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The Great Lakes Initiative and the Contextual Hermeneutics of Reconciliation

La iniciativa de Los Grandes Lagos y la Hermenéutica Contextual de la Reconciliación

A Iniciativa dos Grandes Lagos e a Hermenêutica Contextual da Reconciliação

Abstract

This essay analyzes the ways African Great Lakes Christians have tried, individually and/or corporately, to contribute to the transformation of conflicts, the diminution of violence within the region, and the healing of communities. As a biblical scholar whose research has been influenced in a large part by participation in the Great Lakes Initiative's movement of reconciliation through communal contextual scriptural interpretation, context analysis, communal lament, theological reflections, liturgy, rest, and networking, I reflect on what it means to read and understand the Bible within the African Great Lakes context of chronic conflicts and violence. I show that, within today's African Great Lakes region, biblical interpretation needs to be engaged/ideological, contextual, theological, centered on reconciliation, and collaborative between scholars, practitioners, and ordinary Christians.

Keywords: Reconciliation; Contextual Hermeneutics; African Great Lakes; Theological; Practical.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza las formas en que los cristianos africanos de los Grandes Lagos han intentado, individual y/o colectivamente, contribuir a la transformación de los conflictos, la disminución de la violencia en la región y la sanación de las comunidades. Como biblista cuya investigación ha sido influenciada en gran medida por la participación en el movimiento de reconciliación de la Iniciativa de los Grandes Lagos a través de la interpretación contextual comunitaria de las Escrituras, el análisis del contexto, el lamento comunitario, las reflexiones teológicas, la liturgia, el descanso y la creación de redes, reflexiono sobre lo que significa leer y comprender la Biblia dentro del contexto de conflictos crónicos y violencia en la región africana de los Grandes Lagos. Demuestro que, en la actual región africana de los Grandes Lagos, la interpretación bíblica debe ser comprometida/ideológica, contextual, teológica,

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centrada en la reconciliación y colaborativa entre académicos, profesionales y cristianos comunes.

Palabras clave: Reconciliación; Hermenéutica Contextual; Grandes Lagos Africanos; Teológica; Práctica

Resumo

Este ensaio analisa as formas como os cristãos africanos dos Grandes Lagos têm tentado, individual e/ou coletivamente, contribuir para a transformação dos conflitos, a diminuição da violência na região e a cura das comunidades. Como estudioso bíblico cuja pesquisa foi influenciada em grande parte pela participação no movimento de reconciliação da Iniciativa dos Grandes Lagos por meio da interpretação contextual comunitária das Escrituras, análise de contexto, lamento comunitário, reflexões teológicas, liturgia, descanso e formação de redes, reflito sobre o que significa ler e compreender a Bíblia no contexto de conflitos crônicos e violência da região africana dos Grandes Lagos. Mostro que, na atual região africana dos Grandes Lagos, a interpretação bíblica precisa ser engajada/ideológica, contextual, teológica, centrada na reconciliação e colaborativa entre acadêmicos, profissionais e cristãos comuns.

Palavras-chave: Reconciliação; Hermenêutica Contextual; Grandes Lagos Africanos; Teológica; Prática

Introduction

In the last three decades, war and chronic conflicts have been the greatest challenges for flourishing life in the African Great Lakes region (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda). In addition to the well-known conflicts like the 1994 genocide in Rwanda – which is still haunting the region to this day – or the protracted war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), every country of the region has been plagued by violence, internal conflicts, and disunity among its citizens. At the heart of those conflicts are questions of identity, poverty, greed, and inadequate leadership. In response, Christians have tried to imagine ways they can, individually and/or corporately, contribute to the transformation of conflicts, the diminution of violence within the region, and the healing of communities. Biblical interpretation has often been proposed as a means toward that goal of transforming wounded communities. However, Christians have often faced the crippling division between engaged/interested Christians and academic/professional theologians and biblical scholars. Indeed, what the 1985 South African *Kairos Document* lamented almost four decades ago is still a reality in most Great Lakes countries. The *Kairos Document* noted a division between, on the one hand, a predominantly neutral academic community that engaged in historical and structural studies of the Bible without critical reflection on the impact of their works on the transformation of South African society, and, on the other

hand, a non-academic community that "remained within a pre-critical, naïve frame of reference" (Draper, 1991, p. 235). The result was that "academics and clergy within the churches […] remained methodologically silenced or immobilized, while the people have continued to read the Bible without any assistance from the South African academic community" (Draper, 1991, p. 238).

Most Great Lakes Christians have remained ill-equipped to navigate between faith and social problems, because, while relying on Scripture for guidance, they have had little to no access to the Bible and are not trained in a way that prepares them to address social problems. In the DRC, for example, the Bible is studied as a subject only in (mostly Catholic) seminaries and in a few universities. However, even in those seminaries and universities, students are not prepared to deal with the real questions of violence, war, poverty, etc., because the focus of the curricula is generally on historical and philological questions.

Twenty years ago (2004), a group of theologians, scholars, missiologists, practitioners, clergy, denominational leaders, and lay people, "united by their common bond in Christ, their mission to see the world reconciled and committed to the service of Christ and one another" (Makanda, 2019) started a movement that led to the creation of the *Great Lakes Initiative* (GLI), a Christian platform that seeks "to mobilize restless Christian leaders from across the Great Lakes region of Africa, create a space for their transformation, and empower them to participate in God's mission of reconciliation in their own communities, organizations, and nations" (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2022, p. 152). During its 20 years of existence, the GLI has equipped thousands of African leaders for the ministry of reconciliation within and among their deeply divided communities. Its design focuses on communal contextual scriptural interpretation, context analysis, communal lament, theological reflections, liturgy, rest, and networking. The GLI operates with the conviction that conflicts and violence are not part of God's vision for humanity and that engagement with Scripture can help us live God's vision of a world without violence, that is, a new creation.

In this essay, as a biblical scholar whose research has been influenced in a large part by participation in the GLI movement, I reflect on the contextual hermeneutics of reconciliation that I have used at the GLI and in my teaching and writing. I will show that, within today's African Great Lakes region, biblical interpretation needs to be engaged/ideological, contextual, theological, centered on healing and reconciliation, and placed within a community of scholars, practitioners, and ordinary Christians. I begin this essay with a brief overview of the contextual biblical interpretation practiced especially in South Africa. Next, I will present the situation of conflicts in the Great Lakes region. Third, I will present the Great Lakes Initiative and its "Word Made Flesh" methodology.

1. African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics

My contextual approach to the Bible needs to be located within the framework of African contextual biblical interpretations that are associated with Anglophone scholars, especially South African scholars, Itumeleng Mosala, Gerald O. West, and Jonathan A. Draper. My encounter with African contextual biblical hermeneutics took place through the works of Gerald O. West and Jonathan A. Draper, both scholars having spent the best part of the academic career in developing a hermeneutical approach that makes possible the connection between the biblical text and the African context.

Mosala, West, and Draper are part of the "prophetic theology" called for by the *Kairos Document.* That theology was meant to imagine an approach to Scripture that would be alternative to the then-dominant approach that was neutral and mainly focused on maintaining the status quo. Within the context of apartheid and oppression, prophetic theologians thought it important "to develop, out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model that will in turn lead to forms of activity that will make a real difference to the future of our country" (*Kairos Document, Preface)*. They analyzed and critiqued the structures of oppression that marginalized most citizens and maintained them in inhumane conditions as well as the ideologies that sustained such structures. In addition, they critiqued the dominant kinds of theologies and biblical interpretations that did little to challenge the status quo, but merely rubbed the wounds of the oppressed classes with the balm of passivity and obsequious submission. They identified two forms of theologies that made theologians and pastors believe that their role was to maintain the status quo and avoid confrontations at all costs: Church theology and State theology. "State theology" was a "theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonizes the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy" (*Kairos Document,* 3 §2). "Church theology" critiqued the apartheid system in a "limited, guarded and cautious way," without analyzing the social, economic, and political realities of the time. Instead, it relied "upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation" (*Kairos Document,* 3 §2). These two kinds of theologies, in the words of West, co-opted the Bible and transformed it into a weapon of oppression (West, 2017).

In addition to critiquing the way Scripture was used in Church and State theologies, the prophetic theologians considered the Bible itself a "site of struggle" and avoided using a hermeneutic of trust vis-à-vis the biblical text. Mosala is the most virulent critic of the then-dominant theologies. Following a Marxist historical-materialist methodology, he considers the notion of "struggle" to be essential for biblical hermeneutics, because struggle is "the motive force of human societies" (Mosala, 1989, p. 8). At the heart of the history of human

societies is the struggle between the dominant classes and the oppressed classes (the poor and the marginalized). Thus, because the Bible is "the product and the record of historical, cultural, gender, racial, and social-class struggle" (Mosala, 1989, p. 8), it can be (at least partially) oppressive. In fact, for West, "the Bible is a resource for liberation, but it is also a source of oppression and domination, and not just in the way it has been used by the missionary-colonial project; the Bible is, in part, intrinsically oppressive" (WEST, 2016, pp. 47-48). Because the Bible is ambiguous, West argues, it "requires a hermeneutic of suspicion" (West, 2016, p. 48; see Kabasele, 2005). Contemporary readers of the Bible need then to understand therefore that, through the redactional process, the dominant classes tried to eradicate the interests and voices of the poor and working classes from the texts and privileged the interests of the dominant classes. Mosala finds it necessary to question the notion of the Bible as *Word of God*, because such a notion suggests that "there is such a thing as a nonideological appropriation of Scripture" and that the Bible is "the absolute, nonideological Word of God that can be made ideological only by being applied to the situation of oppression" (MOSALA, 1989, p. 16). Mosala takes the "insistence on the Bible as the Word of God" to be "an ideological maneuver whereby ruling-class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions. In this way the Bible becomes an ahistorical, interclassist document" (Mosala, 1989, p. 18).

Moreover, because the final form of the biblical text is the form willed and preserved by the dominant classes, it should be understood to be "the oppressor's form of the text" (West, 2018, p. 254). It is therefore important to use the historical-materialist approach to biblical interpretation to recover the voices and ideologies of the working classes that were silenced through the redactional process. In other words, "by focusing on the final form of the biblical text, we find only the absence of marginalised voices. But this absence is partially present because redactional processes do not entirely eradicate the voices they co-opt. Remnants or fragments of marginalised voices remain" (West, 2018, p. 255).

In consequence, Mosala argues,

> With the agenda of the text laid bare, we can make hermeneutical connections with similar agendas in the contemporary setting. The usefulness or otherwise of the agenda of the text cannot be decided a priori. It has to be tested on the basis of the demands and experience of the struggle of black working-class people (Mosala, 1989, p. 185; see West, 2018, p. 255).

The starting point of biblical interpretation then cannot be the biblical text, but "the actual struggles of contemporary working-class Africans. Real struggle, whether in the past, present, or future, is the terrain for the doing of African biblical interpretation" (West, 2018, p. 255). This experience of the

struggle of working-class Africans determines the "questions we bring to the text and decides what counts as an answer" (Draper, 2001, p. 153).

The emphasis on the contemporary context as the starting point of biblical hermeneutics means that there can be no universal context from which to read biblical texts. Even within sub-Saharan Africa, the agendas of each country or community are unique and cannot be easily transposed into the context of another community/country. In South Africa, for example, apartheid segregationist practices made scholars and ordinary people acutely aware of the importance of liberation for working-class Africans. Since apartheid separated people and forced some to see their interests being squeezed out of discussions of public policies and their voices being silenced within society, it makes sense that, in South Africa, the theme of struggle be emphasized. The choice to use Marxist historical-materialist categories of class struggle in biblical interpretation is not made a priori, but out of the experience of the actual struggle of classes within apartheid South Africa.

Another consequence of emphasizing the contemporary context is that biblical interpretation cannot be done only by scholars without collaborating with local communities. Gerald West has shown that "not to work overtly with our local African communities to re-read the Bible for decolonization would make us unaccountable to our African context" (WEST, 2018, p. 258), and so, at the Ujamaa Centre, they "read the Bible with the poor, working class, and marginalised for individual and social transformation" (WEST, 2006, p. 321). Even though African biblical scholars need to maintain conversation with the guild of biblical scholarship, their primary accountability is to the African context.

In practice, West and Draper understand the interpretation of biblical texts to be tripolar, combining the poles of context (the contemporary context), the text, and appropriation. As has already been shown, the pole of the context is the starting point of biblical interpretation, and it is the context that suggests the questions that one brings into conversation with the biblical text. The second pole is what Draper calls "the moment of the text," during which the text is "allowed to be other, different, over against ourselves and our concerns and our questions," because "it is rooted in a specific historical, social, cultural and economic context" (Draper, 2015, p. 15). Since the text is "already a closed system of signs, symbols, and structures that discloses a world of its own," "in order to have access to the world projected by the text, the reader needs to understand the logic of operations that hold the text together. Explanation consists in showing, through structural analysis, how that logic works" (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2021a, p. 22). In the third pole, the reader owns the meaning of the biblical text. What allows the reader to create a dialogue between the text and his/her context is, according to West, the reader's lived faith, his/her ideological and/or theological orientation.

The theoretical work done by South African scholars has helped many scholars in their biblical interpretation within the African context. However, it needs to be noted that the notion of "struggle for liberation" has not been imported into all the sub-Saharan African countries without qualification. In the Great Lakes region, the collaborative exegesis done at the Great Lakes Initiative has shown that the context of violence and chronic conflicts requires more attention to healing and reconciliation than to questions of liberation from oppression.[2] In addition, contrary to the dominance of the hermeneutic of suspicion in southern Africa, at the GLI, the hermeneutic of trust is prevalent.

2. The African Great Lakes Initiative, conflicts, and the Hermeneutics of Reconciliation

The African Great Lakes region comprises seven countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Since the beginning of the 1990s, this region has been in the spotlight because of the conflicts that have unsettled it. During the June 2024 Leadership Institute of the GLI, information about peace in the region was rather disappointing. Participants from South Sudan lamented the devastation and refugee crisis caused by the ongoing civil war between the military government led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led by Hemedti. According to the UNHCR, 2.3 million South Sudanese are refugees or asylum-seekers in neighboring countries and 2 million are internally displaced within the country (UNHCR, 2024). In Kenya, the situation is no better: regional inequality, exclusion, and marginalization create ethnic tensions; disputes over land and resources intensify violence; political power struggles incite inter-clan rivalry and political violence; and the infiltration of Somalia-based terrorist organization Al-Shabaab and the proliferation of small arms and weapons contribute to more violence, especially in borderland communities (Mwangi, 2022). While Burundi has not recovered from the effects of the 1993 – 2005 civil war, and the Rwanda is still haunted by the effects of the 1994 genocide, Tanzania is plagued by an increase in gender-based violence and disputes over land resources. In Uganda, political violence, poverty, and ethnic conflicts continue to divide the country. The DRC, my country, has been the center of violence over the last 30 years, with an alleged death toll of 10 million victims. In eastern DRC, since the beginning of wars in 1996, millions of men and women have been maimed, raped, abducted; villages and farms have been burned down by assailants; communities have been destroyed, traumatized, and divided (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2021a). The questions of violence and conflicts and the need for

[2] This, of course, does not suggest that questions of liberation are unnecessary. It means rather that we need first reconciliation and healing, before we privilege liberation.

healing and reconciliation have understandably occupied theologians, pastors, and leaders of the Great Lakes region.

The Great Lakes Initiative (GLI) was born out of the need for Christians to draw on their faith and scriptural resources to heal the Great Lakes communities destroyed by chronic conflicts. Its story begins with a forum of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, from September 29 to October 5, 2004. Of the 31 groups formed during the forum to think about various issues facing the church in the 21st century, Group 22 focused on the topic of reconciliation. The group was made of theologians, scholars, missiologists, practitioners, clergy, denominational leaders, and lay people from Christian institutions and organizations, especially Duke Divinity School (DDS), Africa Leadership and Reconciliation Ministry (ALARM), Evangelical Alliance, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), World Vision (WV), and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The group identified conflict and violence as the Church's most pressing issues. They thus looked for ways to lead wounded communities out of chronic conflicts and violence. This movement for reconciliation began with a powerful gesture performed by the members of Group 22 of the Pattaya forum: they washed one another's feet, to symbolize their commitment to reconciliation. The foot washing took place between friends, between people who did not know each other before the forum, and especially between people/tribes whose past enmity was well-known (Hutus and Tutsis, Palestinians and Israelis, whites and blacks, etc.).

After the forum, some members of this group met at Duke University in the USA and in various African cities to start the movement that became the Great Lakes Initiative, which they defined as

> a community of restless Christian leaders seeking to embody God's vision of reconciliation. The mission of the GLI is to mobilize these restless Christian leaders from across the Great Lakes Region, create a space for their transformation, and empower them to participate in God's mission of reconciliation in their own communities, organizations and nations. The GLI inspires, forms, and supports leaders in the Great Lakes Region through community formation, and learning shaped by biblically inspired content and methodologies (GLI, *Faculty Guide*).

The GLI participants consider reconciliation, not as a program, but as a journey during which Christians, convinced that conflicts can be transformed, that reconciliation is at the heart of God's mission in our world, and that God calls them to be ambassadors of reconciliation in a divided world (see 2 Cor 5,17-20), vow to lament the sins of their communities and sow hope and embody new creation through selfless and prophetic leadership (Katongole & Rice, 2008).

To achieve the goal of equipping Christian leaders with this biblically inspired vision of reconciliation, the GLI developed a *contextual, theological,* and *practical* methodology called "Word Made Flesh" (WMF). This methodology resembles South African modes of practicing contextual biblical interpretation, but it is unique in its focus on reconciliation and its view of the Bible as *Word of God.*

The WMF methodology is contextual because it takes seriously the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in a particular time and place. The Word of God became flesh in history, and so the GLI believes that, whenever reading the Bible for reconciliation, history and geography must be considered: "particular attention is paid to context: the historical, geographical, social, cultural, political and religious context in which our theological reflection is placed" (GLI Christian Leadership for Reconciliation, p. 10). The main question with which the GLI deals on the second day of the annual gathering is: "What is going on?" This question

> seeks to get to a clearer and deeper understanding of the specific challenges facing the region. In our attempt to reflect a patient God, the Great Lakes Initiative sees it as a great gift to slow down, and to seek understanding of the different forces that keep the dividing walls up in our varying contexts and communities (GLI Christian Leadership for Reconciliation, p. 12).

This methodology is theological because it presupposes faith in God and an understanding that reconciliation is a gift from God. Given that presupposition, the WMF methodology begins with God as *Logos* (the Word) and

> must be framed within the wider story of God's creation; God's dealing with humankind through choosing the disadvantaged people of Israel, coming as the marginalized Jew in Jesus of Nazareth, and continuing to keep God's promise of a new creation alive today through the power of the Holy Spirit (GLI Christian Leadership for Reconciliation, p. 10).

The theological emphasis of the GLI WMF methodology is to be understood against the background of the GLI's genesis within a global community whose view of Scripture was influenced by the theological exegesis practiced then at the Duke Divinity School by scholars like Ellen F. Davis (my Doktormutter), Stephen B. Chapman, and Richard B. Hays. For Davis, the Bible is a "divine word that is uniquely powerful to interpret our experience," that aims to tell us "about the nature and will of God," to instruct us "in the manifold and often hidden ways in which God is present and active in our world," and to give us "a new awareness of ourselves and our actions," showing us "that in everything we have to do with God" (Davis, 2003a, pp. 9, 11). Theological interpretation of the Bible presupposes the belief that "the *primary* purpose of Scripture is to render an account of God as an agent" (Chapman, 2019) and is "viewed as part

of the ministry of a church at prayer, and its task to equip the church" (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2021, p. 12) to "speak with wisdom, imagination and courage to the challenges of our time" (Davis and Hays, 2004, p. 23). Biblical exegesis then is not divorced from the life of the Church. The challenges that contemporary communities face are brought into conversation with the biblical text as part of the practices of a community that seeks conversion – metanoia – and transformation through engagement with God through the Bible (Davis, 2003a; Fowl 1998).

Contrary to South-African collaborative exegeses where the hermeneutic of suspicion is prevalent, at the GLI, there seems to be a consensus that the Bible is not intrinsically oppressive. Even texts that appear not to promote the wellbeing of certain communities are valued and grappled with as gifts from God (see DAVIS, 2003b). Participants bring the challenges of real communities to conversation with biblical texts, and they do so with conviction that the intentions of the God who reveals himself within these biblical texts are ultimately for the good of the community. Because of this theological approach to biblical interpretation, the GLI participants privilege the final form of the biblical text over reconstructed history or supposed historical conflicts between ancient competing classes.

The WMF methodology is practical because Christ who dwelt among us transformed us. The process of reconciliation must lead to the development of skills, practices, and stories that make flourishing life possible within communities. During the annual meeting at the GLI, participants are urged to imagine how the context within which they live can be transformed through dialogue with the biblical texts studied, meditated on, and prayed with during the seminars and plenary sessions. Some of the ways Scripture has been thought to impact communities have been through conversations between the Bible and questions of political succession (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2020), the Bible and questions of identity (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2022), the Bible and questions of land use and care (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2023), the Bible and leadership (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2021b), and the Bible and questions of post-traumatic healing (Onyumbe Wenyi, 2021a; see Herman, 1992). The practical aspect of the WMF methodology shows that biblical interpretation is never complete until a dialogue between the context of violence and conflicts and the biblical text shows how engagement with the biblical story can bring the community to imagine skills, practices, and stories that can heal and reconcile wounded communities.

Based on these methodological considerations, the *GLI Faculty Guide* expects all the faculty members to anchor seminars and plenary lectures on a deep "engagement with the Christian narrative and biblical texts as a way of igniting our collective scriptural imagination" and bring "stories and ministry practitioners from particular contexts and lives into conversation with theologians and other Christian scholars," in order to "help shape and sustain communities

of God's resurrection" (GLI Faculty Guide, p. 7). Key here is the collaboration between professional theologians, biblical scholars, activists, practitioners, and ordinary Christians in the interpretation of Scripture for social transformation.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I have reflected on the practice of biblical interpretation at the Great Lakes Initiative within Africa's context of violence and chronic conflicts. I have highlighted the role of the challenges facing the contemporary communities in determining the questions we bring to the biblical texts and what counts as an answer. It should be noted though that, even though the questions that guide the GLI's biblical interpretation come from the African experiences of violence and conflicts, the resources (especially methodological resources) that are mobilized are not exclusively African. The GLI privileges the African context, but not necessarily in opposition to European or American experiences. The guiding conviction at the GLI is that of a global Church where interactions with one another (between scholars and ordinary Christians, between Western and African Christians, between former enemies, etc.) are viewed as opportunities for building peaceful communities.

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