

Considering Theories and Methods in African Biblical Scholarship

*Considerando teorías y métodos en los
Estudios Bíblicos Africanos*

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Abstract

Various intersecting theories and methods underlie biblical scholarship in Africa, which constitutes a dynamic, wide and diverse body of work. With the realisation that theory and method are more than framing or organising measures but are reflective and constitutive of scholars and their work, African biblical scholarship (ABS) can be plotted through notions of contextuality and postcoloniality. The richness of ABS is tangible in various, intersecting approaches such as liberation hermeneutics, in/acculturation foci, gender studies, theological concerns and others.

Keywords: African biblical scholarship; Theory; Method; Contextuality; Postcoloniality; Liberation hermeneutics.

Resumen

Varias teorías y métodos interrelacionados subyacen a los estudios bíblicos en África, los cuales constituyen un cuerpo de trabajo dinámico, amplio y diverso. Con la comprensión de que la teoría y el método son más que medidas de encuadre u organización, sino que son reflectivos y constitutivos de los académicos y su trabajo, los estudios bíblicos africanos (EBA) pueden ser trazados a través de las nociones de contextualidad y poscolonialidad. La riqueza de los EBA es tangible en varios enfoques interrelacionados, tales como la hermenéutica de la liberación, los enfoques de in/culturación, los estudios de género, las preocupaciones teológicas y otros.

Palabras clave: Estudios bíblicos africanos; Teoría; Método; Contextualidad; Poscolonialidad; Hermenéutica de la liberación.

¹ Prof. Punt's primary research interest is in New Testament hermeneutics, with a twofold focus: ancient biblical hermeneutics with the appropriation of the Scriptures of Israel in the Pauline literature as an area of specialisation; and contemporary biblical hermeneutics, including the role and use of critical theory and specifically postcolonial and queer theories in biblical interpretation; as well as the relationship between cultural studies and the Bible, including its appropriation in popular media. University of Stellenbosch. Email. jpunt@sun.ac.za

Resumo

Várias teorias e métodos inter-relacionados fundamentam os estudos bíblicos na África, os quais constituem um corpo de trabalho dinâmico, amplo e diverso. Com a compreensão de que a teoria e o método são mais do que medidas de enquadramento ou organização, mas são reflexivos e constitutivos dos acadêmicos e do seu trabalho, os estudos bíblicos africanos (EBA) podem ser traçados através das noções de contextualidade e pós-colonialidade. A riqueza dos EBA é tangível em várias abordagens inter-relacionadas, tais como a hermenêutica da libertação, os enfoques de in/culturação, os estudos de gênero, as preocupações teológicas e outras.

Palavras-chave: Estudos bíblicos africanos; Teoria; Método; Contextualidade; Pós-colonialidade; Hermenêutica da libertação.

1. Introduction: Method is more?

Various intersecting theories and methods characterise African biblical scholarship (ABS) in all its rich and dynamic diversity and breadth of work. The range of scholarly approaches in ABS—belied using the singular—covers a broad spectrum so that an exhaustive and detailed account lies beyond the scope of this contribution. The aim here, rather, is to indicate a few nerve points in ABS, to provide an inkling of such work and point to some trends and focal areas.

As much as the search for a distinctive or definite biblical hermeneutics on the continent has proven elusive to date, identifying a unique or even typical theory and method in African biblical scholarship is equally challenging, if not impossible. Over the years, various attempts have been made to formulate an African hermeneutic, or at least to identify vital aspects which are to be included in such a hermeneutic (Adamo, 2015a, 2015b; Mburu, 2019; Mbuvi, 2017; Ntrel, 1990; Ukpong, 1995; Wambudta, 1980), even if not without criticism, such as that an indigenous African hermeneutic is stressed rather than defined (Muzorewa, 1990, pp. 175–176). The African context reflects scholarly designs, along with their critique, found elsewhere too. An example is the ongoing if at times diluted dominance of historical criticism in its many forms accompanied by critique for inter alia its positivist moorings. More than that, also its theological justification, “or better still, the *sanctification* of the historical-critical method by Käsemann, thus rests squarely on its perceived ability to guarantee closeness to (historical) reality (*Wirklichkeitsnähe*)” (Lategan, 2004, p. 140; see Martin, 2008, pp. 3-9).

Appreciation is growing for new historiographical insight, for thinking differently about history and access to it, underscoring it as a dynamic, constructive and sense-making venture. Benefitting from sociological, anthropological and related investigative frameworks, for biblical scholars, historical concerns

are increasingly assuming a more nuanced role than simply an account of the way things were. NT scholars' reluctance to admit to the sense-making role of historical work can be connected to theological reasons, scholarly work, and epistemological reasons (Lategan, 2004, pp. 145-146). However, too much faith in the ability of texts to construe their own world ascribes such strong agency to texts that it inhibits recognition of the ideological interests of interpreters.

The broader setting is that, in Africa as well, a gradual shift from detached and aloof scholarship towards socially engaged or grounded academic work, with a focus on effectively, responsibly, and accountably addressing contextuality, has become palpable. The scientific ethos of impartial and detached investigation emphasizes the need for biblical critics to maintain a distance from the ordinary circumstances of collective existence and emphasizes the foreign nature of biblical texts. A stance of apolitical detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the prevailing rhetorical positions within the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1988, pp. 10–11). Gerald West's proposal for cooperation between professional exegetes and theologians with marginalized societies aims to foster interdependence between biblical scholars and "ordinary readers" in hermeneutical practices that support the "struggle for full liberation and life" (West, 1995, p. 4).

If ethics is the critical engagement with social norms that influence people's behavior, rather than a rigid set of rules meant to establish and uphold those norms (Butler, 2005), then social location can no longer be something optional in scholarly discussion. "If the 'I' cannot effectively be disjoined from the impress of social life, then ethics will surely not only presuppose rhetoric (and the analysis of the mode of address) but social critique as well" (Butler, 2005, p. 135). Accounting for theoretical positions involves challenging deeply ingrained analytical categories by recognizing their historical origins, specific utilization, and vested interests. Biblical interpreters in Africa urge themselves and others to acknowledge their reading inclinations and prejudices when they employ the Bible as a foundation for their theological perspectives (Togarasei, 2022, p. 409). Equally important, those constructing Christian theology should openly acknowledge the additional sources that contribute to their theological endeavours. This implies embracing social location-aware biblical approaches, which helps readers, acknowledge the subjectivity of their interpretations. "Because African readers received and experienced the Bible as a component of the colonizer's tool bag, the Bible was always about current affairs (dynamics of authority, power, subjugation, and oppression), and not ancient history" (Mbuvi, 2023, p. 109).

But is there more to theory and method? Scholarly approaches and methods reflect and contribute to social imaginaries. They serve as scholarly homes (Penner & Lopez, 2011) providing a structured environment for research and intellectual exploration. Methods, as heuristic devices, not only create and define

the spaces within which scholars work but also shape their very identities and research perspectives. Method, like home, can provide a familiar and reassuring middle ground for biblical scholars, balancing their personal interpretation with the established norms and expectations of their field (Penner & Lopez, 2011, p. 152). Home entails those scholars as social agents develop strategies adapted to the needs of their social worlds. Method, while constituting home, also maps the route towards home, providing intellectual comfort to scholars. Method's role, then, is more important and wide-ranging than its heuristic function, as it functions also as mediating ground between scholarly work and academic structures, and between individual and social relations. In a similar way that map is not territory (Smith, 1978), method is not simply procedures and techniques to be followed. More than roadmap of the academic journey, method also scripts the landscape, brings the territory into being—and, of course, at the same time it fences it off, delimits and restricts. In short, methods amount to more than erudite taxonomies, as it involves and impacts us as scholars and our scholarship on personal and structural levels, and the communities (academic and other) in which we live (Punt, 2022). Such shifts are understandable with the shifting pendulum of interpretation to include and account for readerly positions, roles and participation in interpretation, and are best if not exclusively signaled by autobiographical hermeneutics (e.g., Kitzberger, 2002; Staley, 1995).

2. African Biblical Scholarship: Contextuality and Postcoloniality

The continuous struggle of actively taking on and disrupting the effects of colonialism in Africa is a complex task—also in the academy, and in biblical studies equally so. It requires confronting the historical evolution of critical theories as well as the structures and ideologies that sustain them. Hermeneutical mapping exercises characteristic of traditional biblical scholarship, with their references to pre-critical, critical and post-critical approaches, or pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras, or author-centred, text-centred and reader-centred hermeneutics, are perhaps less useful than two other, vital categories: colonial and postcolonial (Sugirtharajah, 1998b, p. 15).

Postcolonial as used here refers to an epistemic category or theoretical location; the hyphenated use of post-colonial is best reserved for referring to a chronological era, a temporal gauge, the period after coloniality officially came to an end—even if colonialities of the mind persist. Indeed, a postcolonial social imaginary offers possibilities to African biblical scholarship that can contribute to decolonization in various ways. Postcolonial work emerges from the field of cultural studies, which operates from a grounded standpoint (Gallagher, 1996, p. 229). Although not a major trend in African biblical scholarship, various scholars have taken up postcolonial and decolonial approaches in their work

(e.g., Dube, 2000; Punt, 2015; Ramantswana, 2016; Snyman, 2015); see also an important volume showing a variety of approaches (Dube, Mbuvi, & Mbuwayesango, 2012) and an earlier reflection on the reluctance towards the postcolonial (e.g., Punt, 2006).

As a broader and grounded framework, cultural studies promote inclusive biblical studies (Anderson, 2009) without excluding theological or religious dimensions. A grounded approach makes postcolonial biblical hermeneutics particularly relevant for interpreting texts within historical, imperial contexts as well as understanding texts within the postcolonial African context, influenced by our contemporary (post)modern and often neo-colonial world. However, it resists the imposition of predetermined theological epistemologies or preconceived religious imaginaries as definitive heuristic frameworks for biblical hermeneutics and exegesis. Drawing inspiration from cultural studies, it is valuable, for instance, to acknowledge reinterpretation of the concept of religion in ancient times (Nongbri, 2013), along with the use of other social sphere-categories that are relevant and suitable for our present-day contexts.

Theological and biblical scholarship is increasingly becoming aware of and starting to engage more intentionally with its contemporary surroundings. A classic and relevant demonstration is how, until recently, mainstream biblical scholarship largely rejected the idea of ethnic considerations within biblical texts (Buell & Johnson Hodge, 2004), asserting that the texts advocated a universal Christianity regardless of race and ethnicity. Early Christian thinkers crafted a narrative that predominantly focused on the ethnic aspect of their own history. This narrative aimed to align human differences and diversity with the theological and ideological agenda of the Christian community during that time (Berzon, 2018, p. 191). The growing recognition of the ethnic factors that shape and influence the biblical texts and their language, is leading to the broadening of the scope of topics earlier simply overlooked in conventional biblical studies (e.g., Buell, 2001, pp. 449–452; Kelley, 2000). Embedded in discussions of what qualifies as disciplinary excellence or so-called real academic work, biblical research established Western colonial thought as the norm, and according to the rhetoric (and logic) of Christianization and civilization the indigenous was simply denied or at best tolerated as inferior (e.g., Mignolo, 2007b). So too, it is only more recently that consideration has been given to those entering from the scholarly margins; then still, not wanting to go about the disciplinary business in a way that their work is either dismissed or deemed to destabilize the disciplinary canons, at times their participation is encumbered or the very project they intend to join, thwarted.

Many ironies are locked into the debate about conventional versus post-colonial biblical studies approaches: primary is the ostensible concern in biblical studies for “original” meaning or “real” socio-historical contexts and texts, submerged under and clouded by secondary concerns. Granted that the pos-

sibility of establishing the original is unlikely and the ability to construct (not re-construct) the most likely will always remain contested. However, the conventionalist approach both hampers or limits such endeavors and at the same time obscures through conventionalized strategies, the possibility to construct credible texts and contexts.

An important factor is how the use of language in creating reality and molding the world necessarily has implications for indigenous concepts. Indigenous categories are vital for theologizing, but even more so for biblical studies and -translation (Mugambi, 2001, pp. 13–17, 22–24). Dube’s strong reaction regarding the translation of *Badimo* in the Setswana Bible is not only about reclaiming ownership of a translated Bible but attests to how such claims play out in the use of indigenous concepts (Dube, 2001, pp. 145–163; see also Mothoagae, 2024). However, it is a finely-poised balance since dangers such as ethnocentrism (Wan, 2000, pp. 107–111) looms large in the attempt to recover elements from the ancient past (“mummified figments”, Fanon, 1963, p. 160), rather than trying to modernize and accommodate to new economic, political and cultural contexts locally and globally (Sugirtharajah, 1998a, p. 134).

A decolonial shift aiming at “de-linking” in distinction from postcolonial work poised as “a project of scholarly transformation within the academy” (Mignolo, 2007a, p. 452) is commendable but may require postcolonial realism. Concern about the tendency by decolonial approaches to perpetuate binaries need both acknowledgement and critique, and awareness that insistence upon binaries may take its revenge in the future. Not only is binary thinking embedded in colonialist thinking but perpetuating and celebrating (insistence on) binaries provide scaffolding for the continuation of the colonialist social imaginary. The claim is that decolonial thinking “is the pluriversal epistemology of the future; an epistemology that de-links from the tyranny of abstract universals (Christians, Liberals or Marxists)” (Mignolo, 2007b, p. 159). Postcolonial includes such sentiments but go beyond and may be more attuned to the messiness and even impossibility of complete delinking.

A significant challenge lies in transcending reactionary anti-Western and anti-language discourses, which perpetuate the West as the standard and promote reactionary approaches. While decolonial approaches are often more than knee-jerk reactions, their origins and alignments can be questionable at times. Mignolo’s call for a separation of the epistemic and the political emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge production and geopolitical formations. “The struggle for epistemic de-coloniality lies, precisely, here: de-linking from the most fundamental belief of modernity: the belief in abstract universals through the entire spectrum from the extreme right to the extreme left” (Mignolo, 2007a, p. 500). Decolonial studies’ utopian bent at times may achieve their own goal, running the risk of becoming disempowering and misleading, not least in creat-

ing an impression that past, present, and future, separately or altogether, can avoid modernism or even colonialism's compelling, lasting impact.

Gender-attuned biblical interpretation is another irony. While those few instances of social location-attentive biblical interpretation generally tend to focus on gender, it is often a notion of gender as offshoot of mainstream scholarship. When gender perspective in biblical studies amounts to little more than a feminist focused derivative of established, conventional "malestream" scholarship, the particularity of human lives in all its gender and sexual diversity is lost. When gender is equated to woman or women, their exnomination in gender covers up tensions and strains as well as intersectionalities regarding race, class and sexuality, to name a few.

Within this dynamic environment of modern-day biblical scholarship in Africa, postcolonial biblical studies aim to uncover hegemonic textual practices, challenges and deconstructs established interpretive norms, and considers political and practical implications of power structures. It refuses to accept a strict division between political and material issues as much as aesthetic and formal iterations of power and prioritises the interpreter's position within the socio-political context. However, postcolonialism is not an all-encompassing framework that accommodates all ideological-critical approaches as it remains critical of ideological associations and alignments. Although postcolonial is neither a monolithic approach with eyes only for the geopolitical scene of historical colonization or modern superpower activity, nor an all-encompassing or replacement master narrative, scholars have pointed to its dynamic for linking various "facets of biblical interpretation in Africa—*négritude*, inculturation, rehabilitation hermeneutics, comparative hermeneutics, cultural hermeneutics" (Mbuvi, 2023, p. 105). It does, however, engage with a range of issues, including aesthetic, formal, political, and material concerns (see also Punt, 2024).

3. African Biblical Scholarship's Theoretical Riches

Beyond postcolonial theory more narrowly, engagement with postcoloniality surfaces in various other theoretical stances and methodological approaches—due to space restrictions, only a few can be referenced here.

Liberation Hermeneutics

Liberation hermeneutics constitutes an important element of ABS. Sometimes scholars of decoloniality express their frustration for not being able to break with the vestiges of colonialism, to the extent of self-implication. "Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In

a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). See also Ndlovu-Gatsheni on decolonization resistance: “The modern world system is proving to be resistant to decolonization. Whenever it is confronted by anti-systemic forces, the world system responds in two ways. It either disciplines the anti-systemic forces violently or it accommodates them to its shifting global orders. The shifting global orders are resistant to deimperialisation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014, p. 187). Some scholars make a case for holding onto anti-colonial, postcolonial and decolonial in a creative way (Hiraide, 2021).

Such sentiment resonates with postcolonial biblical work and the role and use of the Bible regarding issues of liberation. From the outset, postcolonial critics have aligned themselves with those imperilled by and seeking liberation from sexual, racial, colonial, and class domination (Horsley, 2000, p. 10). In fact, postcolonial theory remains aware that a hermeneutic of marginality could become a privileged hermeneutic, and consequently invert hegemony, retaining it but now for a group differently defined and composed. Postcolonial biblical interpretation in a way goes beyond liberationist readings by asserting that not only were the political structures of colonialism involved in oppression on the African continent, but the Bible itself played a role in establishing and upholding the framework of such systems. Given that along with colonial political systems, the Bible too contributed to the creation and perpetuation of oppressive structures (Mbuvi, 2017, p. 164). Mbuvi (2017, pp. 161–162) proposes a chronological taxonomy of African biblical hermeneutics, with the 1960s–1980s indicated as the period in which liberation(ist) reading flourished. ABS negotiates this tension as part of its endeavours.

In/Acculturation

In as far as decolonial reading de-links from the conventional and the colonially embedded universals, it seeks to recover by making room for what went before the era of cultural and material imposition. Although scholars in the past suggested going beyond liberation or in/acculturation and as goal of biblical studies (Ukpong, 2003), of late, studies on ancestors (Kamudzandu, 2010, 2013) and other indigenous topics suggest renewed interest in exploring inculturation and acculturation of the Bible in Africa. Unlike elsewhere in the world, the irony is that much of the history from which today global Christian mind developed, happened in Africa. The Bible and Christian history are deeply intertwined with Africa. Ignoring Africa’s role in these narratives distorts our understanding of salvation history. Key figures and events, including Abraham’s descendants, Joseph, Moses, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, have connections to Africa. Additionally, early Christian figures like Mark, Perpetua, Athanasius, and Augustine were also African, making Africa an essential part of the Christian

story (Oden, 2007, p. 14; see Mbuvi, 2023, p. 103). “Inculturation as a matter of ‘encounter’ between the Gospel of Christ and particular cultures—the Gospel concretely meeting cultural human beings with their own strengths and shortcomings and with their values and customs, some responding positively and others negatively to Christ’s invitation to discipleship—must be acknowledged as the essence of evangelization or evangelism in the Christian Church” (Magesa, 2022, p. 54).

Gender Studies

Gender studies comprise feminist work, masculinity studies, and LGBTQIA* and queer studies, interested as it is in the construction of sexed categories as much as the “interstitial places where gender blending, reversals and transformations take place” (Guest, 2012, p. 19). Theoretically strong biblical gender studies in a field which as a rule resists deep-seated change can challenge conventional alignments, identity-political stances and popularised notions of gender. Theory and method, although no magic wand resolving the complexities of gender and sex in biblical studies, helpfully point in the right direction, in at least four ways:

First, that humans live gendered lives as gendered people in a gendered society, means that “we do actually live on the same planet” (Kimmel, 2011, p. 138) even if with different sex and gender performativities.

Second, it is difficult to overrate the impact of gender and sex on people and societies during biblical times. For the NT, Harper (2013) goes so far as arguing, “The gradual transformation of the Roman world from polytheistic to Christian marks one of the most sweeping ideological changes of premodern history. At the centre of it all was sex”.

Third, biblical documents are wedged in antiquity’s movements and changes related to sex and gender, reflecting historical moves and upsets. Gender-conventional (read, heteronormative) use of the Bible should not be allowed to snub its narratives which deconstruct and disrupt, challenge and contest such appeals in exciting, energizing and refreshing ways (Guest, 2012, p. 23).

Fourth, the role of discourse in constructing gender identity and power relations becomes particularly acute when biblical texts and their use are considered. Biblical narratives are implicated in societal discourses, implicit or explicit, written or oral, as they not only inform individual and communal identities but are based on individual and communal performances, past and present (Punt, 2018). As Guest (2012, p. 29) points out, when it comes to gender and sex (also), “the Bible is one of those regulating discourses, a cultural artefact of considerable significance and influence.”

African and Black Theology

Finally, ABS has always had strong connections to both African and Black Theology on the continent. African Theology and African Biblical Hermeneutics, like African and Black Theology (Tutu, 1979), are closely related; however, their unique areas of focus continue to be significant (already Mosala, 1989). The quest for exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible, relevant to the African context remains and as Benezet Bujo argued long ago already, rereading the Bible from an African perspective is the appropriate starting point for an “African Christian Theology” (Bujo, 1977, p. 125; see also Farisani, 2017; Punt, 1997). Notwithstanding mutual if different forms of disillusionment between academic scholarship and believers generally in many parts of the world, the ongoing if at times tense and brittle relationship between biblical scholarship and theological thought and practice remains largely intact. And the tense relationship is not necessarily bad, since “the details of scripture disrupt ‘settled’ theologies, enabling ‘new’ and contextually relevant theologies to be born” (West, 2021, p. 146).

4. Conclusion: Challenges Ahead

Is collectively African biblical scholarship a distinctive enterprise? Yes and no—yes, given the context (history, past and present experience, etc) and no, given the quest for accountable and responsible engagement with the Bible and its interpretation. In a world abounding with an ever-expanding range of theoretical approaches (while questions concerning depth, purpose, and orientation may require more attention), and concerns about the Bible’s position and role in various interpretations, “Africa” as a concept, as well as a reality encompassing all its intricacies and nuances, presents both opportunities and challenges. In negotiating the continent’s complex post-colonial landscape amidst enduring postcoloniality, ABS is challenged to remain Africentred and avoiding a toxic, xenophobic Afrimonism. Part of the global South and part of the global geo-political landscape, ABS is continuously looking to be Africa-affirming without idealising or utopian fantasies.

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Jeremy Punt