

## **“For Better or for Worse?” - the (Christian) Bible and Africana Women<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In her quest for the continued close connection between the Christian Bible and Africana women’s realities, the author uses the folktale of the Rabbit and the Lion (cf. Ndebele 2007) as a background to portray the ambiguous post-apartheid South African reality. The South African context, which is the author’s social location, serves both as a point of departure and a connecting link between African women in South Africa, those on the African continent as well as women of the Africa Diaspora regarding the intersection of power, the Christian Bible and Africana women’s realities. The main question addressed by the article is: Why do Africana women continue to cling dearly to this Book that has, historically, mostly been used “for worse” in their varying interpretive contexts? The agency of these women in the interpretative processes is also highlighted. As one form of redress, a communal Africana women’s reading strategy is employed to read some of the texts from the Hebrew Bible.*

### **A SOUTH AFRICA, A COMPLEX REALITY**

The power dynamics “visible” on the post-apartheid South African landscape are complex if not confusing, particularly if one bears in mind how the country used to be during the period of *apartheid*. Why? Our context seems to have the appearance of what it is not.

In line with the material examined in this article, it can be argued that the Black African face of the South African cabinet may give an outside observer the impression that African epistemologies, philosophies and ideologies are the basic shapers /determinants of what South Africans do, be it in academia (for instance, theology and biblical hermeneutics as in the present text), government, religious institutions and elsewhere. The reality though, as it will become evident, is different. An argument along the same lines may be raised regarding the situation of African-South African women. African women’s experiences as they relate to the Christian Bible form the gist of the contents of the present text. Although they form the majority of the South African population, their lived experiences seldom, if ever, form part of the subject matter of the biblical studies in general and biblical hermeneutics in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first, albeit with a few revisions, read as the inaugural lecture at the University of South Africa, 28 August 2008.

In my view, on account of the general marginalisation of these women's lives (her-stories, cultures, ideologies, religions, and so on) in the South African past, as well as their past and continuing close connection with the Christian Bible, South African biblical scholars can benefit by taking African women's realities seriously. What is startling is the close connection with the Christian Bible these African women still enjoy, "for better or for worse", despite the fact that the Bible interpretation they received via seminaries, theological faculties and religious institutions, has not always been affirming.

The examination of the dynamics underlying the close connection between Africana<sup>2</sup> women and the Bible forms the main focus of this article. The reality of Africana women's experiences will serve as a hermeneutical lens through which the close connection between them and the Bible will be examined. However, before the article explores this close connection, it will exploit the folktale of "the Rabbit and the Lion" (cf. Ndebele 2007) in order to provide more flesh to the complexity of the post-apartheid South African reality. This particular folktale offers a helpful framework within which to understand the dynamics of ideology, power and Africana women's connection with the Christian Bible.

## B WHO HOLDS THE ROOF OF THIS CAVE? RABBIT OR LION?

In his book titled, *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts about our Country*, Njabulo Ndebele (2007) relates the famous tale of the rabbit being caught by the lion in the act of stealing in a cave, in a chapter called *The Lion and the Rabbit: Freeing the Oppressor*.

The lion had laid a trap for the rabbit, succeeded in catching the rabbit in the act of stealing. Lion was enraged and leaped on the poor creature, punching him. As Lion was about to devour Rabbit, the cunning little thief screamed that the cave's roof is about to collapse. Rabbit argued that both of them could be saved if Lion, who was stronger, would prop up the ceiling with his powerful limbs, while Rabbit rushed out to get help. Lion, caught up in the sudden dangerous moment and instantly grateful that he had not recklessly eaten a source of vital and prompt wisdom, sprang up on his hind legs, propping up the roof of the cave with his front paws. Rabbit sprinted away, and of course never returned. Lion remained there in the cave, a living rafter, with his dear life in his own paws and realising with dread that he was getting tired. Doom hung over Lion as he pondered why lions were also made to be vulnerable to fatigue. He prepared to be buried alive as he finally let go of the roof. Nothing happened. His relief at being alive was only momentary as it occurred to him that rabbit had utterly fooled him (cf. Ndebele 2007:106).

<sup>2</sup> The adjective "Africana" is used in this article to refer to African peoples or women (depending on a particular textual context) located both on the African continent and in the African Diaspora.

Ndebele provides two possibilities for the interpretation of the tale.

- Firstly, in the larger frame of entrapment and escape, the audience is presented with an unproblematic hero against an obvious powerful victim who deserved what he got. Although Lion's catch was stolen, he receives less sympathy from those hearing the story on account of his intention to punish (even with death?) a small but clever fellow.
- Secondly, another frame emerges from within the larger one, though quite subversive. The listeners are provided with a somewhat complex vulnerable victim, and a flawed brilliant hero. To their surprise the listeners discover that they might sympathise with the lion and have serious reservations about the rabbit, the thief (Ndebele 2007:107-108).

From the various analogies provided by the author (cf. 2007:108-109), two of them will be helpful in the present context. In the first instance, Ndebele argues that a perception exists that South Africa has been a cave facing inevitable collapse. Within such a context, it is claimed that the South African black people (lion) have been holding the cave as the white people (rabbit) have escaped to continue comfortably with their lives (considering the painful legacies inherited from apartheid which continue to stare most black people in the face like clustered bus ranks, poorly equipped schools, the mushrooming of many informal settlements).<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, from a gender perspective, one could agree with Ndebele's (2007:108-109) question: "Or, have black men left black women holding up the roof?" The latter scenario reminds one of the *שָׁתָחָת חַיָּה* ("Woman of Worth") of Proverbs 31:10-31. She is presented as working tirelessly (Pr 31:12-27), that is, holding the roof's cave, as her husband (Rabbit), sits at the city gates to receive the glory (Pr 31:23). She holds up the roof by preparing warm clothes for her family, caring for the needy (Pr 31:20, 27) while Rabbit, her husband and children, the objects of her industry, might be having a good time elsewhere. Is the Black South African woman not indeed left to hold up the roof of the cave from collapsing, exploited and disavowed by problematic Bible interpretations, while Rabbit (the male interpreters of the texts) continue to revel in the comfort zone provided for them by patriarchy and capitalism? Or, in the case of academia, is the Black woman not the one who holds the roof by foregrounding Africana women-affirming biblical hermeneutics and indigenous knowledge systems, while Rabbit (black men, white men and women) continue to cling so hard and so dearly to Eurocentric knowledge systems? The words of Dube (Dube 2005:193, my italics – M.M.) come to mind here:

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting new development which reveals some reversal of the racial power dynamics in our day can be seen in the mushrooming of white informal settlements.

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The ideology of modern imperialism and colonialism can be crudely defined as “nothing good can come from the colonised centres and everything good comes from the colonisers’ centres”. The colonised were constructed as savages and infants and to this day they are still called “developing nations”, who need to depend on the “developed nations”. This means that the religions, theories and methods of two thirds of the world are seen as “developing”. *In fact they get assigned marginal status in the academic halls and they tend to serve as optional and less serious scholarship by virtue of their status as “developing nations”. Hence (the) culture, economic, and political structures of the so-called First World are held to be the standard that can be and should be transported to and must be acceptable and usable in all other parts of the world.*

But there is another story in which the Christian Bible plays a prominent role. That story not only perpetuates colonisation and Western imperialism (and apartheid, one may add), but captures the unenviable situation of African women in South Africa or the continent as a whole (cf. Mofokeng 1988:34).

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us ‘let us pray’. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.

Firstly, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the female African reality, even more than that of its male counterpart, is the one which is clearly captured by the message underlying this story. Why? Although in a patriarchal context, African women were not afforded the right to inherit the land or to have control over its produce. Nevertheless, unlike their male counterparts, they were the ones who have cultivated the lands with hard labour. These African women also worked relentlessly in the traditional African grinding spaces or granaries<sup>4</sup> for the survival of their peoples. Hence the belief that if one strikes the woman, one is striking the rock (*lwala-mortar*), the source of survival, and will thus die!

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<sup>4</sup> The Northern Sotho proverb, *Tšhilo le lwala re tšere le tlo šala le ej a lewana* is translated as: The diligent girl is now married (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1505). The phrase, *tšhilo le lwala re tšere*, ‘we have taken the pestle and the mortar’ formed part of the wedding song when a diligent girl was getting married. The word *lwala* (mortar) refers to a grinding stone and *tšhilo* (pestle) is a small stone that is used for grinding. These two were basic for the survival of the people because the staple food had to be ground before it could be cooked. The word *lewana* which refers to the un-ground maize (grits) connoted poverty as the people who fed on it were mostly poor (cf. a more or less similar situation in the context of the early Africans in America). The underlying meaning of the proverb is that once a diligent girl gets married, poverty strikes. Similarly, her arrival in the new family marks the survival and even the wealth of that family (cf. Masenya 2004:135; cf. also Nzimande’s *imbokodo* biblical hermeneutics, 2005).

Secondly, this story alludes to some of the earlier encounters of the missionaries with African men in the villages, advising the former to go (with their Bibles?) and see the women (Pataki 2007). It is no wonder that even today, many churches within South Africa, on the African continent and in the midst of the Diaspora are still filled with women. In fact, one was astounded at the sight of an almost all-female church in an Afro-Caribbean context such as Jamaica (Leo-Rhyne 2003)<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is as if Africana women continue to “hold on to the roof of the cave” of Bible interpretation, theology and ministry in their own invisible way. These tenacious human beings continue to hold on to the Book “for better or for worse”, frequently in ways which are detrimental to their own wellbeing.

However, the situation portrayed in the above paragraphs is not that simple. It is complicated if not confusing. Independence in South Africa in 1994 also meant the advent of a new class of black elites with a concomitant widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, Africana women’s reality, like any other woman’s reality, is varied. In view of all these observations and remarks, is it not possible to argue that African women, who are holding the roof of the cave (lion), are basically the ones who belong to the working classes, while their middle and upper middle class sisters (rabbit) are having a good time elsewhere?

Who holds the roof of the cave of biblical hermeneutics in the South African context? Is there any single normative Bible interpretation? Are the powerful legitimate interpreters of the Bible for the powerless? How helpful are elitist biblical interpretations for those who are at the bottom of our communities’ socio-economic ladders? If the Christian Bible itself is an elitist (lion’s?) book, and if, in addition, the received interpretations have been alienating and death-dealing in certain instances, why do Africana women continue to cling to this Book?

An analysis of the power dynamics manifested in the tale of “the Rabbit and the Lion” reminds one of the Northern Sotho proverbs: *Serokolwana se senyane, se ikoketsā ka go nkga*: “a small herb increases itself, by means of a strong odour.” Rabbit, as s/he is mostly portrayed in African folktales, despite and/or precisely on account of her/his size, usually survives by using her/his wits and/or trickster strategies. Might the use of the Bible by Africana women, as outlined in the following paragraphs depict something akin of Rabbit’s survivalist strategies?

The racial power dynamics in South Africa as well as the tale of the lion and the rabbit constitute the socio-political location within which the relation-

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<sup>5</sup> In July of 2003, when the group which came to be known as the Pan-African Group on Religion and Poverty visited Jamaica, we were informed that Jamaica is the only country in the world with more churches per square meter than any country.

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ship between the Bible and Africana women will be discussed. This particular context not only serves as a point of departure in the analysis of Africana women's connection with the Christian Bible, but also as the main link that will connect African women in South Africa, elsewhere on the African continent and in the Diaspora.

Before a connection with the Africana sisterhood is made, a brief disclosure about the author's social location will be in order. After all, there is no value-free interpretation of texts - readers will always bring their biases into the act of reading.

The following aspects of her social location shaped her interaction with the material in this article:

- an African-South African woman biblical / Old Testament scholar
- with an ecclesiastical background in which the Bible is regarded as the norm
- in exile at home,<sup>6</sup> in the academy, and in the church
- an African woman whose scholarship has been heavily influenced by feminist/womanist/mujerista hermeneutic frameworks.

There is therefore no value-free interpretation of texts; in addition readers will always bring their biases into the act of reading. Brueggemann (1993:9, my italics – M. M.) has captured this succinctly when he says that:

We are now able to see that what has passed as objective, universal knowledge has in fact been the interested claim of the dominant voices who were able to pose their view and to gain either assent or docile acceptance from those whose interest the claim did not serve.  
*Objectivity is in fact one more practice of ideology that presents interest in covert form as an established fact.*

In the following paragraphs, an attempt at establishing the connections in the Africana sisterhood is made.

## **C AFRICANA REALITY: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS**

### **1 Points of connection**

Three vivid instances come to mind in my attempt to connect to Africana people's reality.

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<sup>6</sup> In terms of this foreignness in academia, Maluleke and Nadar prefer the designation, "alien fraudster" to depict the powerless state of Black South African intellectuals in a predominantly white academia. They (2007:5) argue: "They (Black intellectuals) are likened to alien fraudsters because what is available to them in the academy is not real power but fraudulent and rented power."

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### **1a Elmina Castle, Cape Coast, Ghana**

I experienced a shocking encounter with the Bible at the infamous Elmina Castle in Ghana in 2000. In an upper room I was confronted by a poster with a quote from Psalm 132:4. The gist of its message was: "God is in this place." God can endorse slavery according to whoever posted that material. In the view of the slave masters and mistresses, the deity could sanction the dehumanisation of less powerful human beings. The use of the Bible to sanction slavery, as it became evident from that poster, reminded me about how the Bible functioned in colonial and apartheid South Africa "for worse", that is, for the dehumanisation of black people. Mosala (1988:4) once correctly argued:

No other political or ideological system in the modern world that I know of derives itself so directly from the Bible as the ideology of *Apartheid*. The superiority of white people over black people, for example, is premised on the divine privileging of the Israelites over the Canaanites in the conquest texts of the Old Testament.

De Gruchy (as quoted by Mofokeng 1988:36) also states that the initial opposition to missionary work among Africans in South Africa was defeated by the assurance given by the missionaries that the Bible would, contrary to the colonists' fears, turn the indigenous people into obedient, loyal, and hard-working slaves (cf. Dube 2000: 3-15).<sup>7</sup> Is this not the same mentality held by many men who know very well that the Bible (if used in line with their interests, that is, the interests of those in power) will produce loyal, unquestioning, obedient women and girl children?

There I stood in that upper room, frustrated and angry, annoyed at what the tour guide told us about the humiliation of African female bodies at Elmina.<sup>8</sup> Not only were some of them subjected to sexual abuse by the slave masters,<sup>8</sup> but also, precisely because of their biological reproductive functions, their female bodies were subjected to a further gaze, to make sure that "bodies with child" would not go through the infamous "door of no return". What kind of productivity could one expect from a pregnant slave anyway? They were likely to be a source of massive irritation to the slave masters in any case. The Elmina Castle encounter reminds one about the power play between the Christian Bible / missionary activities, dehumanising systems such as slavery, colonialism and *apartheid*.

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### **1b Fort Jesus, Mombasa, Kenya**

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough analysis on the connection between Christianity (Bible), Colonisation / Imperialism and Civilisation in Africa, cf. Dube, 2000, 37-59; 1996:37-59.

<sup>8</sup> Lartey (2008:2) says: "Throughout the slave trade period, at different times, thousands of captured slaves were chained to cannonballs at the castle, and made to stand in the blazing sun. Women, when their capturers were not raping them, could be made to lift heavy cannonballs in the blistering sun as punishment."

The painful memories of the Elmina Castle were recalled as I stood at the ruins of a church in Fort Jesus, Mombasa, Kenya, in October, 2007. The Fort was built in 1593-1596 by the Portuguese to protect their trade route to India and their interests in East Africa. Here I was reminded of the painful marriage between (Western) civilisation, Christianity and commerce, a marriage which had led to the birth of Mombasa by the violent Portuguese invaders<sup>9</sup>.

Further experiences at the Martin Luther King Centre in Atlanta reminded me of some aspects of my life in *apartheid* South Africa. In the following lines, a glimpse of that North American (Africana) context is given.

### 1c Martin Luther King Center, Atlanta, USA

Although the present example may not be directly related to the Bible, slave narratives abound on how the Bible was used by earlier Euro-American slave masters to perpetuate segregation and slavery (cf. Weems 1993: 45-46; Thurman 1949:30-31). During my visit to the Martin Luther King Museum in Atlanta (2005), I was shocked by the startling similarities between the situation of black Americans during the time of the Civil Rights Movement and African South Africans during the period of *apartheid*. Apart from the posters depicting the violence done to the blacks by the whites during that time, like in our black South African contexts, my attention was arrested by the signs with the wording “Whites Only”. The latter signpost quickly transferred my memory all the way from the US, across the Atlantic to Polokwane, formerly Pietersburg. It is in Pietersburg where, as a child, I was confronted by similar signposts. Disturbingly though, as a young person the signs saying “Whites Only” did not anger me then. The answer came when I grew older. Why? At that time I was extremely politically naïve and ignorant.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese were astounded at the wealth of the region. Determined to control that wealth, the sailed into the harbours of the region, demanding that the ruler of the town surrender to Portugal and start paying tribute to the king. Resistance was met with violence. The entire campaign was run under the banner of a holy (Christian) war against the Muslims, or the Moors, as they were called at the time.

<sup>10</sup> Given my early initiation into Pentecostal theologies, with their rootedness in white conservative American missionary teachings as well as being a product of *apartheid* theologies, such a naivety makes sense. The separation between the sacred and the secular in these traditions meant that personal piety would get priority while engagement with social issues was regarded as an anomaly. Morran and Schlemmer (in Nadar (2005:70) conducted a study of predominantly White Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches in South Africa ten years before 1994. “They found that there had been a great exodus of people from mainline churches to the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, during this period. When questioned as to why they had joined these churches, a typical response was that they liked what they heard at these churches ‘there was no social gospel – it was the word of God’.”

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Having made an attempt to make the preceding connectedness between the use/abuse of the Christian Bible, African-South African women, and the African and Africana sisters, I now situate the Book within the contexts of Africana peoples.

## 2 The Bible in Africana contexts: A gloomy picture?

The information in the paragraphs above has hopefully given the reader a glimpse of the interconnectedness between the Christian Bible and the realities of Africana peoples. However, it will be presumptuous to assume that one can write a full account of the relationship between the Bible and all Africana women's experiences. The above overview of the resemblances among Africana peoples in general and the close resemblances between African-American and African-South African women's experiences, in particular, will enable us to throw some light on the bigger picture.

Taken at face value, the above picture of the relationship between the Bible and Africana women appears to be bleak, if not utterly hopeless. It cannot but raise the following question(s): Why do Africana peoples continue to cling to the Book which has been successfully used by the powerful for, among others, their humiliation, land dispossession, racial segregation, slavery, patriarchy / *kyriarchy*, domination/imperialism and neo-imperialism?<sup>11</sup> Why do Africana women continue to cling to a Book which men have been used in the past as well as in the present to perpetuate their oppression and marginalisation in the name of God?

What is at stake here? Could it be, as Okure asserts, that "they [African women] are close to life at the grassroots; they see themselves in the texts of scripture, sometimes too literally and in ways that oppress rather than liberate them" (2003:74)? Surely, there must be something special if not mysterious about this Book to enable such a close connection. Or might we agree with Weems, an African-American Hebrew Bible scholar (1993:32), when she says: "Scholars must realise that something is at work here that involves more than the reader's lack of sophistication, or a slavish dogmatic devotion to the Bible."

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<sup>11</sup> The television screens on the African continent (and elsewhere) are replete with preachers who proclaim a new form of what one could call a fundamentalist imperialist Bible interpretation. It seems as if the presenters are mostly white North American tele-evangelists and /or a few of their African disciples. They spew out a theology which promises much, yet delivers little, in terms of material prosperity. Like the *apartheid* theology though, it is rooted in literalist and spiritualist readings of the Christian Bible. It is no wonder that, like state theology, it remains detached from the harsh political, social and cultural realities of its listeners.

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Perhaps “that something at work here” is be the powerless’ unwritten strategies through which these women interact with the Book.<sup>12</sup>

Another related question is: In the transaction between the Bible, the powerful and Africana women, were the latter simply passive recipients or did some women, albeit in a small invisible way, participate in the deal without being informed by the masters’ interests and desires? If they were not influenced by the masters’ interests, why would these women choose to be informed by their own interests? If they had read and understood the Bible from the perspective of the powerful, a contradiction regarding the Bible’s message of God’s love and care for them, was bound to happen. I will return to this contradiction later on.

The history / herstory of the Christian Bible in Africana peoples’ contexts is filled with examples of how they found the same Book useful for their liberation and survival. The following examples can be listed:

- the use of the Bible by African slaves in America (Thurman 1949; Raboteau 1978) in the early days of slavery;
- its utilisation by black theologians and biblical scholars in the US (Cone 1969; Felder 1991; Grant & Bailey 1995);
- the rise of black feminist and womanist theologies and biblical hermeneutics in the North American context (Cannon 1988; Weems 1993 in bibliography);
- the origins of African theologies on the continent (Bediako 1995) Mbiti 1989);
- the theologies propounded by contextual, black, liberation and African theologians in South Africa (Mofokeng 1988; Mosala & Tlhagale 1986; Mosala 1989);
- the theologies of women who constitute the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Fabella and Oduyoye 1989; Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992; Okure 2003);
- the existence of many unnamed African women Bible Study groups (Phiri *et al.* 2002);
- the numerous churches which abound on the African continent and its Diaspora.

How successful the efforts mentioned in the list were and continue to be is a different matter though. What can be assumed is that the Christian Bible has

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<sup>12</sup> Maluleke and Nadar (2004:7-8) assert: “Behind most notions of agency is the basic suggestion that human beings, even the most oppressed, marginalised and seemingly destitute among them, have the potential, possibility and even ability to act as (moral) agents of transformation and change in their own lives and in the lives of others.”

been used and is continually being used, also “for better,” in the varying Africana contexts.

To be more specific, and in terms of exploring the close connection of Africana women with the Christian Bible, let us look at the power dynamics in the interaction between the Bible and Africana women reality.

### **3 The Bible in women’s contexts: powerful Word or powerful interpreter?**

#### **3a What attracts Africana women to the Book?**

It is noteworthy that the Bible was the only (religious) cultural document that was made available to many (aural) Africana peoples in their earlier encounters with Western literacy (Mofokeng 1988:40-41; Weems 1993:35-36). The bond that developed between them and the Bible in their history of literacy impeded them in disposing of it. The reluctance to discard the Bible persevered despite the fact that it has been used “for worse” in their lives. As there is no other “similar” document, many Africana peoples, desperate for the good news of liberation, continue to cling to it.

In my view, over and above the reluctance to discard the Bible, there is another crucial factor that enables the Book to maintain its privileged role in the lives of many readers. It is the “authority” with which the Book as Bible has been invested as the “Word of God”. The notion of the Bible as Word of God added to the incurably religious nature of African peoples (Mbiti 1989:1) as well as the manipulation of the Bible by the powerful interpreters may bring about the act of “surrender” of power by the powerless. This act is neither passive nor hopeless, but calculated. In most cases, one may argue that such an act is inspired by the mystery of the women’s encounter with the Sacred Other through the Book. Thus Weems’ assertion (1993:32) that the women’s continued attachment to the Bible cannot merely be designated as a slavish commitment to the Bible, is not far off the mark. (1993:32).

In a personal conversation with her (cf. 2001), I was struck by the coincidence of the African American and African-South African interpretative contexts in terms of familiar biblical texts most Africana men, even those who never set their foot in church, would use (cf. Masenya 2005c:188):

- **Ephesians 5:22-23:** “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour,” and
- **1 Corinthians 7:5:** “Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourself to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you, because of your lack of self-control.”

The above scenario compels one to ask the following questions: Within a context in which the Bible is literally assumed to be the norm to guide lives (cf. many Africana women's contexts), what attracts men, even those who have no dealings with the Bible, to *such* texts? Is their attraction due to their commitment to God or to a desire to control? In other words, are they inspired by God's Spirit or do they simply follow the patriarchal ideologies of the society whereby these "control" texts come in handy for holding sway over female bodies in God's name? Would the Holy Spirit endorse pain and suffering? Commenting on the detrimental interpretation of the divorce texts in the Full Gospel Church (FGC) in Kwazulu Natal, Nadar (2005:73, my italics – M.M.) rightly asks:

Can an interpretation that results in the deaths of women who are already victims of abuse, be the interpretation of the Spirit? I suggest not. If we are truly to understand the passage quoted in its own context, the context of the Jewish laws concerning divorce, and our own context, then any law passed by the Church saying that a victim of abuse is not allowed to leave her husband, "because the Bible says so", cannot testify to the work of the Spirit. *The Spirit that gives life surely cannot read the text in a way that leads to destruction, and surely we cannot read the Spirit as one who creates death rather than life.*

I want to suggest that what is actively at work in these instances, is the craving for power to control those whose power *kyriarchy* is not legitimated. It cannot be regarded as the male believer's commitment to the Bible as Word of God. It may be argued that this same power game enabled some of the early missionaries, the colonisers, the slave masters, the apartheid ideologues and practitioners to use the Bible "for worse" to dispossess, enslave and tame, in the name of the deity. It is therefore incumbent upon those Bible readers who continue to cling to this Book "for better or for worse" to watch out for such problematic reading strategies. Informed by their *own* experiences and encounters with the Sacred Other, they ought to foil such strategies as they continue to use the Bible for their own empowerment.

One such hermeneutic strategy is used by Howard Thurman's grandmother in the following story, which we now consider.

### **3b A grandmother's aural reading**

Thurman's grandmother's narrates the following episode (cf. Thurman 1949:30-31, my italics – M.M.):

Two or three times I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again; but the Pauline

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epistles, never - except, at long intervals, the thirteenth Chapter of 1 Corinthians.... With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three of four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your master..., as unto Christ'." Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. *I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.*

At work in this narrative is an attempt by someone on the margins to subvert the Bible reading strategies of those at the centre of power. Despite the fact that the Bible's message was communicated to her aurally, obviously to serve the interests of the powerful, Thurman's grandmother was spiritually mature enough to know which Bible texts were affirming to her in terms of her relationship with God and her understanding of God's nature. I call her reading strategies an aural hermeneutics of resistance.

Underlying an aural hermeneutics of resistance is:

- *A selective hermeneutics:* The grandmother's lengthy exposure to the hermeneutic strategies and ploys of the slave masters enabled her to develop strategies to discern between the living Word of God and the word of the master. She was able to employ a hermeneutics very basic in women's liberationist biblical and theological discourses, namely a hermeneutics of suspicion, with which she could selectively appropriate passages of the Book for her life.
- *A self-conscious and self-affirming hermeneutics:* The marginalised of society have a way of carving their own space for survival if not for well-being. Maluleke and Nadar (2004:8) are correct when they argue that (even) "[t]he most wretched victims of oppressions have ways and means, if not for liberation, definitely for survival and self-preservation so that they may live to face another day". Although Thurman's grandmother knew her precarious condition as a slave woman, she seems to me to have been convinced that despite the slave masters' lack of affirming her humanity and her preciousness in the light of the Sacred Other, she could affirm her own worth as a human being against all odds. Could one speculate that her personal encounters with God through (and outside of) the Bible might have contributed to the affirmation of her self-worth?

- *A life-giving hermeneutics*: Her hermeneutic strategy of resistance to the death-dealing Bible interpretations of the powerful enabled her to continue her journey of faith successfully. Being connected to the life-giving Spirit, she was able to relate with God easily through specific biblical texts. Despite the efforts of the powerful Bible interpreters to the contrary, Thurmann's grandmother remained able to experience the "mystery" and "inspiration" of the Bible as Word of God.

These invisible unrecorded hermeneutic strategies of Africana women interpreting the Bible have sustained them through many years. The strategies have enabled them to continue to hold on to the collapsing (?) roof of the cave of Bible interpretation and church business. However, what proves to be disturbing and what calls for the attention of concerned and discerning interpreters of the Bible, is the following: These women not only hold on to the roof of the cave of Bible interpretation, ensuring the spiritual welfare of many, but they were also not theologically fed in part by the preachers and teachers of the Word.

The reason for this can be found in inadequate Bible interpretations which made the battered life of an Africana woman believer just more miserable. These interpretations are inadequate because they are the logical consequence of a dualistic Western mentality. Moreover, Africana women (and men) inherited it from some of the missionaries, and *apartheid* Bible teachers and preachers. We share with them theologies and hermeneutic biblical frameworks based on a mentality Martin (1987:375) has called "the split consciousness inherited with the Cartesian Newtonian system". Doing biblical studies within this framework allows the practitioners to dwell more on the contexts which produced biblical interpretations (cf. historical-critical criticism)<sup>13</sup> while ignoring the troubled contexts of Bible readers whose lives of misery have been heavily influenced by our detached/elitist biblical interpretation. These hermeneutical strategies are obstructive in that they successfully cause many oppressed peoples to turn a blind eye towards atrocities done to them through the use of the same Bible (West 1991:32-34; Mosala 1989:19-20).

Elsewhere I argue (Masenya 2005b:52; cf. also Nadar 2005:67) the following:

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<sup>13</sup> In the *bosadi* approach I (cf. Masenya 1996:10-24; 2004:8-20) advocate for the combination of text-oriented approaches to the Bible (cf. the historical-critical approaches in particular) and the context-oriented approaches. On the whole, in a context (cf. the one discussed in the present text) framed by a belief in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, and with the literalistic approaches to the text as a result, modern readers will benefit from an understanding of the socio-historical contexts from which texts originated.

For African-South African Pentecostal Churches, the pietistic message of salvation and a better life in the hereafter continues to reign supreme. Such a message, which although at times was helpful in detaching its hearers from the harsh realities of every-day life, functioned well as a powerful subjugating tool in the hands of the white Pentecostal missionary pioneers, and their spiritual progeny. In such contexts, atrocities and injustices may be justified in the name of God, and remain patently unchallenged. Hence the Bible can be used by the powerful, as a wounding sword to unsuspecting powerless yet, faithful masses.

Similarly, many women (and other marginalised people sitting in the church pews) are today being exhorted to focus on serious “heavenly/spiritual” business. In the process, women are persuaded, through the use of the Bible, to call our own oppression, or violence done to our own bodies in the name of a god, a “worldly” matter that needs to be shunned. In the process, women’s own female experience becomes alienated. The valid concerns of women become relegated to the “things of the world” which must be shunned.<sup>14</sup> When that happens, the oppressors (rabbit) continue to smugly walk away comfortable in their abuse of power. Again the interests of the powerful (rather than those of God or the deep desire of Christian believers to share in the future eschatological bliss), are the ones being served. The words of Mosala (1988:4), said in the apartheid context, still hold for Africana women’s reality with the Bible and its interpretation today: “Increasingly, therefore, biblical appropriation in South Africa became [become] alienating to Blacks [Africana women] as their reality constantly contradicted their supposed inclusion in the biblically based love of God” (words in square brackets added – M. M.).

### **3c The Bible and Africana Women's Realities: A Review**

The dynamics of the Christian Bible, power, Africana women and their reading strategies, can be summarised as follows:

The Christian Bible continues to wield a significant influence over the lives of many Africana people, particularly the women. The historical impact of this cultural document on the lives of many South Africans, even across the racial divide, continues to be manifested in overt and covert ways in our lives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Commenting about a more or less similar situation in the Indian Pentecostal Church in Kwazulu Natal, Nadar (2005:69-70) asserts: “Even those women who are ordained as ministers find it difficult to bring issues of gender into their sermons since they are accused of becoming ‘worldly’ in their interests, and thereby deviating from the ‘spiritual’.”

<sup>15</sup> A recent survey (Cohen 2008:6) on the comparison between the lives of South African leaders and the people at grass roots bears witness to this: “The elites have high levels of confidence in the constitutional court as well as the president and

The fact that the Book has been historically abused even as it continues to be used by those in power to serve their own interests, has hopefully become evident. The abuse of the Bible continues to manifest itself in the persistent unequal power relations between men and women, black and white people, the rich and the poor, the First and the Two Thirds world, etcetera. That the marginalised, including Africana women, use the same Book for their own well-being and survival is also true (cf. Thurman's grandmother's story above). Nevertheless, many of these Bible readers keep on feeding on the inherited theologies and hermeneutic frameworks based on a dualistic mentality. Within the latter framework, the Bible can easily serve to nurture injustices while its faithful women adherents continue to be encouraged to focus on the spiritual. Violence against women (including numerous AIDS-related deaths) persists unabatedly while unsuspecting women victims are encouraged to focus only on prayer and the reading of the Word (cf. Masenya 2003:113-127).

*All* of us, who have vested interest in the intersection between the Christian Bible, its interpretation and its overall impact on readers' lives could benefit from the following admonitions:

- Those in power should be wary of exploiting the powerless in the name of God for their own purposes.
- Bible scholars, theologians, clergy – all involved in the task of Bible interpretation – will do well to bring a balance to the interpretive task by offering a holistic package. In addressing all the needs (physical, economic, political, spiritual) of the readers', bible interpreters will do well not to only remain in the past of the biblical text but also , to deliberately seek to be informed by the needs of current Bible readers.
- The Bible readers who are adversely affected by the death-dealing reading strategies reflected in this article need to design liberating, life-giving strategies in their continued interaction with The Book. These strategies will enable them to read the Bible as the powerless. Even as they learn to identify with their own voice within the text, the story of Thurman's grandmother should challenge them towards self-consciousness and self-affirmation as sharing equally in God's unconditional love for all humanity and earth.

In the attempt to redress the gaps brought on by the received problematic biblical hermeneutics in varying Africana women's contexts, the discussion now turns to an example of an Africana woman's Bible reading strategy regarding a theme from a few texts in the Writings (*Ketubim*), namely the tension between the "individual" and the "community".

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environmental agencies. The public on the other hand, places its highest level of confidence in the church."

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**D AN AFRICANA READING OF SOME OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM TEXTS**
**1 The tension between the “individual” and the “community” in some Wisdom Texts**

Just as in biblical proverbs, particularly the *mashal* (saying) which populates some of the major divisions of the book of Proverbs (10:1-15:33; 16:1-22:16), the original setting of African (Northern Sotho) sayings/proverbs is difficult to determine (Masenya 1989:88-90). Suffice it to say that these proverbs (Hebrew and Northern Sotho) originated from an oral setting as the product of the accumulated wisdom of the people. Proverbs are communal property. Although they might have been coined by certain individuals, they were not coined within a vacuum. Therefore, even as their speakers have uttered them through the years, as individuals (cf. *dikgoshi* in a court /royal setting, or parents in a family setting, elders in a village context) they knew that they were communicating the wisdom of their communities. Given the corporeal mentality of African peoples, in these instances the line between the individual and the community becomes blurred.

Scholars who choose to see some “liberatory” aspects in the biblical Book of Proverbs, find its contents at times useful when read from the perspective of the marginalised (cf. Ceresco 1999, Fontaine 1992, Murphy 1990). They are quick to foreground the experiences of the individual as a strongpoint that could be used by the readers on the margins of our societies towards their affirmation.<sup>16</sup>

Fontaine (1992:147) argues:

Wisdom values personal experience as the starting point for doing theology and constructing a model of how the world works. [...] For those who have mostly been excluded from participation in the great traditions of covenant and prophecy, the wisdom traditions’ emphasis on the world of daily life offers a basis for valuing women’s experience as an authentic, revelatory way of knowing and being.

Ceresco (1999:181) comes to more or less the same conclusion, lauding the “individual-oriented nature of Israelite wisdom,” when he says that as Job interacted with his friends (who, one could say, reflected the view of the traditional wisdom of the community: cf. tradition [8:8-10]; “common sense” [4:7; 5:27] and revelation [4:13-14]), eventually Job appealed to his individual experience. Interestingly, the deity is portrayed as in the long run supporting the claims of Job (the wisdom of the individual? cf. 42:7).

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<sup>16</sup> On the centrality of human experience notable in the Book of Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth, cf. Ceresco 1999:181 and Murphy 1990).

It makes sense to extoll the experiences of individuals in the context of domination and suppression, a context in which the interests of those in power usually dominate. Those readers whose interactions with the Bible (cf. Africana women) have mostly been marginalised either in the church, academia and elsewhere, are likely to support such an elevation.

All the same, what is noteworthy is that these apparently “individual” sayings are a product of communal wisdom. If marginalised individuals uttered them, they would have uttered them to validate communal wisdom, either overtly or covertly. For example, if a man challenges the integrity of a woman in a position of leadership, that woman leader might cite in defence the following proverb: *Mmago ngwana o swara thipa ka bogaleng* (mother holds a knife by its cutting edge). Although the use of this proverb in this context affirms the ability, courage and strength of *basadi* (women) as mothers, the woman leader’s use of the proverb still reflects the wisdom of African people concerning the value attached to women as mothers. If the critique of her leadership came from a man who is located within the hegemonic culture, the woman’s response would then have communicated a dual lesson: be wary of despising female leadership, particularly African female leadership!

Coming from an African communal context (consider the expression “I am because you are”, or *Motho ke motho ka batho*) though, I challenge wisdom scholars’ absolutising<sup>17</sup> of the individual experience foregrounded by biblical Proverbs. Indeed it can be argued that some of the readers, depending on their social location, may have the luxury to “normalise” such a view. Rooted as it is in the individualistic mindset of the West, such a view will not always hold water in the African-South African context. Why?

The first reason is that in a context where a people have been stripped of their identity, the fight for the recovery of that identity cannot be restricted to an individual. To be sure, former South African politics have taught the then oppressed that “an injury to one is an injury to all” whilst the Northern Sotho proverb: *Tau tša hloka seboka di šiwa ke nare e hlotša* (The lions that are not united can be outrun by a limping “harmless” animal!) says it all.

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<sup>17</sup> I deliberately use the verb “absolutise” to underscore the fact that a particular view, naturally informed by a particular social location, should not assume a universal normative status. For example, women in the Two Thirds World contexts, including African women, cannot afford to wage the struggle against injustices perpetrated against them, as though they are foreigners to their own context. For the most part, given the harsh reality of the global negative image Africa receives publicly, those positive elements and values of Africa’s cultures should also inform us in our struggle for liberation and well-being. While the concerns of particular marginalised women need to be given centre stage, there should also be the realisation that such women’s cultures remain on the margins of global hegemonic cultures.

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Secondly, the overwhelming erosion of Africana cultural identities / heritage should challenge us to jointly preserve our culture.

Thirdly, there is a need to apply the African corporate mindset in the affirmation of African women, as expressed by the maxim “I am because we are” (cf. Mbiti 1989:106). The incorporation of this kind of communalism in women’s liberation approaches will be helpful in neutralising the individualism of Western feminist approaches (Masenya 2004:123). In addition, in my view, communalism implies that the struggle for the liberation of African women is a joint effort by both men and women.<sup>18</sup>

After all, as already noted, these wisdom sayings are a product of a community, aiming to teach or orientate people in the community’s wisdom traditions. While it is significant that the experiences of the marginalised be given attention and protected in contexts like those of the Two Thirds World where people’s identities, cultures and knowledge systems have been trivialised by hegemonic cultures, the marginalised will do well not to forget to deliberately respond also informed by the positive elements of their own cultures. We might be enabled to come up with gender-sensitive Africana reading of texts — readings which will deliberately seek to keep a healthy tension between the “individual” and the “community”.<sup>19</sup> Another practical illustration of the tension between “the individual” and “the communal”<sup>20</sup> becomes notable from the feminist reading of Ruth 4:17.

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<sup>18</sup> Says Okure (2003:84-85): “More so than others, African women believe that cumulatively patriarchy and androcentrism have affected both women and men. Both sexes have been socialised into the same sinful system .... As a result of this socialisation, both men and women have suffered from the total human worldview built on and sustained by patriarchy. African women’s hermeneutics, therefore seeks as much the full liberation of men as of women, from patriarchy.”

<sup>19</sup> An example of this kind of tension manifests itself when the wisdom underlying the following Northern Sotho proverbs is given a hearing: *Hlogo e meetse e lotwa ke mong wa yona* (One who has a “soft” head, has the responsibility to make sure that it is protected), while *bana ba motho ba ngwathelana hlogo ya tšie* (Siblings, despite their number, share a head of one locust). The African-American psychiatrist Welsing (1999:18) echoes a more or less similar idea when she argues as follows about an individual’s behaviour: “[B]ehaviour is not simply an individual affair, for when multiplied by thousands, it has profound effects on the life, future existence and well-being of a total people.”

<sup>20</sup> Cognisant of the need to retain such a healthy tension, and also aware of the limiting notions underlying the words *mosadi* (woman) or *bosadi* (womanhood) on account of its construction by men, Masenya (2004:140) has redefined the word *mosadi* as follows: “A *mosadi* (‘woman’) is a female African person who, though conscious of the corporeal mentality of Africans and also respecting it, can stand on her own to affirm her full humanity as a creature in God’s image...”

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## 2 An Africana communal reading of Ruth 4:17

The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

(Ruth 4:17).

The text above falls within the pericope on the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:13-22). In the meeting of the elders in the preceding chapter, a meeting which in fact has been initiated by Ruth’s (individual) words concerning a marriage proposal to Boaz (see Ruth 3:9) at the threshing floor, a decision was made that Boaz would serve as *גָּאֵל*, redeemer, for the continuation of the line of Mahlon, Ruth’s dead husband (see Ruth 4:10).

The episode opens with the good news of the birth of a son who is presented as being born not to Naomi, but to Ruth. “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her to conceive, and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). Indeed, from verse 14 onwards, Ruth’s name is no more mentioned. The active role players are Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law and the women (of Bethlehem).

Read from a Western individualistic perspective, the “disappearance” of Ruth’s name from the narrative may be viewed as narrative violence by the male Judahite narrator who used the problematic Moabite woman only to achieve male ends: bearing a male heir to Mahlon, and later to the Davidic house. Levine (1992:84) says:

In the final ironic moment, Ruth — whose language and actions sought to incorporate Naomi into her new family — is erased from the text. Her mother-in-law nurses the child, the local women name him, and they even proclaim “A son has been born to Naomi” (4:17).

In the same way, Fewell and Gunn (1999:238) read surrogacy in this verse:

“The message of the women that ‘a son is born to Naomi’, interprets Ruth to be a surrogate, which brings into focus other dimensions of jealousy and resentment that come when other women bear children for the barren. We are also reminded of Sarah and Hagar.

If we re-read the verse above, informed by a communal, albeit gender-sensitive African mentality, we may come up with a different reading: The feminist views on the text above, may give a reader the impression that only pities Ruth, the Moabite (outsider) woman, from the abuse which she has suffered from Judahite people, particularly her mother-in-law, Naomi, whose interests Ruth sought against all odds, to serve. However, if the verse were to be placed within the context of the whole book, it would become clear that Ruth’s

involvement at key points in the unfolding of the narrative was in fact voluntary. Ruth, against the exhortation of Naomi herself, chose to leave her mother country Moab, to cling (קָבַד) not to a husband, but to a woman, who is not a young, but a sonless, husbandless old woman.

In chapter 3, when advised by Naomi to go and lie next to the feet of Boaz at the threshing floor so that “he will tell you what to do” (3:4), she agreed. No coercion whatsoever can be implied from the text. Ruth responds: “All that you tell me I will do.”

Contrary to the latter though, in her encounter with Boaz, the Moabite woman “forgets” what she had promised her mother-in-law and decides to *tell* Boaz what to do: “And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant, spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin’” (3:9). In view of all of the preceding textual evidence, one may argue that reading with the grain of the text, Ruth is acting freely and significantly *independently*. Such a reading coupled with an African communal reading of the text will of course not read surrogacy in 4:17.

It is not an exaggeration to argue that even Ruth, informed by the corporeal Judahite mentality, would not have understood the performance of her motherhood duties as being done on behalf of her mother-in-law. In a communal, family-oriented African setting, a child does not belong to the individual couple, that is, Ruth and the late Mahlon (in the textual context). S/he is a communal child, who belongs to the (extended) family, the clan, and the whole village. It therefore makes sense to readers in such a context that a child, who is born by someone’s daughter-in-law, would naturally also be understood as belonging (having been born) to her mother-in-law, her family and to the women of the particular village. For this reason, in traditional African contexts, any parent in a particular village could discipline any child if the latter was found to be misbehaving. Similarly, even the child would understand that all his/her parents’ contemporaries are in effect her/his parents.

One wonders what would become of the nature of the educator-learner relationship in South Africa if our morality was to be shaped by such a communal worldview. How would the task of Bible interpretation look if we all took it upon ourselves to communally hold up the roof of the cave? What would become of the power dynamics which so typify our contexts?

## E CONCLUSION

At the onset of the previous section, the attention was drawn to the need of designing helpful, affirming reading strategies in our attempt to contribute to affirming, life giving Africana women’s hermeneutics. One such reading strategy, which was mainly inspired by the African corporeal mentality, was outlined. Many more, which will contribute to the use of the Christian Bible “for

“better” in many a life of the marginalised others, need to be employed. The one we have used in a communal setting, even as we have attempted to keep a balance between the “individual” and the “communal” in our interpretive endeavours can enable us to achieve the following objectives:

- The individual needs of Africana women (cries, pain, hunger, affirmation) would be taken seriously by those to whom *kyriarchy* still gives a lion’s share in the whole interpretive process.
- As we deliberately pay attention to the individual concerns of Bible readers, inspired by the African spirit of communality we will be able to give them legitimate space to articulate those concerns in their own special way. In our commitment to listen carefully to these concerns they could deliberately be disempowered from reading the Bible from the perspective of the powerful, difficult as this will be.
- The communal element will also prove helpful in that we as South Africans, a people who have historically been terribly divided along racial lines, could learn to intentionally do things together. In the process we might hopefully be conscientised toward the transformation of problematic structures in our country so that our communal responsibility will be realised fully to hold up the roof of the collapsing cave, South Africa, together.
- As we keep the healthy tension between the “individual” and the “communal”, we would be reminded that both the Western-oriented and African-oriented approaches have a role to play in our current context. The positive aspects of the cultures of Africa and those of the West can be engaged and realised, whilst in the interest of redress and restitution, African and other approaches which we have marginalised, will need to be given greater prominence.
- Inspired by a communal way of thinking, women and men, boy children and girl children, black and white, Indian and “coloured”, powerful and powerless, rich and poor, gay and straight, aged and young, everyone, will all work together to challenge all forms of injustices, whether in the churches, academy or the broader South African society.

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