

Learning from African theologians and their hermeneutics: Some reflections from a German Evangelical theologian

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This article shares some reflections on African theology from an outside perspective. Starting from personal experiences as a German Evangelical coming to South Africa, it basically takes a look at the book *African theology on the way: Current conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton. It wants to identify ways of looking at theology which could be considered in some way or another as 'especially African'. The article then compares these findings with two other books, presenting two different ways of applied African theology: *The Africana Bible*, edited by Hugh R. Page, coming from a very international background and implementing also the views of African people living outside of Africa, and the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*, edited by Tokunboh Adyemo, featuring an evangelical view.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research gives an outside view on African theology and hermeneutics from an European perspective. It challenges the one-way transfer of theological thinking from Europe to Africa, which for many centuries determined the relationship between the continents. It shows that European theologians indeed can learn much from African theologians and their way of reading the Bible.

Introduction

There are at least two dangers in comparing 'African' and 'European' (or 'Western') theology. These dangers are generalisation or even stereotyping, on the one hand, and subjectivity or even arbitrariness, on the other hand. One should not think all Africans to be similar in their way of doing theology. In fact, there is nothing like 'the African theology' just as there is also nothing like 'the European theology' or even 'the European Evangelical theology'. This article therefore presents a very subjective and selective view. In no way is it meant to be an exhaustive academic survey of the specialties of African theological thinking.¹

Some years ago, I worked for the first time as a co-supervisor for a German MTh student in the field of Old Testament at University of South Africa (UNISA), and we were at a study conference for master and doctoral students in Germany. My student was presenting a paper on the ideas and plans for his dissertation. Two UNISA professors were also present at this presentation. At the end of it, one of them asked the student what the relevance of his dissertation would be for the church in Germany and his own personal Christian life. I shall never forget the look on the face of my student. He had never thought about this. His dissertation was on an academic-theological question. Why should it have relevance for the church or for his own Christian life?

I observed the same phenomenon time and again in the students that followed him. It became clear to me that there is a difference in the understanding of 'theology' in South Africa or Africa

1. A theology that could be called 'African' in any real sense of the word is something which only developed in the last 40 to 50 years. In 1977, John Mbiti (1977:9) complained that, although biblical theology '... is one concern of African Theology ... little has been written about it though a great deal of oral theology in this area is going on everywhere'. Ten years later, he still sees the necessity of developing an African theology. In his view, this has only begun (Mbiti, Ferrazzini & Löwner 1987:5). One of the early works in this process of developing and formulating an African theology is the book *Toward an African theology* by John Pobee, who tries '... to interpret essential Christian faith in authentic African language ... so that there may be genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African cultures' (Pobee 1979:22). The last decades showed a tremendous development in this regard. Knut Holter (2008:74) puts it like this: 'Half a century ago, one could hardly talk about academic biblical studies in Africa at all ... Today, however, we count African biblical scholars and African academic institutions with some structural openings for biblical studies in the hundreds.'

Note: This article shares some reflections on African theology from an outside (European) perspective. It wants to identify ways of looking at theology which could be considered in some way or another as 'especially African'. It was presented at the OTSSA conference in Johannesburg (03 Sept. 2014 to 05 Sept. 2014).

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and Germany. In this article, I shall look into this difference in more detail.

Let us now come to the first step of this article. Most articles referred to at this stage come from the book *African theology on the way: Current conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton. This book serves as a starting point for the survey, helping to identify ways of looking at theology which could be considered in some way or another as 'especially African'.

'African theology on the way': Identifying specialties

'African theology' as opposed to 'Western theology'

In his article on 'Biblical hermeneutics in Africa', Gerald West (2010) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal presents his hermeneutic as a development of the so-called 'intercultural hermeneutics' which is, according to West (*ibid*:23), the '... most common African form of ideo-theological orientation'. One important element of this intercultural hermeneutics is the following (West *ibid*):

... the recognition that African biblical interpretation is always in some sense 'over against', or in opposition to, the forms of biblical interpretation imposed by and inherited from missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies. (p. 24)

The time of colonisation and mission, which were connected to a great extent, strongly influenced theology in Africa. Perhaps one should rather say that it dominated African theology for a long time. It was the missionary theology which was imposed on African churches as 'the' theology of the Bible. There was no distinction whatsoever between the Bible and the theology proclaimed by missionaries².

It is, however, not only the influence of the missionaries in presenting the gospel, defining theology and building churches that has to be noted. The missionary influence also led to the prominence of Western (very often: German) academic theology in African theology.³ For a long time, for example, one had to study at least a few semesters of theology in Germany if one wanted to be a 'real' theologian in South Africa. These two forces, 'missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies', as West (2010:24)

2.The theology which came to Africa through the missionaries had at least two main weaknesses, as John Parratt (1997:3) points out. The one is the '... awareness that Christianity had been introduced into Africa during the colonial era, and seems to have prospered largely because it had been supported by the ruling European powers'. The other weakness '... was the tendency of missionary Christianity to devalue traditional African culture and especially to dismiss traditional religion as heathen or pagan' (Parratt 1997:3-4). This leads to 'the two chief concerns of theology in Africa,' as Parratt (1997:4) goes on to say, namely, '... on the one hand its relationship to political power, and on the other its relationship to African culture'.

3.In 1997, Bishop Desmond Tutu (1997:43) complained: 'We are too much concerned to maintain standards which Cambridge or Harvard or Montpellier have set, even when these are utterly inappropriate for our situations'. The Norwegian scholar Knut Holter (1998:240; see also West & Dube 1996:12; Holter 2008:71; Masenya 2003:233; Nzimande 2008:33-35) writes: '... South African OT scholarship has traditionally been so closely tied up with European and North-American scholarship, that it hardly deserves to be labelled *African* - in any meaningful sense of the word.' Gerald West (2008:49) also emphasises the fact that African biblical scholarship '... is constantly attempting to assert itself over against the dominant discourses of western imperialism and colonialism, while at the same time appropriating the bible [*sic*] as an African sacred text'.

puts it, are still very strong in Africa. Hence defining an 'African theology' always means to consciously grapple with this reality.

This discussion with the colonial past can be seen in almost every article used in preparing this article. The responses are manifold and in part even contradictory. What *has* found consistent approval amongst all of them is the stress on the necessity to connect the biblical truth to everyday life in Africa.

Integrating 'real life' and theology

Something that strikes a European theologian as very specifically African - even if it is not explicitly mentioned in any article - is the numerous citations of African proverbs in many of the articles. The very first sentence of the book is a proverb: 'When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion' (Stinton 2010:xiv). This may not sound strange to African readers, but for theological books in Germany, it would sound somewhat strange and inappropriate to start with a proverb.⁴ This shows one of the major differences between African and Western theology: African theology always strives to be rooted in everyday life. According to Holter (1998:241), this '... presence within the social, political, and ecclesiastical context of Africa' can be seen as a '... most characteristic feature of African theology'.⁵

This takes us to the next point.

Integrating 'real life' means the integration of non-academics

Gerald West (2010) writes as follows:

The African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy alone; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities. (p. 29)

Whilst there is a growing distance between the academic world and the everyday life of Christians in Germany (and also in many other countries of the Western world), African theology consciously tries to bring these two worlds together.

The editor of *African theology on the way*, Diane B. Stinton, a Canadian-African theologian, stresses this in her preface

4.Pobee (1996:165) writes: 'For those schooled in the North, theology is done in a propositional style of language. But African theology, while not denying intellectual rigour, is expressed also in proverbs, art, music, liturgy, poetry, stories and biography ... Proverbs, even if they have an anthropological focus and may seem to have a pedestrian nature, help to interpret the cultures of people, by making prosaic subjects stimulating and unforgettable.'

5.See also Ihuoma (2004:191, 213), Pobee (1979:22; 1996:167), Shorter (1975:29-31) and Snoek (2008:85-86). West (2008:38-39) distinguishes between two sets of interest with which we come to read and interpret the Bible: interpretive interest and life interest. 'The life interests are important, for they mark African biblical scholarship ... What makes African biblical interpretation distinctive are the life interests that African interpreters bring to the text ... African life interests lie at the center of academic African biblical interpretation.' (West *ibid*:40). Jonker (2008: 110-112) further divides these two sets of interest into seven contextualities: didactic, interpretive, productive, rhetorical, literary, canonical and meta-theoretical contextuality. In his view, the life interests are especially found in '... an interaction between what I have called interpretive, didactic and meta-theoretical contextualities' (Jonker *ibid*:113).

to the book. There she refers to the story of the Emmaus disciples (Stinton 2010):

Just as the Emmaus disciples shared their hopes and fears, their certainties and their doubts, their grief and their joy 'on the way' of discovering the Risen Jesus with them, so African believers continue to grapple with recognizing and appropriating the Risen Christ in our midst today. (p. xx)

Stinton (2010:xvii) calls this discussion between the disciples and Jesus a 'Christian palaver' which has many similarities with the African culture. One very important element in this kind of African palaver is the following: 'Every member of the community has the right to participate, whether in speech or symbolic action. Hence African palaver guarantees equality in terms of accessing speech' (Stinton 2010:xvii).⁶

Integrating 'real life' leads to a less strict and extreme theology

The fact that theology in Africa seems to be far more routed in everyday life than is often the case with European theological thinking has certain consequences. One of these consequences is that African theology often seems to be less strict and extreme than Western theology, which tends to be more interested in 'pure' academics than in everyday life. Or, as the late Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako (2010:16) writes in his reflections on William Wade Harris, he (Harris) '... appropriated the truth of the Bible not as patterns of "belief in" the truth, but more in line with the African pattern of "participation in" the truth'.⁷

In his article in *African theology on the way*, Gerald West (2010:24–26) depicts 'liberation theology' and 'feminist theology' in Africa. What is very clear from his presentation is that both theologies are routed in the experiences of everyday life. In respect to feminist theology (with their special 'African' implementations 'womanism' and 'bosadi'), West (*ibid*:27) writes: 'It is from within African feminist hermeneutics that the most sustained engagement with postcolonial hermeneutics has come.' This has its '... starting point in the realities of ordinary Africans'.

The catholic theologian Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator (2010:4) formulates this idea with the following words: 'Theology is about life.' Making sense of the experiences of everyday life, says Orobator (2010):

6. In January 2006, a conference with participants from Europe and Africa took place in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The theme of the conference was 'Exegesis and actualisation'. The papers of the conference were afterwards published (De Wit & West 2008). In his review of the conference, Hans Snoek (2008:96) writes: 'Nearly all Western European participants primarily imagined their professional colleagues as correspondents with whom they exchange views, making it somewhat logical to approach the actualisation more from a methodological and/or general perspective. Nearly all African participants emphasised that they preferred reading the bible [*sic*] with ordinary readers, a target group that is chiefly interested in the question of what the bible [*sic*] has to say for today.' See also West (1996:38, 2008:47, 59); West and Dube (1996:7–8, 14).

7. After defining his seven contextualities (see above), Jonker (2008:114) emphasises the need for a new attitude in biblical interpretation: 'Biblical scholars ... tend to step into mainly two abysses: either to claim that their own methods are the only that could deliver true, meaningful results ... or to claim that their own life interests are the only legitimate vantage points into the biblical text.' This new attitude could be called a 'liminal space' (Jonker *ibid*:114–115) where the biblical scholars meet for interaction. 'This liminal space could, however, also be the place where biblical scholars interact with ordinary readers and faith communities and *vice versa*. A liminal space has no hierarchies' (Jonker *ibid*:115).

... in the light of faith is what makes theology contextual. Understood this way what we call theology differs considerably from the exact sciences. Researchers engaged in the latter always strive to isolate their experience so that they can examine the data objectively, that is, without allowing their emotions, feelings and personal experience to influence the result of the experimentation. (p. 4)

Another consequence of integrating 'real life' and theology is that the personality of the theologian is not excluded from but consciously included in her or his theology.

Integrating 'real life' means integrating the theologian him or herself

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a consistent thrust in the academic world at German universities for a 'neutral' and 'nonbiased' approach to theology. Students in their first semester were asked to leave their childish faith behind when they entered university. Only in the last two or three decades has this gradually changed. It has now finally been replaced with an increasing realisation that there is no such thing as 'neutrality' when it comes to theology. This realisation is often viewed as something very sad, but which cannot be changed.

African theology in contrast gladly embraces the fact that we as human beings as well as our circumstances and cultural surroundings always were and always will be part of our theology.⁸ This is not a problem with which we have to cope but an opportunity to make our theology 'fit for life'.

Many articles thus contain references to personal aspects of the author. The editor Diane Stinton (2010) explicitly encourages the reader as follows:

Even before listening for the content of their ideas, get a feel for who the speaker is through the bio-data provided and through any additional research you can do. A person's theology almost certainly reflects his or her life experience, so try to discern what has shaped the person's view. (p. XX)

The last and most important consequence of integrating 'real life' and theology is the importance of the context⁹ for theology.

Integrating 'real life' means dialogue between culture and Bible

Gerald West (2010:22) cites Justin Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method. Ukpong (2000) says that the goal of comparative interpretation is '... the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so

8. Ihuoma (2004:193–194) puts it like this: 'It has been recalled that we have assumed all along that experience or the constituents of each identifiable context is the basis of every theological discourse ... In fact, all that happens in one's life have [*sic*] some religious connotations ...'

9. When we speak of 'context' here, it means what Jonker (2008:110) calls the 'Didactic contextuality: The context within which and for which biblical interpretation takes place' as well as the 'Interpretive contextuality: The context of the interpreter ...' and the 'Meta-theoretical contextuality' (Jonker *ibid*:112). These are the three contextualities that form what West (2008:38–40) calls the 'life interests'.

as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation' (Ukpong 2000:24). To West (2010:22f.), this is something that distinguishes African biblical hermeneutics from traditional Western hermeneutics:¹⁰

While Western forms of biblical interpretation have been reluctant, until recently, to acknowledge that text and context are always, at least implicitly, in conversation, the dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics... Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context. (p. 22f.)

And again West (2010):

While Western forms of biblical interpretation have tended to hide or omit the contemporary context of the biblical interpreter, African biblical interpretation is overt about the context from which and for which the biblical text is interpreted. (p. 31)¹¹

For Orobator, the concentration on the African context is most important. Context for him (Orobator 2010:3) is '... the primary factor of theological reflection in African Christianity and presents theology as a discipline grounded in the ordinary experience of Christians and their faith communities'. An appropriate theology is thus a theology '... that makes sense not only to the theologian, but also especially to his or her community' (Orobator 2010:4). Orobator (2010:5) writes: 'Context is to faith what soil is to a seed.'

The dialogue between the Biblical text and today's context can be seen as a very dynamic one. Jesse N.K. Mugambi (2010), professor at the University of Pretoria and professor extraordinarius at UNISA, writes as follows:

I opt for the ... approach, which allows unrestricted movement between the text and the context. On the one hand, the context provides the operational platform on which theology has to be done. On the other, the text provides the analytical stimulus for creative reflection. The theology of reconstruction is based on this two-way communication between the text and the context. (p. 144)

With the term 'theology of reconstruction', Mugambi denotes a theology which tries to reconstruct the biblical truth in light of the questions of today. Mugambi (2010) writes further:

This approach takes biblical hermeneutics seriously, discerning the meaning intended by canonical texts and relating that meaning to specific cultural contexts. The message takes precedence over the medium of its transmission. (p. 144)

10. In his paper for the above-mentioned conference in Stellenbosch, Hans de Wit tries to define the relationship between exegesis and contextuality. In his view, they should neither be separated from each other nor connected inseparably (he uses the metaphor of divorce and marriage). Instead, he speaks of 'living apart together' (De Wit 2008:28). De Wit (*ibid*:4) writes: 'Exegesis requires skills that are different from those needed in the process of actualisation. Therefore, I also would prefer to make a distinction between exegesis and appropriation.' In her response to De Wit, Makhosazana Nzimande sharply rejects this kind of a relationship. Nzimande (2008:34–35) writes: 'I do not see any positive factor in your option of "living apart together". ... Either we are "apart" or we are "together". ... Are you suggesting that we (the so-called, *Third-World* biblical scholars), stay where we are at, do what we are doing (appropriation) and that you (the so-called, *First World* biblical scholars), remain in your towers of opulence, do what you are doing (exegesis/critical analysis)?'

11. Ihuoma (2004:213) declares '... that the interpretative key to be adopted by African theology must be one that arises from and responds to the African context'.

We have just identified five features that characterise African ways of reading the Bible and doing theology: (1) the integration of real life, which leads to (2) the integration of non-academics, (3) less strict or extreme theology, (4) the integration of the theologian personally and (5) dialogue between culture and the Bible. We shall now take these five features and show how they are applied to the interpretation of Biblical texts and used in theological discussions. To do so, we shall apply them to the *Africana Bible* and the *Africa Bible Commentary*.

The Africana Bible and the Africa Bible Commentary – specialties applied

The *Africana Bible* is a project initiated by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Scholars from Africa and the African diaspora came together to present a broad view on what could be called 'African views on the Hebrew Bible'. The different authors were, as the editors write in their preface, asked the following (Page & Bailey 2010):

... to demonstrate how Africana traditions, lore, and lived experience can be creatively deployed in reading, probing, conversing with, challenging, (at times) ignoring, extending, and creating meaning from and in partnership with the First Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha. (p. xxvii)

This article concentrates on the authors with a clear African background and also only on the articles dealing with the Hebrew Bible, setting aside those on the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha.

The second book used is the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*. This commentary on the whole Bible was initiated by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) and produced together with the mission organisation 'Serving in Mission' (SIM). It is aimed for pastors and lay people in churches in Africa. In the preface, we read (Adeyemo 2006):

The *ABC* should be African in terms of its authorship and its content, which must reflect its African context. While remaining true to the biblical text, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities. (p. ix)

All authors of the *ABC* are seminary or university professors living and working in Africa. They were encouraged to '... use African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent' (Adeyemo *ibid*:ix).

The *ABC* is a book of more than 1600 pages. The commentaries on the following Biblical books were used for evaluation in this article: Genesis, Judges, Ruth, Job, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel and Malachi, as well as all of the 78 additional articles on special theological questions found in the *ABC*. This will give a fairly realistic view of the whole commentary.

The task was to see how the abovementioned specialties of African theology were appropriated in these books, or

in others words, how theory revealed itself in practice. In discussing the findings, we shall see some differences between the two books. Some of these differences are due to the different ideas behind the books whilst others arise from the fact that the *ABC* is intentionally an evangelical work.

Integrating 'real life' and theology

The integration of 'real life' and theology dominates both the *Africana Bible* and the *ABC* from the beginning. The preface to the former starts with the sentence: 'Culture and life circumstances affect the way people read sacred literature' (Page & Bailey 2010:xxv). As already cited, the *ABC* states its task as follows: '... [I]t must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities' (Adeyemo 2006:IX). Both books therefore thrive to integrate the 'real life' of African people today into theology. How this is done may be seen by looking at a few examples.

Both books make extensive use of African proverbs, songs, adages and metaphors. Whilst this may more or less be seen as 'normal' for African readers, it is not in the Western context. There are numerous examples in both books. 'African and African diasporan hermeneutics' by Bailey *et al.* (2010:19) starts with the adage: 'The grass is always greener on the other side.' 'Women, Africana reality and the Bible' by Madipoane Masenya (2010a:33) starts with a Zulu song from South Africa: 'What have we done? – Our sin is our blackness – Whites are dogs.' The same author opens her article on Jeremiah with a Northern Sotho proverb: 'A child who refused to listen [to advice] landed in "initiation schools" and claimed that the schools were his extended family' (Masenya 2010b:147). This proverb then serves as a kind of *leitmotif* throughout the rest of the article. It summarises the message of the book of Jeremiah, namely, 'one who does not listen to advice usually lands in trouble' (Masenya 2010b:147) as this was especially true for Judah in Jeremiah's time.

These examples have all been taken from the *Africana Bible*, but the same connection of theology and 'real life' is also found in the *ABC*. As already cited, these authors were explicitly asked to 'use African proverbs, metaphors and stories' (Adeyemo 2006:ix). There are numerous examples, but the case will be made clearly by looking at some statistics on the commentary on the little book of Ruth. The author of the commentary is Isabel Apawo Phiri. She was born in Malawi but now works at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The commentary takes up only six pages, but it cites nine proverbs from the Chewa in Malawi.

Another way to integrate 'real life' and theology is to link the theological truth to examples of everyday life. These examples could be either stories of true people or legends which reflect on situations from everyday life. The following are a few examples from both books, starting with the *Africana Bible*. In her already mentioned article on 'Women,

Africana reality and the Bible', Madipoane Masenya tells the story of Bathepa Maja, an old retired nurse, who engaged herself in establishing a community home-based care centre in her rural village in Limpopo. She then uses this story as '... a hermeneutical lens through which one can get a small glimpse of Africana women's realities in relation to the Bible' (Masenya 2010a:34). Davidson, Ukpong and Yorke (2010), in their article on 'The Bible and Africana life', use 'two popular African stories' to show the difficult relationship between the Bible and Africans. They (Davidson *et al. ibid*) relate the following story:

One story relates that, when White missionaries first came to Africa, they presented Africans with the Bible and asked them to close their eyes for prayer. On opening their eyes, Africans discovered that the Whites had taken away their land and left them with the Bible. The other story tells of an African woman who carried the Bible with her wherever she went. When asked why she did that, she responded that it was because the Bible was the only book that could read her. (pp. 40–41)

We find the same connection to everyday life in the *ABC*. In his article on 'Leadership', the Nigerian theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo (2006) starts with an African legend:

Many traditional African ideas about leadership are embedded in the Kikuyu legend about the despotic king Gikuyu who was overthrown because of his tyrannical rule and replaced by a council of elders, chosen from the older men of the community who had previously been warriors. (p. 546)

This example is very interesting because it shows that it is not the 'content' of the legend which is important in itself. One could easily replace this story with the statement that it happened often in history that tyrannical rulers were overthrown and replaced by people from the military. What is the effect of citing an old legend? Does it give credibility to the statement itself? It seems that the effect is just to link the theological truth to experiences of everyday life, which are somehow preserved in this legend.

Integrating real life means integrating non-academics

In his article on 'The Bible in twenty-first-century Africa' in the *Africana Bible*, David Tuesday Adamo (2010), a theologian from Nigeria, cites Justin Ukpong with the following words:

... the ordinary people's approach to the Bible is informing scholarly reading practises; critical reading masses are being nurtured at the grassroots, and the hitherto muted voices of the ordinary people are coming alive in academic biblical discourse. (p. 28)

According to Adamo (2010:28), this is part of the 'distinctive African tradition of interpretation', which began to emerge during the twentieth century. According to Adamo (*ibid*:28), the '... two African biblical scholars, Justin Ukpong and Gerald West, are the pioneers for this methodology'. Adamo (*ibid*:30) goes on to say: 'I believe very strongly that this type of African reading should be classified alongside other academic approaches to the Bible.'

In her already cited encounter with 'Bathepa Maja', Madipoane Masenya (2010a) writes about her experiences with this lay woman:

I am intrigued by her hermeneutics. It does not require a background in Bible studies or biblical language proficiency... This is a refreshing break from those approaches to hermeneutics and theology that most of us have been trained to employ, particularly during the apartheid era: individualistic, detached, spiritual, and futuristic. (p. 37)

There were no clear examples for the integration of non-academics into the theological debate in the *ABC*, likely due to the character of this book as a commentary. A decision was made by the editors that it should be written by biblical scholars from all over Africa. Due to this decision, no non-academic was asked to supply an article or commentary to the *ABC*. This is of course also similar in the *Africana Bible* where the cited examples are the only examples for this point.

Integrating real life leads to a less strict and extreme theology

The relevance of this point can only be shown indirectly since there is no intentional reflection on it, which – of course – is not really a surprise. Nevertheless, it can still be seen very clearly in the overall attitude of both books. The *Africana Bible* (Page & Bailey 2010) states it very clearly from the beginning in the following way:

... [It] uses various methodologies, some more traditional and others decidedly experimental. Contributors to *The Africana Bible* have been encouraged to 'step outside' of established disciplinary and genre boundaries and to employ African and African Diaspora stories, poetry, art, and music as actual dialogue partners in the interpretive process. (p. xxvii)

It then goes on to say: 'Readers should leave this volume with an appreciation of the remarkable diversity, scope, and tone that characterize modern *Africana* encounters with the First Testament' (Page & Bailey *ibid*:xxvii f.). Thus, from the beginning, the *Africana Bible* decidedly wants to be colourful, diverse and multi-faceted.

The *ABC* (Adeyemo 2006) has a somewhat more restricted basis for its theological thinking. It says that '... contributors to the *ABC* would be expected to accept the AEA Statement of Faith as a guideline for their work' (Adeyemo *ibid*:ix). However, this does not mean that there is not still a great diversity at work. Therefore, it (Adeyemo *ibid*) explicitly formulates:

The contributors to the *ABC* should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The theological editors will respect this diversity, within the bounds set by the AEA Statement of Faith. (p.ix)

To make clear the differences which are possible within the *ABC*, let us look at one example. In his article on 'The role of the ancestors', the Nigerian theologian Yusuf Turaki (2006) speaks about the place that ancestors occupy in traditional

African thinking. He then discusses whether or not it is possible to present Jesus as an African ancestor. He sees some advantages but also some problems. Then he (Turaki *ibid*) concludes as follows:

The best approach may be modelled on the one taken in the book of Hebrews ... Taken this approach, it can be said that Jesus has become the mediator between God and African society. Consequently, African veneration, worship and respect for the ancestors should now properly be addressed to Jesus as the mediator ... just as he fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the Jewish religious system, so he has fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the ancestral cult and traditional religions of Africa. (p. 480)

This approach to African religions and cults seems to be relatively moderate. Instead of bluntly rejecting the idea of the role of ancestors, Turaki tries to modify this idea so that it fits with the Christian truth.

In his article on 'Idolatry', Emeka Nwankpa (2006), also from Nigeria, takes a rather different position. Nwankpa writes:

Unlike Paul, some African theologians have called for accommodation of African traditional religions, claiming that the High God worshipped in those religions is the same as the God of the Judeo-Christian religion. Some even refer to Jesus as 'a paramount ancestor'. By doing this, they validate traditional religious beliefs and worship that the Bible condemns. (p. 866)

Integrating real life means integrating the theologian personally

There are many examples of the integration of the theologian with his or her personal history in both books. In the *Africana Bible*, there is one example that really stands out. In her article on the book of Job, Madipoane Masenya (2010c) depicts her approach to the book of Job with the following words:

In the story that follows, the narrator [*Madipoane Masenya*], a contemporary Job, picks up on some of the issues raised by the character of Job in the Hebrew Bible in own her [*sic*] struggle to wrestle with God amid suffering. (p. 237f.)

Masenya then tells about the tragic loss of her son in a car accident and her questions about this. 'Why did my son die?' she asks (Masenya 2010c:239). Masenya opens her heart and pours out her questions, her doubts and her accusations, just like Job did. At the end of her article she (Masenya *ibid*) writes:

So huge and sovereign is this Sacred Other, who has become and continues to be the object of our yelling, anger, criticism, and frustrations, that God remains patient with all those who wrestle with God in the midst of unjust suffering. If these sufferers persist in their steadfastness with God, they, like the biblical Job, will eventually say: 'I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you' (Job 42:5). (p. 240)

There are other examples for the integration of the theologian's life into his or her theology in the *Africana Bible* but none is as impressive as this one.

We also find examples in the *ABC*. In the commentary on Genesis, Barnabe Assohoto (2006) from Benise, one of its two authors, writes as follows:

It is very encouraging to have the Most High as one's defence. I (Dr Assohoto) can testify that there was a time in my own life when those who loved me felt that others were seeking evil power to destroy me. From two different sources I received plaques engraved with the words of Isaiah 54:17: 'No weapon forged against you will prevail'. Whenever my eyes caught these words, I felt a sense of assurance that I was well guarded. (p. 33)

In her commentary on the book of Ruth, Isabel Apawo Phiri (2006:319) speaks about one of her sisters who was named Manzunzo (suffering) because she was born two months after the death of their father. Tewoldemedhin Habtu (2006) from Eritrea, in his commentary on Job, tells about a habit in his own culture which shows similarities to the story of Job:

In my culture, when a person dies the bereaved family sit in mourning for seven days, with community members constantly coming to console them. With the pressure of modern life, these days of mourning have now been reduced to three. (p. 574)

To African readers, these examples may not be recognised as something special. However, in the Western context, it is unusual. Authors typically do not reflect on their own personal life experience in their Biblical commentaries. In African culture, it seems to be perfectly normal.

Integrating real life means dialogue between culture and Bible

The last and most important aspect of African Bible interpretation is its dialogue between culture and the Bible. It is not possible to show the abundance of examples on this point. The few mentioned here simply scratch the surface.

There are at least two ways to understand this dialogue. Both of them could be found in both books but with different accentuations. The first way is to understand African culture as the receiver in this dialogue. Maybe it would be better to speak of it as a monologue since the culture is not really active. The goal is to make the Biblical truth understandable and conceivable in the African culture. The second way is to see this relationship between the Bible and culture more as a kind of dialogue between equals. The goal is to further an inter-relationship between Bible and culture. In the *Africana Bible*, the second way is prominent whilst in the *ABC* the first one plays the biggest role.

The Bible speaking into African culture

Ellelwani Farisani (2010a), recent Chair of the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at UNISA, writes in his article on the book of Obadiah in the *Africana Bible*:

Ethnic tension described by Obadiah between the Israelites and the Edomites may have relevance in Africa today, especially in the context of recent xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa. (p. 181)

In his article on Micah, Farisani (2010b:190) writes: 'Micah's meticulous relevance for Africa intensifies as poverty, corruption, HIV/AIDS, and moral decay plague the African continent. Accordingly, there is a need for socioeconomic, political, and moral renewal in Africa.' He (Farisani) further argues as follows:

The most important way to reflect on the eighth-century prophet Micah is to use him as a new paradigm in a quest for an African theology of renewal, transformation, reconciliation, and reconstruction. (p. 191f.)

The examples for this way of letting the Bible speak into the African culture in the *ABC* are numerous. Instead of going through example after example, we shall rather look at an article on this question. It is written by the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako (2006), entitled 'Scripture as the interpreter of culture and tradition'. It starts in the following way (Bediako 2006):

The Africa Bible Commentary attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and in so doing to seek ways in which the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures. (p. 3)

Bediako (2006) then goes on to write: 'We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense of who we are in our cultures and traditions.' According to Bediako, (2006) this does not mean that our task is the following:

... [to] focus on extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture. ... The application of Scripture to our cultures is a gradual process of coming together, of life touching life ... To look for a once and for all biblical 'answer' to a particular cultural problem is to misunderstand the process whereby a community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and come to participate in that community. (p. 4)

Bible and culture as partners in dialogue

As already indicated, the *Africana Bible* (Page & Bailey 2010) wants the following:

... [to] demonstrate how Africana traditions, lore, and lived experience can be creatively deployed in reading, probing, conversing with, challenging, (at times) ignoring, extending, and creating meaning from and in partnership with the First Testament ... (p. xxvii)

Therefore we find many examples of this kind of mutual dialogue between African culture and the Bible in this book.

The Bible and African culture are brought into dialogue by ways of analogy. One example of this can be found in the article on Isaiah by Makhosazana K. Nzimande from the University of Zululand. Nzimande (2010:139) writes: 'Ancient Israelite and Judean struggles under the Babylonian empire that Isaiah sought to address are analogous to black people's struggles in post-apartheid South Africa.' She (Nzimande 2010) further argues:

Evidently, Europe and America have emerged as the 'Babylonian empire' of our time. Within this economically suicidal postapartheid context, the prophet's anti-Babylonian political

stance in Isaiah is deeply needed in levelling a sharp theological critique against the capitalist exploitation of globalization and the subsequent suffering it inflicts on South African blacks. (p. 142)

Another example for this way of analogy can be found in Madipoane Masenya's (2010b) article on Jeremiah:

The 587 B.C.E./1994 C.E. catastrophes in Judah and white South Africa, respectively, show that no human leader is indispensable. Thus human leaders need to remain humble and vigilant even as they serve fellow human beings who have equally been created in the image of the divine leader. (p. 151)

Examples for this kind of dialogue are rarer in the ABC. In his article on 'Christians and politics', the Nigerian theologian James B. Kantiok (2006) writes:

Jesus, too, did not separate religion and politics. In his mission statement in Luke 4:18–19 he declared that his ministry was to those suffering various forms of bondage and oppression, including economic oppression (poverty), physical oppression (diseases and disabilities), political oppression (injustice and oppressive rule) and demonic oppression (various forms of occult practices). These same evils plague Africa today. (p. 1027)

George Kinoti (2006), a theologian from Kenya, writes in his article on 'Christians and the environment':

If we are to be obedient to God and look after his creation, we must not ignore what is happening. Like Noah, we must work to rescue all creatures in danger of extinction – whether the danger comes from pollution, habitat change, overfishing, poaching or any other cause. (p. 618)

Again we can see that analogy serves as the way to bring Bible and culture into dialogue.

It is now time to draw some conclusions to the question raised as the topic of this article.

Conclusion

What can we as Western theologians learn from African theology? The answer to this question is not easy, keeping in mind that there is neither *the* Western theologian nor *the* African theologian. However, there are differences between Western and African ways of doing theology, which can stimulate and eventually even change our ways of theologising. Knut Holter identified one of the most important things to learn from African theology as 'the question of relevance': 'African scholars are, generally speaking, far more eager than their Western colleagues in emphasising that OT scholarship should serve church and society.' (Holter 1998:248). Holter (*ibid*:248) warns that '... without listening to these concerns, I fear that the guild of Western OT scholarship might ultimately face the danger of being of interest to nobody but itself'.

To really learn from African scholars presupposes an open-minded dialogue. The point of such a dialogue '... is not to

copy each other's interpretative experiences and concerns, but to challenge each other's more fundamental biblical interpretation' (Holter 2008:75).

If we as theologians want to be relevant for our society, we have to take the context of our readers and our churches more seriously in the process of exegesis. It is not enough to do appropriation *after* we have done our task of exegesis, but we should learn to understand context as something which accompanies the whole process of understanding biblical texts. Snoek (2008) stresses the fact that there was a:

... long discussion held in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the relation between exegesis and actualisation. For a multitude of reasons ... exegesis and actualisation have become increasingly distant from each other within academia. (pp. 92–93)

It is our task to overcome that distance to make theology relevant for our culture and society.

In sum, this calls for more wholeness or unity of theology and life, academia and church. The task before us cannot be simply to copy methods or contents of African theology. However, we can learn from each other. For example, the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu (1997) stress the necessity of an African theology:

Let us develop our insights about the corporateness of human existence in the face of excessive Western individualism, about the wholeness of the person when others are concerned for Hellenistic dichotomies of soul and body, about the reality of the spiritual when others are made desolate with the poverty of the material. Let African theology enthuse about the awesomeness of the transcendent when others are embarrassed to speak about the King, high and lifted up, whose train fills the temple. (p. 44)

And may I add: Let Western theology join in with this enthusiasm.

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