

African biblical hermeneutics in a state of flux – towards refocusing its trajectory

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This study attempts to critically re-examine certain key hermeneutical concerns of a representative group of African biblical and religious studies scholars, who ground African theological reflection on traditional African values, cultures and social realities. Most of the scholars examined are united by a focus on the past and by an attempt to interpret the present and future on the basis of it. The article critiques the backward-looking hermeneutic implicit in the work of the scholars, especially Jesse Mugambi's backward-looking metaphor of reconstruction. It proposes a hermeneutic based on the metaphor of liberation, as employed, for example, by African women theologians or by Gerald West or Emmanuel Katongole, who focus on building the present and future on the basis of a new liberative transformative narrative and praxis that prioritises the sacredness and inviolability of human life in the context of the web of life, and in particular foregrounds the dignity of African lives, as well as all others.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article engages exposition and understanding of biblical texts by African scholars. Aspects of NT Christology or Ecclesiology are connected to theologies of traditional African socio-cultural realities. The relevance for an African theology of liberation and African theology of women is defended as necessitated by a new liberative transformative hermeneutic.

Keywords: African biblical hermeneutics; Christian faith; theology of ancestors; African theological inculturation; languages.

The quest for an African biblical hermeneutical key

One of the most cited books by African biblical scholars and those who focus on the African traditional religious heritage is John Mbiti's ([1969] 1989) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Therein, he proposes 'the concept of time as key to the understanding of African religions and philosophy' (Mbiti [1969] 1989:15–28). He suggests that although:

Belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies ...it does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs...Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. This is an important element in traditional religions, and one which will help us to understand the concentration of African religiosity in earthly matters, with man at the centre of this religiosity. It is here also that the question of African concept of time is so important. Traditional religions and philosophy are concerned with man in the past and present. God comes into the picture as an explanation of man's contact with time. There is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision with God's stepping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of man's normal life. (Mbiti [1969] 1989:4–5)

Indeed, according to Mbiti ([1969] 1989):

The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, *present* and virtually *no future*. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot therefore constitute time. If, however, future events are certain to occur, or if they fall within the inevitable rhythm of nature, they at best constitute only *potential time* not *actual time*. (pp. 16–17)

Mbiti employs the Swahili term *Sasa* to refer to the African concept of *the Present*, the Now and the Swahili term *Zamani* to refer to the African concept of *the Past*. In fact, from Mbiti's perspective, for Africans, 'history moves "backward" from the Sasa period to the Zamani, from the moment of intense experience to the period beyond which nothing can go.' According to Mbiti ([1969] 1989):

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

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[I]n traditional African thought there is no concept of history moving 'forward' towards a future climax or towards an end of the world. Since the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age, or a radically different state of affairs from what is in the Sasa and Zamani. The notion of a messianic hope, or a final destruction of the world, has no place in the traditional concept of history. (p. 23)

According to Mbiti, an idea much contested, this traditional concept of history holds the key to understanding the African worldview and lifestyle, African politics and economic planning, among other aspects of African life and practice. It is at the heart of African hermeneutics or ways of interpreting and understanding reality. He views this as providing an entry point for an African understanding of biblical and other theological perspectives. In order to demonstrate how seriously Mbiti embraced this idea, he made it the subject of his PhD study at Cambridge University in the early 1960s – *New Testament eschatology in an African background – A study of the encounter between New Testament theology and African traditional concepts*, later published in 1971. Realising the centrality of eschatology and the apocalyptic in the Christian New Testament, Mbiti was intrigued by both the theoretical and practical implications of New Testament ideas of eschatology and the apocalyptic in the African social-cultural context and world. He grappled with this problem in his Cambridge PhD research.

This is not the place to delve into a discussion or critique of Mbiti on this point. His claim that 'the concept of time as key to the understanding of African religions and philosophy' has, to say the least, been much contested, vilified and praised. Mbiti himself draws attention to this point (see Mbiti [1969] 1989:27–28) and finds this idea so important that he understands it as providing the hermeneutical key to unlocking the African lifeworld and as indispensable in the understanding and interpretation of African world views and practices (see Mbiti [1969] 1989:vii). Justin Ukpong in an important essay (Ukpong 2000) has given a helpful survey of similar approaches, including that of Joseph John Williams's *Hebrewism of West Africa* in 1930. The focus here is to highlight Mbiti's role as a leading and influential trailblazer of this popular and widespread use of African concepts and ideas, understood as providing hermeneutic keys for a variety of biblical and theological concepts found in both the Old and New Testaments. Mbiti insists that the African traditional heritage, religions and philosophies represent a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*, a *sine qua non* and filter for an African interpretation and understanding of the Christian faith, and a basis for its inculturation and contextualisation. This is evidently clear in his identification of an African concept of time as such a foundational concept.

In Mbiti's footsteps

Benezet Bujo's view that the 'The Theology of Ancestors' provides 'the starting point for a New Christology' and 'the starting point for a New Ecclesiology'. Thus, in his book

African Theology in its Social Context ([1986] 1992), Bujo understands Jesus Christ as the Proto-Ancestor and Model of African Morality. According to Bujo, Jesus is 'an African among Africans', supremely understood as an ancestor, the proto-ancestor, the one from whom all life flows and as key to understanding human community and values, as well as the nature of the Christian church and its functionaries such as clergy and lay actors, in all spheres (see for example Bujo [1992:79–92]).

Orobator (2008), however in his *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, uses the metaphor of an African brewer and the brewing pot. He views African Christianity as brewed in an African pot with the outcome of a rich and complex synthesis and mixture. McCann's (2010) *Stirring the Pot – A History of African Cuisine* captures and reinforces the idea of an immense variety of foodstuffs and the impressive diversity of African cuisine, and its myriad influences reflecting a rich culinary history. Orobator's image of 'Theology Brewed in an African pot' conjures images of complex mixtures and traditions dependent on the elements included in the mixture. It conjures up the dreaded concept of syncretism! Some argue that syncretism is essentially a process found in all cultures as they evolve and change, borrowing and sharing elements with neighboring cultures or other dominant imperial cultures. What constitutes syncretism with regard to an orthodox theological belief system is, however, contested and remains a subject of debate and discussion.

Charles Nyamiti is better known as a leading scholar of African theological inculturation approaches. He attempts an interpretation and understanding of the Christian mystery and story from an African social-cultural perspective. He adopts the analogical metaphor, which he employs to look at various elements of the Christian mystery in terms of their African counterpart, carefully paying close attention to their similarities and differences. He further uses the principle of interconnection of Christian mysteries, referred to a *nexus mysteriorum*. He thus endeavors to understand the Gospel and biblical revelation in its entirety from an African perspective. Like Benezet Bujo, Nyamiti (1984) also views Christ as our Ancestor (see his book *Christ our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*). Elements of the Christian faith are in Nyamiti's thinking and that of other like-minded theologians, subjected to the prism of African rituals, rites or ceremonies. They draw on various cultural practices related to socialisation and the life cycle, such as birthing and naming rites, growing up, various initiation and adulthood rites, marriage rites, mourning rites, inheritance ceremonies, old age and elderhood rites, death and funeral rites, among others. They also draw on ethnographic narratives of particular ethnic communities, emic or etic, that draw on African rural and urban landscapes and environments, village life, life in the household and the extended family, family and kinship relations, sex and marriage, youth and old age, rituals of life and death, among others.

The focus on the Bible in African languages

A number of scholars have highlighted the centrality and importance of rendering the Bible in African languages and viewed it as the key to vernacularisation, inculturation and, indeed, the incarnation of the Gospel in African cultures. African theologians such as Kwesi Dickson, Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh have unapologetically focused on the pivotal significance of Scripture translation into the mother tongue as indispensable for relevant theological formation. It is no wonder that at Trinity Theological College, Accra Ghana, the Chair for Mother tongue hermeneutics is named after Kwesi Dickson and his colleague Gilbert Ansre. The first occupant of this chair John Ekem, a very strong supporter of mother tongue hermeneutics as a pre-requisite for relevant African theology, closely treads the path earlier trodden by both Kwesi Dickson and Gilbert Ansre, a leading theologian and linguist, respectively. This approach insists on reading the Bible in the vernacular and in the context of its underlying culture as a pre-requisite for in-depth local theologising and wholesome domestication of the Gospel. This is well captured in the words of Dickson (1984) when he writes as follows:

The faith can be meaningful only when Christ is encountered as speaking and acting authentically, when he is heard in the African languages, when culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ. (p. 5)

It is only through the use of the mother tongue and ultimately in the lived experience and practice that the Gospel and theology, in general, can be domesticated or indigenised. Kwesi Dickson thus prioritised the translation and interpretation of the Scriptures as a prerequisite for the domestication, indigenisation or inculturation of the Christian Gospel in the life and cultures of African peoples. He saw this as necessary for the construction of relevant and vibrant African theologies.

Kwame Bediako, the founder of Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture at Akropong, Ghana, building on Dickson, placed much emphasis on the Engagement of Gospel and Culture in Africa, with a particular emphasis on the use of African vernaculars and the original source text languages of the Bible for theological discourse in African biblical and theological institutions. This continues to be taken very seriously at the Institute he founded. An example of such an engagement with Christian themes drawing from the fertile soil and world of African cultural experience that Kwame wished to see is exemplified in the highly imaginative and rich metaphorical language of an amazing Ghanaian lady, Christiana Afua Gyan, better known as Afua Kuma. Her 48-page booklet titled – *Jesus of the deep forest – prayers and praises of Afua Kuma* (Kuma 1980) – contains powerful poetic prayers and praises of Jesus of the Deep Forest, vividly expressed in African thought forms, figures and tropes drawn from the farming and the forest world and the structures of African traditional life. We find in this

booklet a theology free from Hellenistic and metaphysical thought forms and terminology, a world steeped in the rich and fertile traditional setting of a traditional African farm in the forest. Afua Kuma's world is dense with fecund Christological imagery, expressed in the form of prayers and praises. I was introduced into this book by the late Kwame Bediako and was pleasantly surprised when the late John Mbiti took Afua Kuma's booklet as the focus of his last lecture at St Paul's University, Limuru Kenya, sometime in 2018, about a year before his death in October 2019. The lecture was a glowing appreciation and affirmation of Afua Kuma's deep inculturated and contextualised faith. According to Bediako (1995), Afua Kuma is an example of the emerging forms of Christianity in Africa, which constitute the Renewal of a Non-Western Religion, as his book *Christianity in Africa – the Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, bears out. In his book, *Jesus in Africa* (Bediako 2000:8–19), Kwame Bediako includes an extended appreciation and affirmation of Afua Kuma. He expresses the view that Afua Kuma provides 'the kind of evidence which helps to show how one is able to speak of the Christian faith itself, as having become a non-Western religion. It is the evidence of what I call a "grassroots" theology; some will call it an oral theology, or even, a spontaneous or "implicit theology... Yet it is, in its own way a reflective theology"' (Bediako 2000:8).

The Bible in the common language of the people makes possible the vernacularisation, indigenisation, and indeed, the contextualisation of its message. The Septuagint opened the way for the Hellenization of the Hebrew Bible. Other translations that followed in this train accomplished similar results and effects during their time and contexts. The Bible in Coptic in its various dialects – Sahidic, Fayumic and Bohairic, from about the third-century CE to about the eighth-century CE enabled this Holy Book to gain deep roots in the life of the Coptic faith and culture, providing it inspiration and anchor to survive through the difficult periods ahead. Similarly, the Bible in Ge'ez translated between the fourth- and fifth-century CE has been the key and anchor to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Christianized Ethiopian culture to this day. These Bibles like other major translations in local languages that followed, no doubt, played a major role in the development of indigenous theologies rooted in the vernacular. They opened the way for the invention of new local alphabets and orthographies, the development of national languages, as well as new lexicons and literature made possible through the miracle of writing. The process and product of Bible translation in various languages continue to contribute to the evangelisation of communities, the consolidation of the faith and the transmission of cultural values.

Reconstruction – a spanner in the works

Although domestication, indigenisation and inculturation motifs or theologies have gained much attention and popularity among an increasing number of African

theologians, these themes and motifs have not been free from challenge and questioning. As a Kenyan theologian and religious studies scholar, Jesse Mugambi who has proposed, embraced and zealously promoted discourse based on the metaphor of reconstruction has attempted to take it beyond the above motifs. He presents the metaphor of reconstruction as something new and as moving beyond the theologies of liberation and inculturation. Using this metaphor, he attempts to recreate, rebuild and reconstruct the dilapidated and crumbled walls of Africa's communities destroyed by centuries of institutionalised racism, colonialism and maldevelopment. In order to provide flesh and depth to this metaphor or theology of reconstruction, Mugambi takes us back to the Old Testament. He settles on the text of Ezra-Nehemiah and the figure of Nehemiah, the heroic and legendary leader of Jewish returnees from exile in Babylon and Nehemiah's monumental task of the rebuilding and restoration of the destroyed and dilapidated walls that encircled the ancient city of Jerusalem, despite external hostility and resistance. Mugambi (2012) claims that this text:

[P]rovides valuable insights into the logic of Reconstruction. Using the managerial knowledge and experience of a senior civil servant in the imperial palace, Nehemiah organizes his community to rebuild the wall within the shortest time possible. The contributors towards the project vary according to the abilities and endowments of the individual members of the community. Whereas Moses operates like a war commander both in Egypt and in the Exodus, Nehemiah operates like a manager at a construction site. The pedagogy of Reconstruction presupposes that the work-force knows the task at hand. The pedagogy of Liberation presupposes that only the commanders know the terrain and the logistics of the war. (p. 25)

This understanding and comparison of the two metaphors, liberation and reconstruction are at best simplistic and misleading. It forms the basis of Mugambi's claim that the main agenda and task are for Africans to engage in the urgent task of Africa's reconstruction. It is inspired by Nehemiah's successful mission of reconstructing and rebuilding the dilapidated African Wall. It would appear that Mugambi's reconstruction agenda as other key metaphors mentioned above, that is, of indigenisation, inculturation or contextualisation, represent a yearning for a return to an idealised past, to a bygone land of glory and splendor or an attempt to restore cultural relevance and harmony, based on traditional African cultural values. Mugambi's view is a reminder of Mbiti's assumed return to some idyllic, bygone era exemplified in his argument of the African concept of time discussed above, namely the concepts of the *Sasa* and the *Zamani*, where time is grinding slowly backwards on to some bygone world and time, the *Zamani*. Indigenisation, inculturation and reconstruction are viewed, as in some sense, focused on restoring, reconstructing or bringing back some form of pure, idyllic, longed for, lost world, destroyed by the colonialists and neo-colonialists. This is akin to Nehemiah's mission to Jerusalem to rebuild or reconstruct the ruined and dilapidated Walls of the ancient city of Jerusalem destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar the Neo-Babylonian Imperial Ruler, in 586 BC, with the aim of restoring it to its

past state and glory. Persian imperial rulers conquered and took over from the Babylonian imperial rulers under Cyrus II of Persia. The new ruler allowed the Jews to go back to their native land and to rebuild their Temple and the Walls of the ancient city. Nehemiah was part of a wave of returning Jewish exiles from Babylon. The Wall was rebuilt by these returning Jewish exiles under the leadership of Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century BC. Mugambi picks on this reconstruction of material ruins as a metaphor for the reconstruction of belief systems, cultural values, and worldviews and accompanying practices, drawing on some past idyllic bygone era.

Based on this picture, Mugambi embraces a reconstructionist hermeneutic. He proposes and defends a reconstruction metaphor and motif drawing from Nehemiah's Wall rebuilding project. In so doing, Mugambi finds the achievement and figure of Moses of little use and relevance to Africa at this juncture. He marginalises and decentres the Moses figure, as well as the Exodus motif, which stands at the heart of the liberation metaphor and the liberation hermeneutic. He critiques the traditional metaphor of liberation usually understood as symbolic of the freeing of Jews from captivity in Egypt and their return to a promised land flowing with milk and honey, led by the great and legendary figure of Moses. He abandons this in favour of an alternative metaphor of reconstruction symbolised by Nehemiah's rebuilding and restoration of the historic Walls of Jerusalem, built originally during the reign of King Solomon in the 10th century BC together with the Temple. Solomon's Temple and the Wall were both destroyed and reduced to ruins in 586 BC. Mugambi critiques the Exodus motif because of its implications in the oppressive and negative effects of the occupation and settlement in Canaan or Palestine. The Exodus motif has been generally understood in terms of the metaphor of liberation from any type of oppressive or negative reality to a better more human-liberating reality. Reconstruction, however, for Mugambi is the better metaphor. In its favour, for example, Mugambi points out that 'Jesus serves as a model for reconstruction theology. Indeed, he was much more of a reconstruction theologian than a liberation theologian' (in Mugambi 2012:27). He interprets the Sermon on the Mount as 'a concise outline of reconstructive theology' (Mugambi 2012:27). Similarly, he interprets Paul's epistles as 'replete with insights for theologies of Reconstruction' (Mugambi 2012:28) and claims that Paul 'for the rest of his life endeavored to reconstruct Jewish religious consciousness so that it would become much more inclusive'. He views Pauline theology and work as 'social reconstruction at its best'. Even the book of Revelation is interpreted by Mugambi as focusing on social reconstruction (Mugambi 2012:28). Mugambi in the final analysis seeks to interpret and to see everything in terms of reconstruction. The question is whether the metaphor of reconstruction understood analogically by Mugambi in terms of Nehemiah's Wall Reconstruction is really powerful enough to contain the liberation metaphor and other metaphors? Its major shortcoming and limitation lie in that fact that it is a reactionary, backward-looking metaphor,

beholden on the belief that the task is to recreate, to reproduce, to bring back, that is, reconstruct anew older schemas and visions, revive older values and mindsets. The challenge is to be forward looking, visionary, pragmatic and sensitive to the needs and challenges of the present and future in order to allow for the creation of relevant, liberative, transformative solutions that promote human flourishing and the highest human good.

Evolving hermeneutical keys and horizons

Nigerian Chris Manus (2004) introduces a tool for use in reading the ancient texts, which he calls *Intercultural Hermeneutics*. This is not far removed from that advocated by Ukpong (2000) who emphasises:

[T]he concern to create an encounter between the biblical text to the African context...such that the main focus of interpretation is on the communities that receive the text rather than on those that produced the text as is the case with the Western methods. (p. 11)

Ukpong here distinguishes 'two currents of academic readings of the Bible in Africa, one follows the Western pattern, while the other follows the African pattern of linking the text with the African context' (Ukpong 2000:11). Both Manus and Ukpong, as well as others, follow a hermeneutic based on an inculturation agenda that seeks to bring the ancient and foreign biblical text closer to the people, in terms of domesticating it and filtering it through the local cultural grids and filters. The inculturation agenda focuses on the incarnation of the Gospel in a culture and the evangelisation of that culture. Its true success is visible when it is in sync with the cultural understanding and thinking of ordinary readers or ordinary simple people found in African villages or cities. Manus (2004) views this approach as:

[A]n appropriate methodology by which the academically trained interpreter employs the resources of African social or religio-cultural and experiential contexts, African conceptual framework and African life experience to examine the text of a given passage of the Bible ... in order to derive meaning suitable to one's contexts. (p. 35)

DR Congolese theologian and translation scholar, Loba-Mkole (2005), proposes an approach that he refers to as 'Intercultural Mediations' understood as interpretations or representations based on a 'Triple Heritage' or 'three cultural entities, namely the original cultures, Church traditions and the current ones' (Loba-Mkole 2005:1). He restates this as concerned with these three – 'current audiences in Africa, and cultures embedded in the New Testament writings as well as cultures represented in Church traditions' (Loba-Mkole 2005:1). Manus and Loba-Mkole are careful to not only highlight the understanding of the text and its underlying original cultures but also include church traditions adding another layer of interpretation that attempts to grasp the text through the prism and filter of prevailing and dominant church traditions and orthodoxies in a given community. The place and role of church tradition and orthodox cannot be overlooked in any interpretive endeavor. Similarly, there is

no escape from the reality and complexity of contemporary audiences in Africa, who are by no means monolithic, pure traditionalists or modernists, but rather complex, multi-ethnic and pluralistic and even post-modern. How does biblical interpretation operate in this new complex space? Comprehending this reality complicates the picture.

African women theologians are at the centre of African realities who cannot be avoided or ignored. Their perspectives, their agenda, their interests and struggles undoubtedly influence their biblical hermeneutic stances. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has been playing a huge active front-line role in actively making the African woman's voice heard. In a number of texts, including Mercy Oduyoye's *Daughters of Anowa – African Women & Patriarchy* (1995) and; *Beads and Strands – Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (2003), among others; *Other Ways of Reading – African Women and the Bible*, edited by Musa W. Dube (2001), as well as *Her-stories – Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden and Saroji Nadar (2002), to name but a few, African women theologians have continued to seriously engage issues that arise out of the African social-cultural environment in encounter with Christianity. Among some of the key issues included in the above books and elsewhere are – 'Women and ritual in Africa', 'Old Testament Polygamy through African Eyes', 'Christian Widows in African Culture', 'Priesthood of Women in the African context', 'Sexuality and Women in African Culture', 'African Women and Patriarchy, African Women and Matriarchy', 'How Local Divine Powers were Suppressed – A case of Mwari of the Shona', 'Esther and Northern Sotho Stories', 'A *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31.10–13', 'A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth', 'Fifty Years of Bleeding: A story telling Feminist Reading of Mark 5.24–43', among others. African women theologians prioritise approaches that focus on the dignity of women and issues of equity and equality. The oppression of women generally, the marginalisation and silencing of women's voices in African spaces, as elsewhere is a trend that they seek to struggle against and see its termination. Rev. Dr Njoya (2012) has captured this African weight of womanhood in his report where he reminds us of widely held beliefs and perceptions by many Kenyan men, who continue to falsely hold that:

Men should have precedence in opportunities in life. Men have the right to eat and mate more than women. Culture holds women accountable to men while the reverse does not obtain. Men assume the rights to assign all chores and activities to women. Men feel justified to assume unattainable and unsustainable marks of masculinity as providers, property owners, and protectors, even when it is women who actually execute all these roles. (pp. 7–8)

African women have focused their attention and struggle on overturning this oppressive narrative and replacing it with a liberative and egalitarian alternative. Paradoxically, this oppressive narrative is rooted in ongoing traditional African cultural and religious mindsets. The women struggle focuses on challenging and deconstructing the dominant patriarchal

and androcentric attitudes, interpretations and perspectives, prevalent in African societies, institutions, including in churches and the religious sphere. They expand and entrench this critique by embracing feminist and post-colonial perspectives that affirm life, wholeness, freedom and truth.

Towards a liberative transformative life affirming hermeneutic

The current ongoing women's struggle for freedom and equality, for respect and mutuality, for self-realisation and fulfilment within the present African socio-cultural, religious and political space, characterised by gender inequality as well as other inequalities is both legitimate and necessary. Men and people of goodwill everywhere ought to strongly support this agenda and lend it all their energies and resources. The women's agenda is a clear indication that a broader hermeneutic that is inclusive and life affirming is urgently called for. A hermeneutic that actively promotes and advances the healing of persons, communities and nature, as well as positive and wholesome transformation and liberation of every sphere, is evidently non-negotiable. Our survival depends on it.

The magnitude of evil and suffering in our world but especially in Africa has reached unprecedented proportions. DR Congo theologian Ka Mana reminds us of the 'abject poverty and grinding misery which our societies are confronted with each day and which leave them without a glimmer of hope' (Mana 2002:2). He draws our attention to the:

[M]oral helplessness in confronting illness, deep distress in the face of supernatural forces, and the irrepressible need for healing and deliverance from the forces of darkness; the powerlessness of our societies in the face of the 'geopolitics of chaos' which make up the world today, and the disconcerting policies imposed by international financial institutions; the implosion of our creative forces in the unspeakable anarchy experienced by many of our countries where the quest for survival generates violence and an instinct that is destructive of life itself; the multiplication of hotbeds of social unrest and areas of armed conflicts in a continent where the basic needs of life are far from satisfactory, and where the countries with the most appalling cases of poverty in the world are found. (Mana 2002:2).

These and more are compounded by:

[H]ow insignificant we seem to be in today's world, how great are the shortcomings that hinder us, and the extent to which we debase ourselves in our own eyes as individuals, as a culture and as a society. (Mana 2002:3).

The challenge that faces us is how to 'break loose from the stranglehold upon our destiny and thus build a new society?' (Mana 2002:3).

Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole takes us back to the root causes of Africa's untold tragedy and misery – characterised by 'the disturbing observation: churches and coffins are the two prevalent images associated with Africa today' (Katongole 2011:29). He observes that many of these

are tragically rooted in Africa's pre-colonial and colonial past. He notes that the African church has been sadly coopted in reproducing 'the negative ideologies of violence, war, tribalism, poverty, despair, corruption and even genocide' (Katongole 2011:47) characteristic of the African reality. Despite this negativity, Katongole who has dismissed Mugambi as 'moving too fast to the solutions of what the church's role should be' and as having 'capitulated to the temptation of "prescriptive haste" into which many others have fallen' (Katongole 2011:32). Paradoxically, and with hope, he imagines a new future for Africa, one that negates and transcends the dominant hegemony of the nation state, which is symbolic of the wanton sacrificing of African lives, destruction of African environments and economies, and which is part and parcel of the reproduction of Africa's enduring perennial problems, memorialised in the figure and legacy of King Leopold's Ghost and his African kleptocratic big men, steeped in the exercise of power greed, looting and plunder. Katongole reminds us of the 'connections between African politics and the sacrificing of African lives, as well as the expectation and even anticipation of Africans' disposability...' and the belief that African lives are 'not unique, precious, sacred lives ...' but 'mere bodies to be used, mere masses to be exploited' (Katongole 2011:17). His conclusion is compelling and self-evident, namely that:

[F]or a new future to take shape, the wanton sacrificing of African lives would have to be confronted – no, interrupted – by a different story and its accompanying practices in which sacredness, the preciousness, the inviolability, and the dignity of African lives are foregrounded. (Katongole 2011:17–18).

A biblical hermeneutic that does not take African lives, or any human life for that matter seriously, immediately loses relevance and disconnects itself from the divine narrative *ipso facto*. This is Katongole's major point. The divine narrative is intimately and inextricably intertwined with the words of Jesus when he declared in the Gospel of John 10.10,11 that:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The meaning of this text is clear. Jesus came with the intention that all humans may have life in all its fullness, in all its wholeness, inclusive of every sphere of life. Jesus embraces a holistic view, with implications and consequences for the whole person and all of society. This was not a paternalistic approach in support of human dependency, but robust support in support of a pro-active human agency – personal as well as interpersonal, human independence as well as interdependence. It affirms the need for the individual to be self-supporting, fulfilled and living in solidarity with others. It is not an individualistic approach nor a collectivistic approach. This approach takes seriously the needs of the person in the context of the community and moreover the needs of the community itself, as existing for itself and in the interests of its members. It affirms a communitarian ethic of solidarity and generosity, of self-giving, empathy and

compassion. It is a kind of 'one for all and all for one' approach, a good shepherd, good Samaritan approach, with positive elements of capitalism and elements of socialism.

In his hometown of Nazareth at the start of his mission, Jesus pronounces what some refer to as his manifesto. It is an inclusive liberative transformative agenda – to set all humans free, none is excluded – but beginning with the weak and poor, the marginalised and forgotten, the least among us, the little ones. According to the Gospel of Luke 4.16, Jesus declares before the home congregation:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Similarly, in his futuristic discourse regarding the final Judgement day, Jesus judges the conduct and praxis of his followers in terms of their practical love of neighbour. At Matthew 25:35–36, Jesus depicts himself as present but invisible with, and in the neighbour, including the least among us, the little ones, the weak and poor, thereby fully identifying with those on the 'underside of history'. Jesus exclaims:

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

This undoubtedly makes more sense from a liberation perspective rather than from a reconstruction perspective as Mugambi would have it.

The current corruption and rottenness in our nations, the present Hobbesian nightmare among us where life for the many is 'poor, nasty, brutish and short' seems to have become a norm. The focus on the materialistic, the looting and grabbing of public goods and resources for private gain, in the midst of squalor, daily shame and humiliation, daily pain and suffering, and the alarming degradation of everyday life is a brutal judgement on all of us. It is a shame on all of us.

This reality undeniably demands for an inclusive liberative transformative life affirming hermeneutic and theologies with the hope of and possibility for leading humanity out of this quagmire and seemingly unending captivity and prison. West ([1991] 1995) has attempted to apply this hermeneutic in the South African context. His important book *Biblical Hermeneutics – Modes of Reading the Bible in South African Context* offers practical suggestions on how such an approach can be applied to various groups of readers mostly in the South African context but elsewhere as well. The hugely influential Latin American theologian Leonardo Boff understood the desire for such an approach as arising out 'of an ethical indignation at the poverty and marginalisation of the great masses of our continent' (quoted in Rosino Gibellini [1986] 1987:4). This indignation lies at the root of all liberative transformative life affirming theologies and forms the basis

of any defensible 'Utu/Ubuntu' based hermeneutic (see Mojola 2019a in Ogude 2019a, and Mojola 2019b in Ogude 2019b). At the very least, such a liberative transformative hermeneutic operates at three levels, as, for example, explicated by Gibellini ([1986] 1987) as follows:

- a) the socio-political level: i.e. liberation of the oppressed: 'exploited classes, despised ethnic groups, and marginalized cultures'; b) the anthropological level: liberation for a qualitatively different society with a human dimension; c) the theological level: liberation from sin, the ultimate root of all injustice and oppression, for a life in community and participation. (p. 8)

Gibellini adds that 'it is the task of a responsible theology of liberation to go through these three levels and articulate them in a differentiated account' (Gibellini [1986] 1987:8).

Transcending the problem of Pervasive interpretive pluralism

A hermeneutic driven by inclusive liberative transformative life-giving theologies is more relevant now more than ever. It can never be bypassed by such metaphors as reconstruction or any myriad others. Rather, such metaphors and their prevalence are only indicative of an interpretive crisis at the heart of contemporary theological practices. All interpreters of the Bible or indeed any text are confronted by what Christian Smith refers to as 'the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism' (Smith 2012:16–18) whose underlying logic is that 'scripture taken at face value itself often cannot resolve differences in interpretation, because of its multivocal, polysemous, and multivalent nature... (Smith 2012:21). There are those who hold that any text can generate only one reading or interpretation. On the contrary, texts allow a plethora of divergent interpretations of the same text. This has been explained by American translation scholar Lawrence Venuti (1995):

[A] foreign text is the site of many different semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation, on the basis of varying cultural assumptions and interpretive choices, in specific situations, in different historical periods. Meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence, and therefore a translation cannot be judged according to mathematics-based concepts of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence. (pp. 17–18)

Meaning is created and re-created, constructed and reconstructed. Moreover, it is fluid and unstable. It is always embedded in particular contexts, paradigms, cultures, languages, presuppositions, belief systems, ideologies, etc. Theologians, translators or any other interpreters are implicated in all manner of biases, prejudices, preferences or even stereotypes. Alvarez and Carmen-Africa Vidal (1996) are surely to the point when they remind us that translators and interpreters are:

[C]onstrained in many ways: by their own ideology; by their feelings of superiority or inferiority towards the language in which they are writing the text being translated; by the prevailing

political rules at the time; by the very language in which the texts they are translating are written; by what the dominant institutions and ideology expect of them; by the public for whom the translation is intended. The translation itself will depend upon all of these factors. (p. 6)

The problem and reality of *pervasive interpretive pluralism*, which is unavoidable, mean that all interpretive practices or hermeneutic approaches must be constrained and contained within a larger framework. This allows for an acceptable relativism, which defends and promotes the highest human good, and makes possible a viable universal ethic, necessary for a wholesome, well-ordered human community that is just and fair, free from cruelty and dehumanisation and reduction of human beings to objects, used as a mere means for the advantage of others.

In conclusion, the inculturational or reconstructionist hermeneutic approaches discussed above need to be driven and contained within the larger framework of *an inclusive liberative transformative life-giving hermeneutic and theology*. Such an overarching hermeneutic provides a unifying logic that transcends the problem of *pervasive interpretive pluralism*, namely the imperative of seeking the highest inclusive human good and the obligation to promote, to defend, to seek and to live in harmony with the web of life and the dignity and worth of all humans.

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A.O.M. is the sole author of this article.

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