

Hearing the text, seeing the text: Mazamisa on orality and textuality



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Mazamisa, a dialectical thinker, argued in his article *Reading from this Place* (1991), that orality and textuality are complementary hermeneutical modes. This perspective disrupts the conventional binary that quarries oral traditions against written texts. Instead, a dynamic interplay is proposed where each mode amplifies the other's interpretive potential. This article revisits Mazamisa's perspective, investigating how oral traditions and written texts mutually enrich interpretation. Stressing the interaction between storytelling and textuality, the study aims to demonstrate the relevance of this reconciliatory hermeneutic for bridging cultural, historical, and textual divides in modern interpretation. Mazamisa's vision emerges as a crucial tool for navigating the dynamic relationship between oral and textual traditions in the quest for discovering the meaning of the biblical text.

Contribution: Prof. Welile Mazamisa's concept of *Dialectica Reconciliae* significantly contributes to African biblical hermeneutics by advocating for a dynamic interplay between orality and textuality. By challenging the binary opposition between oral traditions and written texts, Mazamisa promotes their complementary nature, where each mode enhances the interpretive potential of the other. These reconciliatory hermeneutic bridges the cultural and historical divides in South Africa between black and white readings, offering a more inclusive and contextual approach to biblical interpretation in African theological contexts.

Keywords: *Dialectica Reconciliae*; orality; textuality; hermeneutics; biblical interpretation; African biblical hermeneutics; Mazamisa.

Introduction

Prof. Welile Mazamisa stands as one among various South African theologians who demonstrated a profound mastery of German philosophical hermeneutics that is effectively applied to the evolving discourse on biblical interpretation in South Africa in the late 1980s (Hombana 2024:1). His scholarly contributions critically engaged with and challenged both Eurocentric biblical methodologies and what may be termed *African biblical approaches*.¹ Emerging as a New Testament scholar during a period of significant socio-political context of his generation, Mazamisa introduced an alternative philosophical framework, known as *Dialectica Reconciliae* (DR). This approach transcended mere textual analysis, evolving into a broader epistemological tool for navigating life's complexities. Given the historical and political landscape of South Africa at the time, such an interpretative method was both timely and necessary. Thus, it is reasonable to assert that Mazamisa was among the early New Testament scholars in South Africa – and across the continent – who actively engaged in decolonial and postcolonial theological projects from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Consequently, I wish to argue that his approach retains its relevance in contemporary hermeneutical discourses.

Orality and textuality: Complementarity in Mazamisa's *Dialectica Reconciliae*

In his article *Reading from this place: From orality to literacy/textuality and back* (1991), Mazamisa critically examines the relationship between orality and textuality, challenging the conventional dichotomy that privileges written texts over oral traditions in biblical interpretation. He (Mazamisa 1991) contends that responsible hermeneutics must integrate both oral and textual traditions as complementary rather than hierarchical. Drawing from African oral traditions, he highlights the

1. African biblical approaches refer to contextual methods of interpreting the Bible that emerge from, and speak to African worldviews, social realities, historical experiences, and cultural traditions. These approaches intentionally centre African identities, epistemologies, and communal struggles in the hermeneutical process, challenging imported Western or colonial frameworks. As Justin Ukpong (2001) asserts, the African biblical scholar must 'bring the African context into dialogue with the biblical text, not as a mere background but as a co-subject of interpretation'.

performative and communal dimensions of storytelling, which foster dynamic and contextually relevant interpretations of Scripture. This perspective resonates with broader African theological discourses which perceive biblical texts as living narratives, deeply embedded within communal memory and oral transmission (West 1999). Mazamisa (1987) advocates a reconciliatory hermeneutical approach that seeks equilibrium between opposing perspectives. This intellectual posture informed his exploration of the interplay between oral and textual traditions in meaning-making. As a self-identified Southern reader,² Mazamisa found this approach particularly significant in African contexts, where the spoken word remains central to both cultural and religious life. His argument in *Reading from this place: From orality to literacy/textuality and back* underlines the necessity of a dialogical and non-hierarchical engagement with Scripture, wherein both oral and textual dimensions contribute to the richness of biblical interpretation.

Hermeneutical implications: Between authority and meaning making

Mazamisa's reconciliatory hermeneutic also intersects with Martin Heidegger's existential hermeneutics, particularly in how it emphasises interpretation as a lived and embodied process (Heidegger 1927). Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* – being in the world – suggests that meaning is not located exclusively in written discourse but in the lived engagement with language, tradition, and community (Heidegger 1927). In African interpretive traditions, where storytelling, proverbs, and communal engagement with sacred texts are central, DR provides a methodological bridge between the written biblical text and the oral performative dimension of African religious life (Mazamisa 1987; see also West 2000).

Furthermore, DR challenges structuralist and poststructuralist hermeneutical approaches, such as those proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, which emphasise the autonomy of the text and the instability of meaning (Derrida 1976; see Hombana 2024:1–8; Lategan 1984). While Mazamisa (1991:67–72) recognises that texts function as independent entities, he insists that meaning cannot be entirely detached from oral traditions and communal interpretation. This positions his framework as a corrective to Western logocentrism,³ which often marginalises oral epistemologies in favour of written textual analysis.

2. A Southern reader refers to a biblical interpreter or theological scholar whose social location, identity and hermeneutical orientation are shaped by the Global South, particularly regions such as Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania.

3. In short, Western logocentrism is a philosophy that positions reason, language, and written discourse as the central means by which human beings access truth, often dismissing or undervaluing oral, embodied, or non-Western ways of knowing. Jacques Derrida is the key scholar who most explicitly coined and developed the concept of logocentrism as a critical term, particularly through his seminal work, *Of Grammatology* (1967). Derrida critiques the Western intellectual tradition's privileging of speech over writing and explores how this logocentric thinking shapes our understanding of truth and meaning. However, the roots of logocentrism can be traced back to earlier philosophers such as Plato, whose *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE) reflects the ancient Greek tendency to value speech as the purest form of communication and knowledge. In works like *On Interpretation*, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) further entrenched the association between logos and rational thought,

Mazamisa (1991:67–72) argues that African religious and cultural traditions have long relied on oral transmission as a primary mode of preserving and interpreting sacred narratives. In these contexts, oral storytelling is not merely a means of communication but a performative, communal and interpretative act that allows for fluidity and adaptability in engaging sacred texts. This perspective aligns with John Mbiti's assertion (1969) that African religiosity is deeply embedded in oral traditions, where knowledge and spirituality are transmitted through the spoken word, proverbs, and storytelling. However, Mazamisa extends this argument by emphasising that written texts, particularly biblical scriptures, are not inherently alien to African traditions but rather engage in a symbiotic relationship with oral hermeneutics.

The DR approach contrasts Western textual methodologies, which often prioritise the written text as the primary and authoritative source of meaning. Biblical interpretation in traditional Western exegesis has been mostly text-centred, with historical-critical methods emphasising authorial intent, textual structure, and linguistic analysis (West 1999). However, Mazamisa (1991) critiques this approach as limiting, particularly in African contexts where textual meaning is often mediated through oral performances, communal readings, and interpretative retellings. By integrating orality and textuality, DR allows for a more dynamic and contextually relevant engagement with Scripture, reflecting the lived realities of African Christian communities (Maluleke 2005). The interaction between orality and textuality as distinct; yet complementary interpretive modes has been a subject of extensive scholarly discussion across disciplines, including biblical hermeneutics, philosophy, anthropology, and literary studies. Scholars such as Ong (1982:11), Vansina (1985:45) and Foley (1995:37) have debated whether oral and written traditions function independently or in dynamic interplay, with increasing recognition that they mutually inform one another in interpretative processes.

Orality as an interpretive mode

Orality, as an interpretive mode, emphasises performance, communal engagement, and memory-based transmission. Walter Ong (1982:33) highlights that oral cultures operate through a form of participatory rather than detached knowledge, with meaning being reproduced through storytelling, proverbs, and communal discourse rather than static textual representation. In this sense, meaning is never

(footnote 3 continues...)

providing a foundation for later metaphysical and logical constructions of meaning. René Descartes, in his *Meditations on first philosophy* (1641), emphasised the primacy of reason and the thinking subject, reinforcing the central role of logos in accessing truth. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a key figure in structural linguistics, laid the groundwork for deconstruction with his ideas on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign in *Course in general linguistics* (1916), highlighting the connection between language and meaning. However, his structuralist view still maintained the centrality of logos. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), in works such as *Being and time* (1927), challenged the metaphysical obsession with being and presence, questioning how language shapes our understanding of existence while not explicitly critiquing logocentrism in the same way Derrida would. These thinkers collectively contributed to the Western philosophical tradition, which places speech, reason, and language (logos) as the defining mediums for knowledge and truth.

fixed but constantly reshaped through iterative retellings (Goody 1987:17). Albert Lord's study of oral epic traditions (Lord 1960:101) demonstrates that oral texts are fluid, adaptive, and context-dependent, contrasting with the fixity of written texts. Oral traditions, particularly in African and indigenous contexts, function as repositories of collective wisdom, often privileging narrative over propositional truth (Okpewho 1992:62). Foley (2002:21) similarly argues that oral traditions carry mnemonic and performative structures that enable interpretation through action rather than mere words. From a theological perspective, African biblical hermeneutics recognises orality as central to how communities engage with Scripture (West 2000:69). The spoken word in religious traditions is often regarded as having divine immediacy, as in African storytelling traditions where oral transmission conveys spiritual authority (Magesa 1997:42). Hence, biblical interpretation in oral cultures relies on dynamic re-narration and communal participation rather than isolated textual analysis (Ukpong 2001:585).

Textuality as an interpretive mode

In contrast, textuality privileges fixity, analysis, and abstract reasoning. Ricoeur (1976:92) argues that written texts introduce a level of *distanciation*, where meaning is separated from the immediacy of the speaker and listener. Written texts, by their very nature, become objects of interpretation detached from their original context (Gadamer 2004:117). This feature of textuality allows for historical-critical methods of biblical exegesis, where scholars analyse textual variants, linguistic structures, and authorial intent (Barr 1961:72). Textual traditions often emphasise hermeneutical consistency – the ability to compare, cross-reference, and critically analyse meaning across different texts (Fishbane 1985:27). This is evident in Jewish and Christian traditions where sacred texts are meticulously preserved and interpreted through commentaries, exegesis, and doctrinal formulations (Levinson 1997:184). In contrast to the situational flexibility of oral traditions, textual interpretation often strives for systematic coherence (Dockery 1984:58).

Orality and textuality as complementary modes

Rather than seeing orality and textuality as opposing categories, scholars increasingly argue that they interact dialectically, each enriching the other (Kelber 1983:19). Mazamisa's (1991:67) DR builds on this premise, proposing that orality and textuality are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. He suggests that biblical interpretation, particularly in African contexts, should integrate oral traditions with textual analysis to create a more holistic hermeneutic. John Foley (1995:83) refers to this as *oral-derived textuality*, where written texts carry traces of oral traditions, influencing how they are read, understood, and performed. This is particularly relevant in biblical studies, where many scriptural texts emerged from oral storytelling traditions before being written down (Kelber 1997:146). The

Gospels, for instance, preserve oral structures and mnemonic devices, reflecting their roots in oral tradition (Bailey 1991:44).

In African theology, Gerald West (2010:212) emphasises the importance of dialogical engagement – where scriptural interpretation actively incorporates oral storytelling, proverbs, and communal wisdom. Similarly, Musopole (1993:15) argues that African hermeneutics must prioritise both the written and spoken words, acknowledging that religious authority is not limited to texts but is deeply embedded in communal experience. The integration of orality and textuality challenges Western logocentrism, which has historically privileged written texts as the primary carriers of theological truth (Derrida 1976:98). Instead, recognising orality as an interpretive mode, decants textual authority and reclaims the interpretive agency of oral communities (Sanneh 1989:103). This has significant implications for African biblical hermeneutics, where oral traditions perform a crucial role in theological discourse and scriptural engagement (Ukpong 2001:589). Mazrui (1993:57) argues that scriptural interpretation in Africa should not be limited to Eurocentric textual methodologies but should also draw from oral wisdom, proverbs, and storytelling traditions. This aligns with Bediako's call (1995:69) for an 'oral-textual hermeneutic' (1995:69), where African theology is both biblically grounded and culturally resonant.

Disrupting the binary opposition: A dynamic interplay between oral and written traditions

The relationship between orality and textuality has often been framed in terms of binary opposition, where orality is viewed as fluid, immediate, and performative, whereas textuality is considered fixed, abstract, and analytical (Goody 1987:54; Ong 1982:11). However, recent scholarship challenges this rigid dichotomy, arguing for a dynamic interplay between oral and written traditions (Foley 1995:37; Mazrui 1993:41). This perspective recognises that textual traditions retain oral residues, while oral traditions increasingly incorporate textual elements, creating hybrid modes of meaning-making (Kelber 1983:22).

The constructed opposition between orality and textuality

Walter Ong (1982:33) famously argued that orality and literacy represent distinct cognitive and cultural paradigms, with literacy promoting abstract thinking and historical consciousness. Jack Goody (1987:17) reinforced this, suggesting that writing introduces institutional memory and epistemic fixity, contrasting with oral traditions' performative and transient nature. These perspectives established a dichotomy that privileged textuality as a marker of progress and rationality, often dismissing oral cultures as pre-modern (Derrida 1976:12).

However, Derrida's deconstructionist critique disrupts this binary by highlighting that even written texts remain open to interpretation, ambiguity, and performative re-engagement (Derrida 1976:98). He argues that writing is not inherently fixed, just as orality is not inherently ephemeral, suggesting a more fluid and interdependent relationship between the two. Mazrui (1993:57) critiques the Eurocentric privileging of textuality, emphasising that African oral traditions are not merely preliterate relics but function as living, adaptive interpretive systems. Similarly, Finnegan (1992:88) asserts that oral societies exhibit highly structured systems of knowledge transmission, comparable in complexity to written traditions.

The interdependence of orality and textuality

Rather than existing in opposition, orality, and textuality interpenetrate and transform each other (Foley 1995:83). Foley (1995:21) introduces the concept of *oral-derived textuality*, demonstrating that written texts, particularly ancient and religious texts, retain oral performative structures. This is evident in biblical narratives, where parallelism, repetition and mnemonic devices indicate a deep oral foundation (Kelber 1997:146). Ricoeur (1976:92) further disrupts the binary by arguing that texts are not merely fixed objects but exist within a *hermeneutical circle* that requires continuous reinterpretation, much like oral traditions. Thus, interpretation is never static, whether in oral or textual forms. Musopole (1993:15) builds on this by examining African storytelling traditions, noting how written texts are often orally mediated in African Christian contexts. He observes that the Bible in African churches is moreover performed orally, reinforcing the idea that textuality does not eliminate oral modes of meaning-making but rather incorporates them into new interpretative frameworks. This phenomenon manifests through several communal and liturgical practices. A prominent example is call-and-response preaching, where preachers and congregants engage in dialogic proclamation; for instance, in many Zulu Pentecostal contexts, the preacher might declare: 'The Lord is our shepherd!', to which the congregation replies: 'We shall not want!' – a form that fosters collective hermeneutics and theological affirmation (West 1999). Similarly, memorisation and chanting of Scripture are common among youth groups, where passages such as Psalm 23 are rhythmically recited, embedding the text in communal memory (Ukpong 1995; 2000a; 2000b). At amaXhosa Easter gatherings, the dramatisation of biblical narratives, particularly the Passion of Christ, transforms Scripture into a living, embodied performance that resonates with local political and existential realities (Mbiti 1970). Moreover, preachers often draw upon African proverbs and idioms to interpret Scripture, such as relating Proverbs 3:5 to the saying, *Inkosi ayibuzwa kuthunywa* [You do not consult the messenger when you can speak to the king], thus contextualising biblical wisdom within indigenous knowledge systems (Dickson 1984). In liturgical settings, dance and ululation – especially during readings of celebratory texts, for example Psalm 150 –

function as corporeal exegesis, enacting praise through movement (Bediako 1995). Additionally, testimonies during services are framed as interpretive acts, in which believers relate biblical promises to their individual experiences, thereby collapsing the divide between text and lived reality (Rhoads, Dewey & Michie 2012). Scripture is also sung, especially in churches where psalms are set to local musical idioms, such as the *mbira*-accompanied renditions among Shona Anglicans (West 1999). Furthermore, in many rural congregations, communal oral exegesis happens in prayer groups or women's fellowships, where Scripture is read aloud and each participant offers interpretive reflections grounded in everyday life experiences (Ukpong 1995). These practices collectively affirm that, in African ecclesial spaces, the Bible is not silenced by textuality but amplified through oral performance, which becomes both a theological and hermeneutical act (Bediako 1995; Mbiti 1970; West 1999).

Biblical interpretation and the oral-textual interplay

Biblical studies provide compelling evidence for the coexistence of orality and textuality. Werner Kelber (1983:19) critiques the assumption that the written Gospels represent a departure from oral tradition. Instead, he argues that the New Testament reflects an 'oral textuality', where written Scripture continues to function within an oral hermeneutic. Gerald West (2010:212) highlights how African biblical interpretation alters the Western logocentric approach, where Scripture is primarily viewed as a textual object. Instead, African communities engage with the Bible through oral performance, storytelling, and communal reflection, demonstrating how textual traditions are embedded in oral discourse. Sanneh (1989:103) expands on this, arguing that translation movements in African Christianity illustrate the fusion of oral and written traditions. The act of translating Scripture into local languages necessitates oral engagement, reinforcing the interplay rather than opposition between the two modes.

Postcolonial and African hermeneutical perspectives

Postcolonial hermeneutics further challenges the binary by centring indigenous interpretive frameworks, which often integrate oral and written modes of knowledge production (Bediako 1995:69). This is crucial in African theology, where Scripture is merely understood within oral storytelling frameworks rather than in isolation as a written text (Ukpong 2001:589). Mazamisa's DR proposes a reconciliatory model, recognising that African hermeneutics cannot be reduced to Western textual methodologies alone but must integrate oral wisdom, communal dialogue, and textual analysis (Mazamisa 1991:43). Levinson (1997:184) provides a comparative perspective, examining how Jewish *midrashic* traditions blend oral interpretation with written texts, further illustrating that scriptural traditions are not monolithically textual but dynamically engage with orality.

The future of orality and textuality in digital media

The rise of digital media has further complicated the distinction between oral and textual modes. Derrida's concept of *différance* (1976:102) is particularly relevant in digital spaces, where textual communication increasingly incorporates oral features (e.g. voice-to-text, video content, digital storytelling). Brockmeier and Olson (2009:76) argue that digital media is a hybrid space where textual and oral elements continuously merge and reshape meaning. This reflects what Foley (2002:21) describes as 'secondary orality', a condition where digital texts replicate oral features, such as immediacy and interaction.

The role of orality in African biblical interpretation

The role of orality in African biblical interpretation is fundamental, reflecting the deep-rooted oral traditions that shape African epistemologies and theological frameworks. Unlike the dominant Western emphasis on textual hermeneutics, African approaches to biblical interpretation often prioritise oral forms of knowledge transmission, such as storytelling, communal discussions, and performance. This section overthinks the primacy of oral traditions in African cultures, storytelling as a theological and epistemological framework and African biblical exegesis through oral hermeneutics.

The primacy of oral traditions in African cultures

Orality plays a foundational role in African societies, serving as the primary means of preserving and transmitting cultural, historical, and theological knowledge (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986:15). African traditions emphasise the spoken word over written texts, as knowledge is often stored in the collective memory of the community rather than in written archives (Mbiti 1990:48). This oral-centred worldview significantly influences how Africans engage with biblical texts, often interpreting Scripture in ways that align with their oral traditions (Magesa 1997:72).

Mphahlele (2002:119) argues that wisdom, proverbs, and folklore are the primary repositories of knowledge in many African cultures, functioning as a living archive that informs theology and ethics. Similarly, Okpewho (1992:94) highlights that African oral traditions exhibit complex structures, rhetorical strategies, and mnemonic devices, indicating high intellectual rigour. These rich oral traditions shape biblical interpretation as communities engage with Scripture as static texts and as dynamic, spoken narratives that must be performed, retold, and reinterpreted in different contexts (Pobee 1987:66). Furthermore, orality fosters communal participation, where biblical interpretation is not reserved for scholars or clergy but is a collective and participatory endeavour (Oborji 2005:34). This approach contrasts with Western traditions, where biblical interpretation is often an individual and text-based activity. According to

Bediako (2004:202), African Christianity embraces a corporate reading culture, where biblical stories are shared, debated, and lived out in everyday life.

Storytelling as a theological and epistemological framework

African theology is deeply rooted in storytelling, which functions as both a theological method and an epistemological framework (Kibicho 2006:177). In African contexts, storytelling is not merely a form of entertainment but a means of transmitting theological truths, ethical principles, and social values (Oduyoye 2001:145). Biblical narratives resonate with African audiences because of their strong affinity with oral storytelling traditions (Sanneh 1995:83).

According to Nyamiti (1999:58), African Christian storytelling bridges biblical narratives and local cultural contexts, enabling communities to reframe biblical events in familiar idioms. For example, African preachers often retell biblical parables using local proverbs and folktales to enhance their relevance (Tiéno 1990:27). This approach reflects what Ukpong (2000a; 2000b:12) calls *inculturated hermeneutics*, where African worldviews actively shape the interpretation of Scripture. Another crucial aspect of storytelling as theology is its performative nature. Musa Dube (2000:147) explains that in many African churches, Scripture is recited, dramatised, and sung, reinforcing communal memory and deepening engagement. This multi-sensory approach stands in contrast to Western textual analysis, which often relies on silent, individual reading. Thus, African storytelling does not merely repeat biblical narratives; it interprets, adapts, and contextualises them, making theology a living and evolving process (Kombo 2007:209). Furthermore, African storytelling is deeply dialogical, allowing for multiple perspectives and interpretations. Unlike Western hermeneutics, which often seeks a single, fixed meaning in biblical texts, African oral hermeneutics recognises that meaning is fluid and shaped by communal discussion (Gathogo 2008:96). This aligns with African relational epistemology, where knowledge is gained through interaction, dialogue, and shared experience (Imasogie 1983:61).

African biblical interpretation is distinctively oral in nature, integrating traditional storytelling, proverbs, communal dialogue, and performance into its hermeneutical method (Mutavhatsindi 2019:72). This oral approach challenges Western exegetical models, which often prioritise historical-critical and text-centred analysis. Instead, African oral hermeneutics emphasises narrative coherence, communal reflection, and existential relevance (Kalu 2008:183). One example of this is the use of African proverbs in biblical interpretation. According to Ayegboyan (2011:54), African preachers and theologians often interpret biblical texts through the lens of proverbial wisdom, drawing parallels between scriptural themes and local proverbs. This method not only deepens theological understanding but also ensures that biblical teachings remain rooted in African cultural expressions (Amanze 2012:102). Similarly, the performance of Scripture in African worship practices demonstrates the

importance of orality. As Walls (1996:239) notes, many African churches incorporate drama, song, and oral recitation in their engagement with Scripture, making the Bible a lived experience rather than a distant historical document. This performative aspect reflects the oral nature of early Christian traditions, where Jesus's teachings were first transmitted orally before being written down (Dunn 2003:34).

Another key element of African oral hermeneutics is communal interpretation, where the Bible is read and discussed in group settings. According to Ukpong (2001:587), this method fosters a corporate understanding of Scripture, aligning with African traditions of consensus-based decision-making and wisdom-sharing. Unlike Western exegetical models that emphasise individual interpretation, African hermeneutics values collective discernment and experiential knowledge (Tiéno 2006:67). Furthermore, oral hermeneutics allows for contextualised readings of Scripture, where biblical narratives are reinterpreted considering African socio-political realities⁴ (Gifford 2009a:83). For instance, themes of liberation and justice resonate deeply with African Christians, who often draw on biblical texts to address issues such as colonialism, economic inequality, and social oppression (Mugambi 1995:218).

The function of textuality in biblical interpretation

Textuality, or the authority of written texts, plays a critical role in biblical interpretation, shaping both historical and theological traditions. While African theological contexts often prioritise orality and oral hermeneutics, the written text also holds significant sway in Christian doctrine and biblical exegesis.

The authority of written texts in historical and theological traditions

The authority of written texts has been central to Christian tradition since the establishment of the biblical canon, and its role is especially pronounced in the context of the Protestant Reformation and the development of modern biblical scholarship. Scripture is considered the final authority in theological issues, as this textual authority underpins the belief systems of many Christian denominations (Käsemann 1971:128). According to Ehrman (2005:13), the written word of the Bible has always been regarded as a transcendent source of divine revelation, mediating God's message to humanity. This authoritative status is shaped by the historical process of canon formation, where texts were deemed inspired and infallible.

4. In African contexts, oral hermeneutics enables contextualised readings of Scripture by relating biblical narratives to contemporary socio-political struggles. During apartheid, for instance, black South African churches orally reinterpreted the Exodus story as a symbol of liberation, casting Pharaoh as the apartheid regime and Moses as a figure of resistance (Mosala 1989; West 1999). In Zimbabwe, the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 was linked through oral preaching to national heroes who endured under colonial rule (Bediako 1995). Nigerian Pentecostal sermons reframe Joseph's rise in Egypt (Gn 41) as a metaphor for divine promotion amid poverty, conveyed through testimonies and idioms (Ukpong 1995). Likewise, healing narratives in Mark 5 are orally enacted in Tanzanian communities as affirmations of Christ's liberating power (Nwaoru 2005). These practices affirm that oral performance is not only interpretative but also a theological response to oppression, making Scripture speak directly into African realities.

In the Catholic tradition, the written texts of the Bible are balanced by oral tradition, forming a harmonious interaction between both. Fitzmyer (1992:45) contends that while Scripture holds the highest authority, it is complemented by oral traditions and the church's magisterium in the interpretation process. In this view, written texts carry doctrinal weight, but they are not considered isolated from historical and ecclesiastical contexts (Fitzmyer 1992:56). Similarly, Vanhoozer (2010a:89) argues that biblical texts function as both a source of doctrinal truth and as part of an ongoing interpretative tradition that extends through the church's practices and teachings.

Textuality in the development of Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation

Textuality has shaped the development of Christian doctrine throughout the centuries, providing a foundation for theological reflection and doctrinal disputes. The textual foundation of Christian belief is found in the Bible, which was foundational to the emergence of various theological debates from the early church councils to the Protestant Reformation (Schaff 1997:102). For instance, the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) debated and formulated doctrines regarding the Trinity by referring to the scriptural texts, cementing the Bible's role in shaping Christian beliefs (Hurtado 2003:167). Similarly, the Protestant Reformation's *sola Scriptura* principle underlines the exclusive authority of written Scripture in defining theological matters (MacCulloch 2011:88).

The historical development of Christian doctrine thus hinges on the interpretation of biblical texts. Augustine's interpretation of the Bible had a profound impact on the Western Christian theological tradition, where he famously emphasised the literal and spiritual meanings of Scripture, creating a framework for understanding biblical text beyond just its surface meaning (Brown 1987:56). As biblical scholars and theologians such as Calvin and Luther emphasised, written texts are authoritative and were instrumental in shaping Christian dogma such as justification by faith and the nature of the church.

Moreover, textuality remains a key factor in modern theological scholarship, where historical-critical methods – such as source criticism, redaction criticism, and textual criticism – remain central to understanding the development of biblical texts (Bartlett 2011:107). Historical criticism particularly emphasises the role of written texts in their historical context, helping scholars understand the evolution of biblical documents over time and how these texts were shaped by their social, political, and theological milieu (Fowl 1996:62).

Challenges posed by textuality in African theological contexts

In African theological contexts, the role of textuality presents several challenges, particularly concerning the predominance of oral cultures and the communal nature of biblical interpretation. As Tutu (1992:45) observes, the

written text is often seen as foreign or foreign to African cultural expressions, prioritising oral transmission. In many African societies, oral traditions are central to community life, making the authoritative role of written texts less significant than living communal traditions (Gathogo 2008:137). This tension between oral and written modes of engagement with biblical texts poses a distinct challenge in African Christianity, where biblical literacy may be limited by the availability of texts in indigenous languages and the lack of formal education in some regions (Achebe 1989:72).

Moreover, African Christians often interpret Scripture in ways that resonate with their lived realities, which may not always align with Western text-based interpretations. Nyamiti (1999:42) argues that African theologians struggle to reconcile the universal nature of the written text with local traditions, particularly in the context of African liberation theology, which demands a reinterpretation of Scripture that challenges Western canonical structures. The historical tension between oral and written textuality is also compounded by colonial legacies, where European missionaries promoted written texts and a literacy-based approach to Christianity, which sidelined African forms of theological expression (Pobee 1987:69).

Additionally, critics argue that biblical textuality in African contexts can sometimes be disempowering, as it may emphasise the universalisation of doctrines that fail to consider local experiences and cultural context. Gifford (2009a:215) suggests that African theological interpretation must not be reduced to merely adherence to written texts but should involve a dynamic engagement with the text, incorporating oral traditions, proverbs, and indigenous theological concepts. Mbiti (1990:95) further stresses that African theological interpretation should seek to re-contextualise biblical messages so that biblical doctrines align more closely with African Christians' daily lives and experiences.

The interplay between orality and textuality in hermeneutics

The relationship between orality and textuality plays a vital role in the interpretation of Scripture, especially in African Christian contexts. While written texts (textuality) have long been regarded as the primary authority in Christian theology, oral traditions continue shaping how biblical texts are received, understood, and performed within African communities. This interplay between orality and textuality in hermeneutics requires a deeper understanding of how oral traditions influence the interpretation of texts and how the performative dimension of Scripture is actualised in African Christianity.

How oral traditions influence the reception and interpretation of texts

As a central feature of African cultures, orality shapes how Scripture is read and interpreted. African oral traditions such as storytelling, proverbs, and chants contribute significantly

to the hermeneutical process, influencing how biblical texts are received and understood by Christian communities (Asante 2011:49). In African contexts, oral traditions are not only methods of preserving knowledge but also serve as tools of interpretation, providing frameworks for engaging with the sacred. Oral traditions emphasise the communal and interactive nature of learning and understanding. According to Mawela (2002:123), African communities are often more concerned with applying biblical teachings to life situations rather than adhering strictly to the text's historical context. This pragmatic approach to Scripture mirrors the oral hermeneutical traditions, where the performance of stories or teachings is as important as the content itself. Ngubane (2015:142) argues that African Christians typically personalise biblical stories by integrating them with cultural narratives thus offering local interpretations that resonate with their lived experiences. For instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan may be interpreted through an African lens that emphasises hospitality and kinship ties rather than just moral or religious lessons (Kalu 2008:54).

The oral performance of biblical texts can also affect the interpretation of Scripture. Storytelling in African cultures is not merely a re-telling of stories, but a dynamic performance that engages the audience (Gifford 2009b:205). Biblical performances are therefore social events that involve expression, dialogue, and transformation of the text as it is shared within the community. Torrance (2006:23) emphasises that in various African Christian contexts, preaching is not a lecture but a performance that invites the community into a dialogical exchange with Scripture. Thus, the oral dimension of biblical interpretation extends beyond a passive reading of the text, engaging the community in active participation and communal reflection.

Furthermore, the reception of texts in oral cultures is often contextualised to address the needs and struggles of the community. This form of interpretation is rooted in the African worldview, where life, death, and the sacred are seen as interconnected and not compartmentalised (Hunsberger 2009:117). Bediako (2000:96) underscores the importance of this contextualisation, noting that African Christianity strongly emphasises the lived experience of the faith, where Scriptures are interpreted through rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices. This dynamic interplay between orality and textuality results in an interpretive process that is both grounded in tradition and open to new meanings (Afolayan 2007:144).

The performative dimension of Scripture in African Christianity

The performative nature of Scripture in African Christianity reflects how the text is embodied and actualised through rituals, worship, and communal life. For African Christians, Scripture is read and performed as a living text. Oral traditions, where knowledge is passed down through embodied performances such as chanting, singing, and dancing, significantly influence the performative dimension of biblical interpretation (Mbiti 1990:38). African Christianity's

performance of Scripture is not limited to the preaching of texts but includes the enactment of biblical narratives in rituals and worship practices that make the text tangible and transformative.

The performance of Scripture in African Christianity is also closely related to rituals of healing, deliverance, and empowerment, where Scripture is used as a source of power and authority. As Tshifularo (2005:83) notes, in African charismatic movements, Scripture is not merely a text but a tool for effecting change in the spiritual and social realms. Biblical passages are often recited, sung, or prayed in ways that convey their transformative power. The performative aspect of Scripture includes rituals of anointing, spiritual warfare, and prophetic declarations, where the text itself is seen as an active participant in shaping the community's reality (Heuser 2014:118).

In African Christianity, the performative dimension is also evident in communal worship, where Scripture is embodied in song, dance, and prayer, integrating the sacred text into the daily lives of worshippers (Okeke 2010:57). The interpretation of Scripture through music and dance is not only an expression of personal faith but also a community event that creates a space for shared experience and communal identity. Fiedler (2010:92) argues that these performative expressions are central to the African Christian experience, where the text is not merely a set of instructions to be followed but a living, breathing reality that is experienced and performed within the body of believers.

Moreover, African Christians often view Scripture as dialogical – a living conversation between the text and the present context. As Abrahams (2002:110) points out, African Christian interpretation of Scripture involves a two-way communication where the text speaks to the community, but the community also speaks back to the text, bringing it into their everyday struggles and life experiences. This performative reading allows the Scripture to take on new meanings, reinterpreted considering contemporary African issues, such as poverty, health crises, and political struggles (Goba 2008:161).

Conclusion

Orality and textuality are two fundamental aspects influencing biblical interpretation, especially within African contexts. Orality in African cultures involves the transmission of knowledge through the spoken word, storytelling, and communal practices, playing a pivotal role in interpreting sacred texts. African Christianity often emphasises oral traditions, where Scripture is performed, enacted, and internalised in communal settings, making Scripture dynamic and interactive rather than a static written text (Goba 2008:163). On the other hand, textuality underscores the authority of written Scripture, particularly in historical and theological traditions, yet it faces challenges in African settings where oral cultures dominate. Both orality and textuality must be integrated for a holistic understanding of Scripture in Africa, where the two can coexist to shape theological discourse. Mazamisa's concept of DR is a crucial

tool for reconciling cultural tensions between African traditions and biblical teachings. His approach challenges the colonial imposition of Western theological frameworks and creates a space for African Christians to engage with Scripture through their cultural lenses, thus decolonising biblical hermeneutics. By embracing dialectical reconciliation, Mazamisa facilitates a hermeneutical model where African oral traditions and biblical textuality coexist, enriching the interpretation process and ensuring it is both theologically sound and culturally relevant. This method affirms African experiences and provides a contextual theological framework that speaks to the African spiritual, social, and cultural realities.

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