

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: An African perspective

Elelwani B Farisani

Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

During the apartheid era in South Africa, the Bible was used both as a tool to legitimise the apartheid ideology and as a site of struggle against it. Today, in the post-apartheid context, the Bible still plays a significant role in addressing the current challenges. Accordingly, in this article my aim is twofold: first, to chronicle how the biblical text has been used to support the apartheid ideology and second, to spell out the role of the biblical text in the post-apartheid context. I begin by discussing how uncritical and literal interpretations of Scripture have been used by the white minority to exclude, oppress and sideline the black majority in South Africa. I then present a biblical interpretation which may serve as a safeguard against our tendencies to exclude, oppress, marginalise and sideline any minority or powerless group in our society. I conclude by suggesting ways to interpret the Bible that are less likely to lend themselves to abuse by the powerful in the post-apartheid context.

Introduction

In this article I will examine the role of biblical interpretation in the light of certain power relations. This I will do in three stages. First, I will discuss how uncritical and literal interpretations of Scripture have been used by the powerful to further exclude, oppress and sideline the powerless in South Africa. Second, I will present a biblical interpretation which may serve as a safeguard against our ambitious ideological needs, and, finally, I will suggest ways to interpret the Bible that are less likely to lend themselves to abuse by the powerful.

The abuse of power in the interpretation of Scripture

The Bible is open to abuse by the powerful, and we have allowed the powers and principalities of both secular and spiritual oppression to usurp its spirit and use it to legitimise economic and environmental exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of abuse.¹ In what follows I will show the extent to which the authority of the Bible can be undermined, eroded and even hijacked.

Ethnicity: an abuse of Scripture

In Africa, Scripture has been abused to justify ethnicity. While this article does not offer an exhaustive and detailed analysis of how this has occurred, a few instances of such abuse will be highlighted.

First, Scripture has been abused to justify the slave trade. It is common knowledge that the centuries-long slave trade has contributed to the various ethnic separations on the African continent. As Nambala explains:

Here I refer to both imposition of plantation slavery in Africa and commercial overseas slaving by Europeans, Americans and Arabs. The effect of the slave trade was devastating to Africa with regard to its population as well as to its social mobility and development.²

Biblical texts such as Philemon and 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 have been used to justify slavery in Africa and the USA. The literal use of these texts to justify slavery and its negative consequences is unfair, since it fails to take into consideration the religious, economic and political conditions out of which these two biblical texts emerged.

Second, ethnicity has been used to sow division and conflict. Maimela argues that in Africa, ethnic diversity has been used by politicians “to destructive ends”.³ These include “tribal or ethnic conflicts which have given

¹ John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 3–4; Gerald O. West, “Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: a Tentative Sketch,” in Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), pp. 29–53.

² S.V.V. Nambala, “Ethnicity and the Church in Africa,” in I. Gobena (ed.), *Church, Culture and Ethnicity in Present Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus, 1997), p. 30; See also Albert de Jong, *Ethnicity: Blessing or Culture* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1999), p. 4.

³ Cf. O. Oddland, “Revisiting the Cultural Anthropological Concepts of Culture and Ethnicity: An Introduction to the Present Cultural Diversities in EECMY,” in Gobena, *op cit* (note 2), p. 63; De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), p. 5; E.B. Farisani, “Ethnicity in Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *Theologia Viatorum* 28/1 (2004), p. 44.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

rise to civil wars, conflict, refugees and destruction of African society.”⁴ Maimela reminds us that the advocates of apartheid used Scripture to justify their ideology:

Their favorable text was the story of the Tower of Babel [Gen 11:1–8] which tells us of the confusion of tongues. It was deduced from the story that it is God’s will that different races and nations should be separated to live far from each other. As the will of God, this separation was not revoked in Christ’s reconciling work. Hence the Acts of Apostles [Acts 2:4] narrates the speaking of different tongues at the Pentecost the difference being only that the spirit enabled different races to hear one another.⁵

Here, we see Scripture (Gen 11:1–8; Acts 2) being abused in order to justify the separation of people according to their ethnic or racial origins. Maimela explains that in South Africa, “the political ideology of apartheid was implemented precisely to exploit the reality of ethnic diversity to further the socioeconomic and political interests of the dominant Whites.”⁶

Sadly, certain independent governments in Africa (those of Rwanda and Sudan, for instance) have continued the ethnic power play started by colonialism. These parties, argues De Jong,⁷ rely on an ethnic power base and exploit and encourage interethnic conflicts.

The oppression of women

Texts such as 1 Corinthians 7, 11:2–6, 14:33b–36; Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22–23 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15 have been used to oppress women in the church and in society.

Ayanga reminds us that throughout history, religion has sanctioned and sanctified the oppression of women as a God-given doctrine not to be challenged through the interpretation of Scripture. Thus certain biblical interpretation relegated women to a particular social status.⁸

⁴ Simon Maimela, “Cultural and Ethnic Diversity in Promotion of Democratic Change,” in J.N.K. Mugambi (ed.), *Democracy and Development in Africa. The Role of the Churches* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997), p. 118; see also F. Pierli et al., “Ethnicity and Human Development. The Missing Link,” in Gobena, *op ci.* (note 2), p. 36.

⁵ Maimela, *ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), p. 28.

⁸ H.O. Ayanga, “Liberation of the African Woman,” in Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng, *Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 1999), p. 91; Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Polygamy: A Feminist Critique,” in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis

Both culture and religion play a role in the oppression of women. One could argue that they impinge on women's participation in church and political leadership. In other words, biblical interpretation can be used as a tool either to enhance or to curtail women's participation in religious or political processes. Religious beliefs restrict leadership to men, thereby legitimising male domination in religious and political leadership roles.⁹ Islam and Christianity could be cited as religions whose doctrinal imperatives legitimise male domination (Qu'ran, 4:34; Eph 5:22–23; 1 Tim 2:11–12; 1 Cor 14:34–35; Col 3:18).¹⁰ Culture and religion have supported male dominance, which has obviously contributed to the abuse of women.

Prosperity gospel

In Africa, some churches have propagated a theology of prosperity. Biblical texts that display deuteronomistic inclinations advocating retribution are employed here. Given that many factors contribute to the material conditions of Christians in Africa, the use of biblical texts to explain conditions of poverty and affluence is far too simplistic. Moreover, Jesus Christ rejected retributive explanations for the physical conditions of those he healed (Jn 9:1–3).

The Dutch Reformed Church's use of Scripture to support apartheid ideology

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa has played a significant role in providing a theological backing for apartheid policies. "The three large Afrikaans churches, despite their differences, used the Bible in much the same manner."¹¹

A biblical hermeneutical justification of apartheid was triggered by "a sense of anxiety about the mixing of races, together with a concomitant uncovering of certain 'principles' on race in Scripture".¹²

The Bible was used as "a biblical *principium*" (Durand 1978:4–5 quoted in Lombaard 2009:276) or "biblical keynotes" (Von Allmen 1977:8

Books, 1992), p. 103; see R. Ammah, "Paradise Lies at the Feet of Muslim Women," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

⁹ N.K. Maina, "Muslim Women and Politics in Kenya," in Getui and Obeng, *ibid.*, p. 136; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 15.

¹⁰ Maina, *ibid.*, p. 137; Oduyoye, *op cit* (note 8), p. 101; Kanyoro and Oduyoye, *op cit* (note 8), pp. 2ff; Ammah, *op cit* (note 8), pp. 83–4; Lloyd Fanusie, "Sexuality and Women in African Culture," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op cit* (note 8), pp. 140ff.

¹¹ Christo Lombaard, 2009. "Does contextual exegesis require an affirming Bible? Lessons from 'apartheid' and 'Africa' as narcissistic hermeneutical keys." *Scriptura* 101, 277.

¹² Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

quoted in Lombaard 2009:276), without providing clarification to what is meant by phrases such as “eternal principles on race relations” in the Bible.¹³

According to this hermeneutic, anyone who questioned the so called “principles” or “conclusions” was seen to be questioning the authority of the Bible.¹⁴

The texts most frequently used to justify apartheid were Genesis 11, Deuteronomy 32:8, Acts 1:8 and 17:26, 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 and Revelation 5:9 and 7:9. From these texts conclusions were summarily drawn about racial segregation within society and in the church.¹⁵

As Lombaard further explains:

This tenet having been postulated, the subsequent reasoning ran as follows: while the obvious unity of the human race is founded on Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26–29) and on Noah (Genesis 10:32), the diversification of this unity by God in Genesis 10–11 should be taken as seriously (also Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 32:8; Amos 9:7; Acts 17:26). This diversification of humanity was entrenched and perpetuated with the mission text (Matthew 28:19 – see e.g. Dreyer 1978:68; *Herderlike skrywe* 1973:3f), at Pentecost (Acts 2:8f) and for all times (Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 14:6, 19:15). The implication was thus that such divisions must be observed in modern times (Groenewald 1947:44–47). These thoughts and texts in Groenewald’s work were to be repeated in many a church document and other publications (e.g. Du Preez 1955) endorsing apartheid.¹⁶

They further argued that according to Genesis 1–2 God as the creator is primarily responsible for the separation of nations.¹⁷ According to this reasoning God is responsible for splitting up the faithful generations of Seth and the unfaithful generations of Cain. To disregard this would bring about Divine punishment, namely, the flood of Genesis 7.¹⁸ It is important to note here that according to Deuteronomy 7:1–11, if one respects the boundaries set by God, then one will automatically be blessed. It was further argued that the existence of separate peoples is a “healthy Christian principle”, which is in line with “God’s creation and will. Racial differentiation implied in

¹³ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

¹⁴ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

¹⁵ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

¹⁶ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

¹⁷ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 276.

¹⁸ Lombaard, *op cit*, pp. 276–277.

Genesis 10:32, 18:18, and Matthew 25:32 will continue for eternity, as shown by Isaiah 2:4” (Sampson 1966:72).¹⁹

Lombaard further explains that the tower of Babel narrative played a significant part in attempts to “prove” apartheid.

Babel, it was argued, proves that a false human unity was corrected by God (De Klerk 1939:56). This is thus a history of *grace*, showing the idea of apartheid to be ‘Scriptural, ... Christian, ... natural, ... and just’ (Wolmarans 1978:90; cf. JD Vorster, quoted in Kinghorn 1986:107–108; cf. Villa-Vicencio 1977:27). Even Exodus 9:1 and 10:3 add to the argument (cf. Ukpong 2004:25): it is for ‘*my people*’ that Moses claims national autonomy. This distinction between nations was then traced in the New Testament: the Jerusalem congregation was for Jewish Christians; Jesus and his followers differentiated clearly between Jews and Greeks. Unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:4–6; Galatians 3:28; John 15:4–5; John 17; Ephesians 2 and 4 etc.) is therefore purely spiritual, never at the cost of diversity, and no more than a ‘supernatural organic communion’ (Groenewald 1947:56–61, translated; Federal Council 1960:7–8).²⁰

From the above hermeneutics, it was concluded that the Bible teaches *national* (Psalm 80:14; Isaiah 5:1–5; Philemon 3:4f; 1 Corinthians 7:18), *social* (Deuteronomy 7:2–4, Nehemiah 13:23), *occupational* (Deuteronomy 22:10; 2 Corinthians 6:14), *judicial* (1 Corinthians 6:1–11) and *religious* (Deuteronomy 7; John 17:14; 1 Corinthians 8:4–7 and 10:19–22; 2 Corinthians 6:14 and 7:1) apartheid (Groenewald 1947:51–55). In line with this, and taking the Genesis 19 narrative (Sodom) and Psalm 86:9 (blessing of nations) into account, it is thus impossible to accept “non-whites” into church membership (cf. Loader 1978:19). Extreme interpretations even used the curse of Ham in Genesis 9:25 and the sons of Cush in Genesis 10:6 to justify overt oppression of blacks by whites (cf. Burden 1994:11–12).²¹

Curse theology

Certain biblical texts (Gen 3:16; 9:18–27) have been used to justify the oppression of women and black people, the argument being put forward that they have been cursed since biblical times. It has been argued that in Genesis 3:16, women are “cursed” because they are blamed for having caused sin to

¹⁹ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 277.

²⁰ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 277.

²¹ Lombaard, *op cit*, p. 277.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

enter into the world. According to racist ideology, black people are subject to the “curse” of Ham (actually, the curse of Canaan, Ham’s progeny), placed on them because of Ham’s sin against Noah, for which Noah cursed him (Gen. 9:25–27).

In both cases, in terms of the religious and ideological justification of racial and sexist oppression, black people and women are cursed from birth based on the “original sin” of some ancestor of the same sex or race. In both cases, the curse is continuous, affecting all those of the same gender or race. It is used to justify the subordination of women and black people: in the case of women, “your husband ... shall rule over you”; in the case of black people, “lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers ... let Canaan be his slave”.²²

From this racist and sexist perspective, black women have to bear a particular burden since they have upon them both the “curse of women” and the “curse of Ham”.²³

Romans 13:1–7 is one of the famous passages that was abused during the heyday of apartheid rule in South Africa:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (Rom 13:1–7).

Romans 13 urges citizens to be subject to the government of the day as instituted by God, and was invoked during the days of apartheid to coerce black people into accepting the apartheid government’s policy of racial oppression and segregation as being ordained and sanctioned by God. It was

²² Demetrius K. Williams, *The End to this Strife. The Politics of Gender in African American Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 155.

²³ *Ibid.*

Elelwani B Farisani

argued that opposing the South African government was tantamount to opposing God, who had given the government authority to rule over all South Africans. All those who opposed the government were branded Communists and terrorists who wanted to wage a total onslaught on the Christian government and replace it with a Communist dictatorship. This view led to torture, detention without trial and the loss of many innocent lives. The text was used not only by politicians to silence those who opposed racial segregation, but also by certain church leaders and theologians who urged Christians not to be involved in politics that went counter to the government's policies.

Biblical interpretation through safeguarding the authority of the Bible

We have seen how biblical interpretation has been used or abused by the powerful in order to oppress the less powerful. I will now show how such abuse could be avoided, and highlight how Scripture can be used in an inclusive way in matters of women's liberation and ethnicity.

Ethnicity

- The role of the text in strengthening ethnicity

Biblical texts can and should be critically appropriated to affirm cultural diversity within a community as a positive sign of God's creation. Thus, in order to avoid the trap of abusing Scripture to foment ethnic conflicts, the context in which a particular Scripture is situated has to be critically analysed. A straightforward reading of any biblical text, without critical analysis of the world that produced or shaped the ideology contained in it, is dangerous in that it perpetuates rather than solves conflict between the powerful and the powerless in any community.²⁴

Jonathan Dyck underscores this contention when he argues that,

There is a danger, however, in taking ideologies of identity at face value without considering the social complexity of the concept of identity, without taking into consideration that ideologies of identity are the point at which the beliefs of the people are taken hold of for the purpose of power.²⁵

Bearing in mind that ethnic categories within Scriptures have been used by certain scholars and politicians to "manipulate and to rule," careful biblical

²⁴ Farisani, *op cit* (note 3), p. 44.

²⁵ Jonathan Dyck, "The Ideology of Identity in Chronicles," in Mark G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible. Biblical Interpretation Series 19* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 116.

interpretation should also encourage the use of Scripture as a “mode of resistance” to ethnic conflict.²⁶

I have argued elsewhere for a critical analysis of this particular ideology.²⁷ Careful biblical interpretation will have to take seriously the fact that every text in the Bible is the product of its sociohistorical context. In order to use any text in a non-oppressive and inclusive way in Africa, without its further oppressing and silencing the already silenced and marginalised poor, the text’s ideology has to be subjected to rigorous critical analysis, in order to de-ideologise it.

Whereas certain individuals have previously fuelled ethnicity in Africa through their careless interpretation of Scripture, the hope remains that the church and theologians will use biblical texts critically, in other words in a way that will highlight the strengths of ethnicity and encourage unity in diversity within the community.

- The role of the church in ethnic issues

According to Nambala,²⁸ the fact that many people affected by ethnic conflict are church members demands that the church play a pivotal role in encouraging coexistence and harmony among different ethnic groups. Thus, the church will have to insist that there is nothing wrong with ethnicity *per se*, but that “polarising and destructive forms of ethnicity”²⁹ constitute the problem.

Accordingly, Birri³⁰ argues that we must fight against any form of ethnic conflict with the “gospel of love both in the church and in the society”.³¹ At the same time, Birri suggests that ethnicity could become a means through which the gospel is witnessed and culture serves the cause of Christ:

The variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment.³²

²⁶ Brett, *op cit*, p. 8.

²⁷ Farisani, *op cit* (note 3), p. 44.

²⁸ Nambala, *op cit* (note 2), p. 33.

²⁹ See also Mary N. Getui, “At Variance but in Harmony,” in De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), pp. 10ff. P. Gichure, “Ethnicity and Enculturation: Challenges and Promises,” in *ibid.*, pp. 25ff.

³⁰ Debella Birri, “EECMY and Cultural Diversities: Gifts to Enrich the Witness of the Church,” in Gobena, *op cit* (note 2), p. 80.

³¹ Aylward Shorter, “The Curse of Ethnocentrism and the African Church,” in De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), pp. 28ff.

³² Birri, *op cit* (note 24).

We can identify seven steps that the church should take in order to address ethnicity:

- 1) Balcomb³³ suggests that ethnicity should be made a subject of teaching and preaching in the church. The church should teach that through baptism, all members receive a new identity, one that is totally different from that of their ethnic group or family.³⁴ In this regard, the church should teach that Christians belong to the universal “family of God” – the church – which transcends tribal and family allegiances.
Ordination places priests and bishops at the service of all families and all ethnic groups, and ... must be ready to welcome the growing number of ethnic outsiders who are appointed as bishops and parish priests.³⁵
- 2) The church should promote occasions where different ethnic groups meet in celebration.
Activities of this kind will offer each ethnic group a chance to present its own customs, jokes, music and wisdom to enhance mutual knowledge, appreciation and tolerance.³⁶
- 3) Lanigan³⁷ suggests that the church should encourage both multicultural and monocultural liturgies in its worship services.
- 4) The church will have to review its relations with other faiths. Rather than demonstrating passive tolerance, it will have to engage in “constant, critical and creative dialogue with” other faiths, especially in situations where “religion is used in ethnic conflicts.”³⁸
- 5) According to Balcomb, the “stereotypes that exist in society between people of different groups”³⁹ need to be dismantled. He further proposes that this could be effected through prayer, teaching, worship, drama,

³³ A. Balcomb, “Ethnicity, the Bible and the African Church: The Problems and some Possible Solutions.” Unpublished paper presented at a conference on ethnicity and the church in Africa, Kinshasa, September 1996.

³⁴ Shorter, *op cit* (note 25), p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁶ Pierli, *op cit* (note 4), p. 51.

³⁷ P. Lanigan, “Abba/Baba/Ete/Father/Nne ...: The Challenges of Inculturation in Multicultural Parish Liturgies”, in De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), p. 59.

³⁸ De Jong, *op cit* (note 2), p. 6.

³⁹ Balcomb, *op cit* (note 27).

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

- storytelling and deliberate confrontation in the spirit of unconditional acceptance.
- 6) Balcomb infers that an atmosphere needs to be created in the church that encourages members to experience a sense of belonging and self-esteem. He argues that, "If the church itself can provide these things then there will be no need for people to be seeking them in their ethnic identities."⁴⁰
 - 7) Maimela argues that God's gifts of racial and cultural diversity should be seen as a source of strength and enrichment. He cites the post-1994 situation in South Africa as an example of how to accommodate all ethnic groups, arguing that it was precisely the acceptance of diversity that forced politicians to seek a compromise by creating a federal constitution which promotes the devolution of power to the nine provinces. Therefore, diversity, which has resulted in a federal constitution, has provided a check on the central government and should be seen as supportive of democratic change in South Africa.⁴¹

Galatians 3:28 as a basis for gender equality

In Galatians 3:27–28 Paul argues convincingly about the equality of the Galatian Christian community. Membership of this new community does not depend on gender, social status or ethnic ties, and effectively eliminates all discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. This text can be used to counter gender, ethnic and race stereotypes within a believing community.⁴² Mercy Oduyoye contends persuasively that just as Galatians 3:27–28 has been used to counter slavery and racism in the past, it should also be used to combat sexism today. She states that

we are baptized into Christ as persons, irrespective of our social status, so that just as the humanity of the male is taken into the Christ so is the humanity of the female. There is no sexual distinction in the Trinity, but qualities labeled feminine

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Maimela, *op cit* (note 4), p. 118.

⁴² Elelwani B. Farisani, "The Use of Galatians 3:28 in Promoting Gender Equality," in *Journal of Constructive Theology* (July 2006).

Elelwani B Farisani

and masculine are all manifested in Christ Jesus who is the image par excellence of God.⁴³

Following Schussler Fiorenza, Sue Rakoczy has argued convincingly that Galatians 3:28

denied all male religious prerogatives in the Christian community based on gender roles and since this egalitarian Christian self-understanding did away with all male privileges of religion, class and caste, it allowed not only gentiles and slaves but also women to exercise leadership functions within the missionary movement.⁴⁴

Demetrius Williams also suggests that Galatians 3:28 be used as a basis for gender equality. He challenges the sexist practices of the African American churches, and argues that Galatians 3:28 can serve as a liberative paradigm for interpreting sexism in the African American context. Thus he states that in his book he seeks

to recover Gal 3:28 as a model of liberation that can meet the challenges of the historical quest for freedom which the African American religious tradition, especially sexism, which continues to prevail in many African American churches and religious institutions, restricting women's opportunities for leadership.⁴⁵

Williams examines sexism from the exegetical, historical and theological perspectives. Part one of his book, comprising the first two chapters, explores the early Christian experience and Scripture. In chapter 1, Williams examines Jesus' and Paul's gospel message using current feminist-critical hermeneutics and sociohistorical analyses of biblical culture and texts. Thus he explores how Jesus' and Paul's teachings are counter-hegemonic and entail not only what he calls the "salvation of souls," but also a critique of their followers' current social and political conditions, Jews and Gentiles, under Roman hegemony. Chapter 2 applies traditional historical literary analysis to examine exegetically the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 (a first-century Pauline letter) and to trace their connection to 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (a second-century deutero-Pauline letter written a generation later in the Pauline

⁴³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton, 2000), p. 137.

⁴⁴ Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004), p. 202.

⁴⁵ William, *op cit* (note 16), pp. 5ff.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

tradition). Thus, he traces the effective role of Galatians 3:28 in early church history and shows how toward the end of the first century CE this egalitarian vision was curtailed a generation later within the Early Church.

Part two focuses on the African American religious experience and the appropriation of Scripture. Chapter 3 assesses how Galatians 3:28 and other passages were used to support the principle of “equality of all people before God,” which functioned not only as an impetus to found independent black congregations, but also as a prophetic principle to critique American slavery and racism. Chapter 4 recognises that African American religious tradition did not manifest the same courage and vigour as seen during the days of slavery and racism when it came to addressing contemporary issues related to gender. Williams maintains that the principle of “the equality of all people before God” can and must be turned inward by African American churches in order self-critically to evaluate their own attitudes and practices with respect to leadership roles for women.

The third part deals with African American women’s religious experience and the witness of Scripture. Chapter 5 focuses on current feminist, womanist and black theological perspectives and posits that all oppression – race, class, and gender – is interrelated. As Williams puts it, “If the African American religious tradition has argued against race and class oppression, it must also challenge gender oppression and discrimination.”⁴⁶

Chapter 6 explores how a number of early and contemporary African American women have argued for the right of women to preach, act as pastors and hold leadership roles according to their particular calling.

Williams’s book is highly relevant with regard to the biblical interpretation of power relations. While it points out the disadvantages of exclusive or oppressive biblical interpretation, it offers an alternative to an abusive interpretation of the Bible. Moreover, it challenges Christians to use their experience and traditions to fight against the oppression of women.

Inclusive interpretation of Scripture

Careful biblical interpretation must seek to reinstate women, as Jesus Christ did, to their full status as “total persons”, whole and worthy, created in the image of God, and fully accepted members of the body of Christ.⁴⁷

Our interpretation of Scripture will have to draw on such theological resources as the incarnation of Jesus Christ if it is to influence the quest for women’s liberation. It will have to declare that God’s love for humanity was revealed in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ came to the world as a human

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁴⁷ Daisy N. Nwachuku, “The Christian Widow in African Culture,” in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op cit* (note 8), p. 73.

Elelwani B Farisani

being to restore humanity to new life. This includes male, female and the whole of creation.

Thus, a non-abusive biblical interpretation should declare that

Through Jesus an intimate relationship was established between God and humanity (Eph 5). By Jesus's incarnation, women and men were freed from servitude to sin and death, and human life was fully divinized.⁴⁸

In addition, Scripture should be interpreted in such a way that it equips women to liberate themselves from merely accepting the status society assigns to them. In this regard, attitudes must be changed in accordance with Christ's message that new wine cannot be put into old wineskins. The church should be a living example of a free community of women and men, a community truly set free in Christ.

Finally, certain texts (Gal 3:28; Neh 6:1–14) could be used to dismantle typical stereotypes of women prevalent in Africa today. These texts could serve as a theological instrument against the abuse of women, especially if they are read "against the grain." If carefully read, Noadiah (Neh 6:1–14) could serve as a source of inspiration for many women who are abused, marginalised and silenced. Noadiah, a prophetess from among the *am haaretz*, refused to accept Nehemiah's oppressive ideology, which excluded the *am haaretz* from the renewal and reconstruction of the postexilic community. She refused to be silenced or coopted into structures which aimed further to oppress and marginalise her. Careful biblical interpretation should draw on sociological analysis in order to equip women to challenge and dismantle structures, theological or otherwise, aimed at perpetuating their subjugation and oppression.⁴⁹

Way forward

Biblical interpretation

The purpose of biblical interpretation is to render the meaning and message of biblical writings plain to the readers.⁵⁰ The challenge today is to ensure that our interpretation is not aimed at sidelining, excluding or suppressing the views and aspirations of those less powerful than we are.

⁴⁸ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique," in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op cit* (note 8), p. 115.

⁴⁹ Elelwani B. Farisani, "The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for an African Theology of Reconstruction," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 116 (July 2003), pp. 27–50.

⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, "Interpretation, Biblical" in D. R. W. Wood, & I. H. Marshall *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 509–510.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

General interpretation

In order to avoid biblical interpretation that fuels ethnic conflicts, oppresses women and suppresses the less powerful, we will need to ensure that each part of the Bible is interpreted in its context. This refers not only to its immediate verbal context, but the wider context of time, place and human situation.⁵¹ This will ensure that a literal reading of the text is avoided.

Special interpretation

Biblical interpretation takes into account how each part of the Bible contributes to the purpose of the Bible as a whole. Since the Bible records God's Word to human beings and their response to God, contains "all things necessary for salvation" and constitutes the church's "rule of faith and life," we look for a unity so that each part can be interpreted in the light of the whole.⁵²

We may look for some unifying theme or principle of interpretation.⁵³ This can safeguard against the abuse of Scripture for our selfish ideological power games.

In traditional Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, this unifying principle was found in the Law, understood in accordance with the teaching of the great rabbinical schools. The prophets and writings were treated largely as sources of commentary on the Law.⁵⁴

Christ is the unifying principle in the biblical interpretation of the New Testament. This principle is not applied mechanically, but in such a way that it underlines the historical and progressive nature of biblical revelation. The apostolic church derived this creative principle of interpretation from Christ himself.

A unifying theme based on solid exegetical study taking into account the sociohistorical context of the text will go a long way toward avoiding the literal use of the text, which has caused untold harm and inflicted suffering on the less powerful.

Tripolar model

Generally speaking, there are three key elements or poles to the interpretation of the biblical text in Africa: these are the biblical text itself, the African

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Bruce, *op cit* (note 50); Spero, E.R. 2004. "Unitarian Universalism and the Bible". A Sermon by the Reverend Ellen Rowse Spero. First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, Chelmsford, Massachusetts. October 17, 2004. Unpublished manuscript.

⁵⁴ Bruce, *op cit.* (note 50).

context, and appropriation. Jonathan Draper has referred to this as a “tripolar” approach.⁵⁵ Gerald West reminds us that appropriation “offers an important starting point in understanding the different emphases in African biblical hermeneutics”.⁵⁶

Appropriation connects both text and context. Through appropriation, the reader facilitates a conversation or dialogue between the text and the context. The reader is aware that the text was not originally written for South Africans, but for an earlier audience in another part of the world. The message from the text must first be retrieved. The reader must also be aware of the challenges within his or her particular context. The reader or scholar brings his or her baggage to the conversation process in the form of ideologies, values, beliefs, and cultural or theological formations.

Concluding remarks

Life-sustaining Bible reading involves several considerations in addition to the study of the historical and literary aspects of the texts. These include:

- Drawing upon personal experience. We should always be aware that biblical texts can either be abused to oppress the less powerful, or used to liberate or empower them. We in South Africa have experienced this personally.
- Reading in light of social context. Challenges such as poverty, reconciliation, transformation, HIV/AIDS and the oppression of women form part of the post-apartheid South African context today. My interpretation of the biblical text would certainly have a bearing on how to address these and similar challenges in my context.
- Responding to an interpretative community. Theology should not be done in a vacuum, in isolation from one’s faith community. It is an important aspect of my ministry that my theology is practised, implemented or shaped by my faith community. This happens when I preach, conduct Bible studies or workshops in the local congregation, parish or diocese or at church level. In most of these encounters my biblical interpretation is challenged, shaped or renewed by the community I interact with.

⁵⁵ J.A. Draper, “Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What is Contextual Exegesis in the new South Africa?”, in M. T. Speckman and L. T. Kaufmann (eds), *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001); J.A. Draper, “Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa.” *Grace and Truth* 19(2) (2002), p. 1224; G.O. West, “Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa”, in D.B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), pp. 21–31.

⁵⁶ West, *op cit* p. 22.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

I have elsewhere⁵⁷ suggested a critical, sociohistorically and ideologically aware reading of the Bible as a resource for biblical interpretation, and have warned against an uncritical reading that does not engage profoundly with the text. According to Farisani, an uncritical reading tends further to oppress and sideline the poor and marginalised by appropriating the biblical text as the revealed word of God without taking into consideration its religious, political and socioeconomic context. Instead of empowering the poor and marginalised, an uncritical reading disempowers and weakens them. Such an uncritical reading is dangerous, and should not be left unchallenged.⁵⁸

Works Consulted

- Ammah, R. 1992. Paradise lies at the feet of Muslim women, in Oduyoye, MA. and Kanyoro, M. (eds.), *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 83–84.
- Ayanga, HO. 1999. Liberation of the African woman, in Getui, MN. and Obeng, EA. (eds.), *Theology of reconstruction*. Nairobi: Acton, 90–106.
- Balcomb A. 1996. Ethnicity, the Bible and the African Church: The problems and some possible solutions. Unpublished paper presented at a conference on ethnicity and the church in Africa, Kinshasa, September 19.
- Birri, D. 1997. EECMY and cultural diversities: Gifts to enrich the witness of the Church, in Gobena, I. (ed.), *Church, culture and ethnicity in present Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus.
- Brett, MG. 1996. *Ethnicity and the Bible. Biblical Interpretation Series 19*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bruce, FF. 1996. “Interpretation, Biblical”, in Wood, DRW. and Marshall, IH., *New Bible Dictionary*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Buehrens, JA. 2003. *Understanding the Bible: An introduction for skeptics, seekers and religious liberals*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- De Jong, A. 1999. *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications.
- Draper, JA. 2001. Old scores and new notes: Where and what is contextual exegesis in the new South Africa? in Speckman, MT. and Kaufmann, LT. (eds.), *Towards an agenda for contextual theology: Essays in honour of Albert Nolan*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

⁵⁷ Farisani, 2003:27ff.

⁵⁸ Farisani, *op cit* (note 43).

- Draper, JA. 2002. Reading the Bible as conversation: A theory and methodology for contextual interpretation of the Bible in Africa. *Grace and Truth* 19(2):1224.
- Dyck, J. 1996. The ideology of identity in Chronicles, in Brett, MG. *Ethnicity and the Bible. Biblical Interpretation Series 19*. Leiden: Brill, 89–116.
- Fanusie, L. 1992. Sexuality and women in African culture, in Oduyoye, MA. and Kanyoro, MRA. (eds.), *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 135–155.
- Farisani, EB. 2003. The use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a quest for an African theology of reconstruction. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 116, July, 27–50.
- Farisani, EB. 2004. Ethnicity in Ezra-Nehemiah. *Theologia Viatorum* 28(1):24–55.
- Farisani, EB. 2006. The use of Galatians 3:28 in promoting gender equality. *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12(1), July, 53–65.
- Getui, MN. 1999. At variance but in harmony, in De Jong, A. (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 9–19.
- Getui, MN. and Obeng, EA. 1999. *Theology of reconstruction*. Nairobi: Acton.
- Gichure, P. 1999. Ethnicity and enculturation: Challenges and promises, in De Jong, A. (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 20–26.
- Lanigan, P. 1999. Abba/Baba/Ete/Father/Nne...: The challenges of inculturation in multi-cultural parish liturgies, in De Jong, A. (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 56–66.
- Lombaard, C. 2009. Does contextual exegesis require an affirming Bible? Lessons from “apartheid” and “Africa” as narcissistic hermeneutical keys. *Scriptura* 101:274–287.
- Maimela, S. 1997. Cultural and ethnic diversity in promotion of democratic change, in Mugambi, JNK. (ed.), *Democracy and development in Africa: The role of the Churches*. Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 106–121.
- Maina NK. 1999. Muslim women and politics in Kenya, in Getui, MN. and Obeng, EA. (eds.), *Theology of reconstruction*. Nairobi: Acton, 136–150.
- Nambala, SVV. 1997. Ethnicity and the Church in Africa, in Gobena, I. (ed.), *Church, culture and ethnicity in present Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus, 25–35.
- Nasimiyu-Wasike, A. 1992. Polygamy: A feminist critique, in Oduyoye, MA. and Kanyoro, MRA. (eds.), *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 101–118.

Interpreting the Bible in the context of apartheid and beyond: ...

- Nwachuku, DN. 1992. The Christian widow in African culture, in Oduyoye, MA. and Kanyoro, MRA. (eds.), *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 54–73.
- Oddland, O. 1997. Revisiting the cultural anthropological concepts of culture and ethnicity: An introduction to the present cultural diversities in EECMY, in Gobena I. (ed.), *Church, culture and ethnicity in present Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Mekane Yesus, 56–66.
- Oduyoye, MA. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Oduyoye, MA. 2000. *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton.
- Oduyoye, MA. and Kanyoro, M. (eds.) 1992. *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Pierli, F. et al 1999. Ethnicity and human development: The missing link, in De Jong, A. (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 33–55.
- Rakoczy, S. 2004. *In her name: Women doing theology*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Shorter, A. 1999. The curse of ethnocentrism and the African Church, in De Jong, A. (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or culture*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 27–32.
- Spero, ER. 2004. Unitarian universalism and the Bible. A sermon by the Reverend Ellen Rowse Spero. First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, Chelmsford, Massachusetts. October 17. Unpublished manuscript.
- West, GO. 2000. Mapping African biblical interpretation: A tentative sketch, in West, GO. and Dube, M. (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 29–53.
- West, GO. 2010. Biblical hermeneutics in Africa, in Stinton, DB. (ed.), *African theology on the way: Current conversations*. London: SPCK, 21–31.
- Williams, DK. 2004 *The end to this strife. The politics of gender in African American Churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.