical hermeneutics such as inculcation and post-colonialism and gave it a feminist angle. However, in other cases, these women came up with totally new approaches in response to their needs such as the life hermeneutics and the *bosadi* hermeneutics. In this section, I present four African women who are the leading proponents of the different hermeneutics. These are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye with her inculcated feminist hermeneutics, Masenya Madipoane with her *bosadi* hermeneutics, Musa Dube with the post-colonial biblical hermeneutics and Teresa Okure's hermeneutics of life.³¹

2a Mercy Amba Oduyoye

The inculcated feminist hermeneutics is a result of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's experiences. She was born in 1934, at a time when Ghana was still under British rule, then grew up in a matrilineal environment of the Asante community in Ghana, and later married in the patrilineal Yoruba community in Nigeria. The contrast she found between the Asante and Yoruba communities shaped her agenda for biblical theology and her desire to affirm a woman's dignity became apparent. Oduyoye was not trained as a biblical scholar, but she is revered as one of the most illustrious African women theologians on the continent.³² Oduyoye's pivotal concern is on the relationship between African hermeneutics and Christian theology. Like any other advocates of inculcation, Oduyoye's efforts are geared towards making Christianity an African issue. Specific in her focus is the need to show how liberation relates to African women and how African women relate to the western church. Through this process, Oduyoye gives a voice to African women making it possible for them to speak of the issues which oppress them both from their cultural and church perspectives.

³⁰ Dube, "Talitha Cum," 35.

³¹ Many other contributions to the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics can be found in the different works of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, such as Musa W. Dube, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001). The Nigerian Acholonu has also made a contribution towards what we can call a *Talitha Cum* in her book: Catherine O. Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa, 1995). But her contribution is yet to be tested and accepted as indeed an effort towards *Talitha Cum*.

³² Dube, "Talitha Cum," 37.

Oduyoye identifies multiple scriptures in the African context which she cross-studies with reference to OT texts. This enables her to frame similar figures from the African contexts and this in turn makes the scriptures alive and accessible to the women in Africa.³³ Discussing the position of a woman who is in most cases defined with an affinity to a man, Oduyoye makes reference to Gen 1:27:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

She argues that this text is a clear indicator that a woman is a human being whose destiny does not have to derive from a man's destiny. She refers to the African mythical creation stories as a means to show that creation is a communal ideal in which people emerge on earth as pairs.³⁴ Oduyoye's inculturation hermeneutics has influenced the works of other African women such as Nasimiyu who refers to Gen 2:18 in support of monogamy.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

Nasimiyu uses this text which presents God as making one companion for Adam to argue that monogamy emerges in the OT as God's initial and final will for humanity. She goes on to explain that this Genesis creation story is re-echoed in the African myths of the origin of human life in the sense that several African myths on human creation affirm that God created one woman and one man to begin the generation of human life on earth.³⁵

2b Madipoane Masenya

With a view that western feminist and womanist approaches may contain aspects that are foreign to an African woman, Madipoane Masenya suggests a *bosadi* (womanhood) approach for reading the Bible in a South African con-

³³ This can be affirmed from her published works such as: Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (New York: Orbis, 2004); Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (IFT 6; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001); and Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

³⁴ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 79.

³⁵ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (ed. Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro; New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 107.

text.³⁶ Through the *bosadi* hermeneutics, Masenya practices her *Talitha Cum* by re-reading Prov 31:10-31, to investigate what ideal womanhood should be for an African South African woman reader of the Bible.³⁷ This approach, according to Masenya, is an African woman's liberation reading of the text and would take into account the African-ness of an African woman and her attributes. Other issues addressed by the *bosadi* approach include poverty, sexism, racism, foreignness, classism, family, suffering and African cultural practices vis-à-vis the African woman's social status. Masenya's hermeneutics is an African woman's effort towards redefining and renaming herself and her fellow women, equipping them with an ability to call themselves in their own names and saying what they want to say in biblical interpretation by their own voices.³⁸ Masenya argues that the text of Prov 31:10-31 is liberative for women because it pictures women as being hard workers, independent and powerful who like the virtuous woman can hold her own in the world of men. It is also worth mentioning that the same Proverbs text is used in honor of women in the Nigerian culture.³⁹

Furthermore, Masenya rereads Judg 19 to confront and challenge violence perpetuated against women. Judges 19:24 states:

Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.

This text presents an elderly man who is ready to give up his virgin daughter to be used by strangers in exchange for his almost unknown guests. With the *bosadi* hermeneutics, Masenya re-reads this text with a call to women to rise up and realize their full potential as people with dignity in the image of God, rather than remain victims.⁴⁰

³⁶ Masenya, *How Worthy?*, 122. Masenya is also said to be the first black South African Woman Hebrew Bible Scholar. See Dube, "Talitha Cum," 39.

³⁷ Masenya, *How Worthy?*, 6.

³⁸ Cf. Elivered Nasambu-Mulongo, "Bosadi: Madipoane (Ngwana'Mphahlele) Masenya's Contribution to African Women's Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Post-Colonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbivu and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 43; and Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 10/3 (1997): 439.

³⁹ Mary J. Obiorah, "Reading the Old Testament from a Nigerian Background: A Woman's Perspective," in *Global Hermeneutics? Reflections and Consequences* (ed. Knut Holter and Louis C. Jonker; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 42.

⁴⁰ Madipoane Masenya, "Sacrificing Female Bodies at the Altar of Male Priviledge: A Bosadi Reading of Judges 19," *ThVia* 27/1 (2003): 108.

2c Musa Dube

Musa Dube's *Talitha Cum* is manifested in her post-colonial feminist biblical hermeneutics. The post-colonial biblical hermeneutics is an effort which seeks to decolonize the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions as well as seeking ways of re-reading the texts in ways that are liberating and promoting inter-dependence. The post-colonial feminist approach is an alternative way of reading the Bible which calls for a re-reading against the suppression of the female presence in the Bible.⁴¹ Dube's *Talitha Cum* hermeneutic caters for and respects the needs of a woman and more specifically the African woman. In recent times, Dube has extended her focus to HIV/AIDS, which she views as a disease caused by social injustice and calls upon the world to address it as such.⁴² With a re-reading of Luke 18: 1-8, Dube ponders on the question of how NT readers can stand in the narratives in search for justice and healing for all in the world.⁴³ Dube goes on to argue that the struggle against HIV/AIDS is everybody's business and thus the need for biblical studies, academic and non-academic to take its place in the struggle against the pandemic.⁴⁴ Consequently, in the light of HIV/AIDS, *Talitha Cum* puts the use of class, race, gender and ideological analysis at the centre of re-reading the Bible.⁴⁵ While Dube uses the post-colonial feminist *Talitha Cum* on reading NT texts, she has influenced other female scholars who have used her post-colonial feminist hermeneutics to re-read texts from the OT. A case in point is Boyung Lee who reads Gen 16.⁴⁶ Lee starts by observing that most scholars ignore completely the two women in the text and present the text as one that is about Abraham and the history of Israel. She adds on that even some feminist scholars who highlight the women in the story often take the story of Sarah and Hagar as simply a story about two

⁴¹ Musa W. Dube, *Post-Colonial Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 16-21.

⁴² Musa W. Dube, "Talitha Cum: Calling the Girl Child and Women Students to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalization Era" (paper presented at the Executive Committee Meeting of the World Student Christian Fellowship, Kempton Park, Johannesburg, 12-24 Feb 2002).

⁴³ Musa W. Dube, "Introduction," *Grant me justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 3-4.

⁴⁴ A detailed analysis can be found in: Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, eds., *Grant me justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender readings of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004).

⁴⁵ Jerry I. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989) and Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 179-98.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lee Boyung, "When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy," *RelEd* 102/1 (2007): 44-61.

jealous women seeking approval from their husband, or as a conflict between two stubborn women from different social classes. Lee re-reads this text and goes on to explain that this is a story of two courageous women trying to reach their self-realization amidst a patriarchal social structure that was preventing them from realizing themselves.⁴⁷

2d Teresa Okure

Okure introduces the hermeneutics of life. Okure argues that the whole Bible has to be seen as an attestation of people seeking to understand and live their lives in their situation in relation to God.⁴⁸ Okure's *Talitha Cum* which is the hermeneutics of life is a radical extension of biblical interpretation, in the sense that it calls one's attention not only to what we read but also to why we read it.

This is best captured in her article: "First was life and not the Book."⁴⁹ Okure's core contribution is that any interpretation that does not promote life in its fullness is suspect and should be rendered unauthentic.⁵⁰

Njoroge gives a practical suggestion on how *Talitha Cum* can be practiced when she calls for "a reading with."⁵¹ In her view "reading with" involves finding some linkages between the theologians and grassroots women with an aim of uncovering what is already distorted within the texts so as to rescue the Bible from misuse and misinterpretation and search for ways that lead to responsible creativity, healing and wholeness.⁵²

3 The Hermeneutic of *Talitha Cum*: An Example of a Gender-Sensitive Ethical Reading of Old Testament Texts

From the above presentation, I would like to argue that *Talitha Cum* is an excellent example of African women's gender-sensitive ethical readings of biblical texts. It aims at asserting the position of women and more specifically African women wherever they are as a means to bring about healing to victims and

⁴⁷ Boyung, "When the Text," 51.

⁴⁸ Dube, "Talitha Cum," 41.

⁴⁹ Teresa Okure, "First Was Life, Not the Book," in *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multicultural Global Context* (ed. Teresa Okure; Natal: Cluster, 2000), 194-214.

⁵⁰ Okure, "First Was Life," 57.

⁵¹ Njoroge, "Bible and African Christianity," 215.

⁵² Njoroge's suggestion has been reiterated by Holter as a viable solution for African biblical hermeneutics Holter (2010), 216.

restoration of their human dignity.⁵³ *Talitha Cum*'s concern for issues that affect the community and reference to life is significant because these concerns provide the best ethical setting for reading OT texts. In my opinion therefore, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics lays the foundation for a life-centered ethics that serves to promote the dignity of women and humanity. Women's concern for social change and social justice and the ultimate call for a better community which enjoys life in its fullness are actually at the center of *Talitha Cum*.

Furthermore, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics underlines transformation. At the heart of the African women's effort is the need to transform the theological curricular as a deliberate effort towards transformation of the African society.⁵⁴ In the latest effort, Dube challenges African women to engage with texts in ways that help them to name prevailing social injustices and to use biblical texts as a basis to protest against unacceptable social injustices by calling for transformation and a living hope.⁵⁵

A gender-sensitive ethical reading of OT texts as presented by the African women discussed above is geared towards transformation and healing. It involves re-reading texts and continuously engaging in dialogue with both text and our experiences to recognize where God is at work in our world so as to co-operate in the transformation process. This in my opinion means that *Talitha Cum* leads to transformative liberating action. Gender-sensitive ethical readings of the OT texts – or any other texts – by African women lead to action; action which does not only bring hope but ensures that the African women are liberated in all aspects.⁵⁶ *Talitha Cum* empowers women to stand by women regardless of color, race, ethnicity and context to celebrate both unity and diversity to rediscover their human dignity through transformative liberating action.

Northern Uganda presents a good example of an African woman in transformative liberating action. Little was known about Angelina Atyam, a midwife and mother, in northern Uganda. However, the abduction of her 14

⁵³ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 158-180.

⁵⁴ Musa W. Dube, *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003).

⁵⁵ Musa W. Dube, "Introduction: The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Post-Colonial Perspectives," in *Post-Colonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbivu and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; GPBS 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, 23. Cited 19 July 2013. Online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/060813P.front.pdf>.)

⁵⁶ Liberation in this sense is viewed as Men and women walking together on a journey home. See Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 185.

year old daughter in 1996 was a turning point in her life. Atyam is quoted as saying that when the children were abducted, as parents, their first reaction was merely crying and wailing but later they decided that they must do something about their situation.⁵⁷ She together with other affected parents founded the Concerned Parents Association—a non-governmental organization which has been at the center of providing rehabilitation to children in the reintegration process. In addition it also called for a peaceful solution to end the war in northern Uganda with reconciliation and forgiveness. Guided by the Lord's prayer, Atyam and other affected parents started praying for the forgiveness of the Lord's Resistance Army rebels and at the same time seeking the release of all Uganda's abducted children.⁵⁸ Unlike the unnamed Cushite woman in Num 12:1, who does not say anything and seems to passively look on as Moses is being criticized by Miriam and Aaron for marrying her, Atyam refuses to look on as her life and that of other parents whose children had been abducted was wasting away; she is an example of *Talitha Cum* in action.

E CONCLUSION

Moses' Cushite wife did not have the opportunity to engage with *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics, for it was not yet born. But now that we have *Talitha Cum*, we are in position to re-awaken her position and her strength in the OT. *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics empowers African women to read the OT text in ways that promote dignity for women and the entire humanity. Also, as the case is with Atyam, *Talitha Cum* encourages women to engage in transformative liberating action. In so doing, they make the reading of OT texts meaningful and relevant to their interpretative communities.

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⁵⁷ Sanam N. Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What they Do, Why it Matters* (London: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2007), 67.

⁵⁸ Sherry Williamson, "As We Forgive..." *Divinity* 9/2 (2010). N.p. Cited 22 November 2012. Online: <http://divinity.duke.edu/publications/2010.01/features/feature2/index.htm>.

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