

**After the missionaries:  
historical and hermeneutical dimensions of  
African appropriations of the Bible  
in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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*Abstract*

While the Bible was produced in part in Mediterranean North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa has had a very different engagement with the Bible. This article analyses the reception of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa, recognising its complicity in colonialism, then going on to reflect in detail on African agency in the appropriation of the Bible. The perspective of this article is both historical and hermeneutical, following a broadly chronological framework, but pausing regularly to analyse the hermeneutical contributions of particular historical moments.

**Introduction**

Appropriations of the Bible in Africa are both ancient and recent. North Africa forms part of the cradle that gave birth to the Bible, participating in the production of the Bible as we now have it. North Africa is part of the Mediterranean world in which the Bible was born (West 2008). But the story in Sub-Saharan Africa is quite different, with the Bible being a relatively recent arrival as part of a missionary-colonial package.

“The first Portuguese ships anchored off the coast of the west-central Africa kingdom of Kongo in 1483” (Isichei 1995:45). So begins the story of modern European interest in Africa. Slavery was the initial, and for long periods, the sustaining interest in Africa, with the first black Africans being sold into slavery in Portugal in the 1440s. From 1490–1530, between 300 and 2 000 slaves were brought annually to Lisbon from as far south as the Upper and Lower Guinea coast (Sundkler and Steed 2000:42). But the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the news that the Hagia Sophia had been turned into a mosque, together with significant technological advancements in seafaring, precipitated the search for a new passage to the East over the seas (Sundkler & Steed 2000:42). The interest in Africa now began to extend to places along the coast to replenish supplies on the way to somewhere else.

But, interest gradually shifted to the interior, in search of still more slaves and other commodities desired by European empires.

### **The arrival of the Bible**

While the Bible has always, in some sense, been associated with North Africa, the same is not true for Sub-Saharan Africa. The Bible was brought to these parts of Africa relatively recently, initially (1415–1787) with the wave of explorers, traders, and ecclesial representatives of the medieval Catholic Church, directed by Portugal. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI (Borgia), a Spaniard, divided the world in two, assigning the West to Spain and the East, including Africa, to Portugal (Sundkler & Steed 2000:44). King Manuel “the Great” (1495–1521), aided by a form of missionary Tribunal made up of theologians and members of the orders of knighthood, embarked on a national-ecclesiastical enterprise in which Africa was a resource to be consumed by “*conquista* Christianity” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:44–45). Crusading for “pepper and souls”, in the words of Vasco da Gama, this emergent *conquista* idea of Christian mission took root along the coastlines of Africa and India, incorporating both political and spiritual conquest (Sundkler & Steed 2000:45). Slave and trade posts, with chaplains in attendance, were established at various strategic sites on the West African coast, at the mouth of the Zaïre River (providing access to the Kongo), at Mpinda in Soyo, at Luanda in Angola, at the Cape, at a number of sites on the East African coast, and at Massawa in Ethiopia (Isichei 1995:52–73; Sundkler & Steed 2000:45–80).

This first wave of European mission, characterised by a particular form of imperial Christianity, was followed by a second wave. This second wave was characterised at first by “literally hundreds of European conquests of Africa” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:97), and then by the more systematic European ‘scramble’ for Africa, precipitated by the Berlin Congress of 1885 (Sundkler & Steed 2000:97). The Roman Catholic mission presence in Western, Central, and Southern Africa in the early to late 1700s and 1800s was almost entirely French (with an Italian Catholic presence along the Nile in North-East Africa). Besides being the vanguard of French trade and colonialism, an explicit aspect of their missionary work was to teach their converts and inspire in them “a great affection for the Fathers of the Church in Africa” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:105). The formation of the *Sacra de Propaganda Fide* in 1662, and the founding of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith in 1822 gave further impetus to Catholic mission (Sugirtharajah 1998:103). During this same period, vast numbers of Protestant missionaries moved into Africa, and while some were independent of direct support by a missionary organisation, the majority belonged to an array of missionary societies, so that by 1910 there were an estimated one–

and-a-half million European Protestant Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sundkler & Steed 2000:84). The impetus for this Protestant missionary movement into Africa was the formation of a number of missionary agencies: the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (1698), the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the London Missionary Society (1795), the Church Missionary Society (1799), the Wesleyan Methodist Society (1813), and the Netherlands Missionary Society (1797).

The slave trade began to be replaced by trade in other goods towards the end of the nineteenth century, a shift brought about as much by the agricultural efforts of the large slave populations in West Africa as by the abolitionist movement (Sundkler & Steed 2000:97–98). Accompanying this shift, the European missionary imagination sought to emulate and cooperate with companies such as the East India Company and the Dutch East India Company (Sugirtharajah 1998:103). As Catholic imperial control of the seas loosened, so the way was cleared for Protestant Holland and England to construct their empires, inspired by the possibilities of trade and their newly rediscovered post-Reformation Bible (Sugirtharajah 1998:104). Precipitated, perhaps, by the Baptist William Carey's (1761–1834) interpretation of Matthew 28:19 as a command to preach the gospel in distant lands (Sugirtharajah 1998:104), a number of other biblical texts were interpreted as a mandate to explore, convert, civilise, and colonise. It was not until this period of Protestant mission that, for example, the book of Acts was read as containing a missionary-journey pattern and mandate (Sugirtharajah 1998:104).

This second wave, of modern nineteenth-century Catholic and Protestant missionary and imperial Christianity (1787–1919), did not find an undisturbed territory. Sub-Saharan Africa was already in flux, with large population movements and migrations across the sub-continent, propelled by the innumerable incursions from the African coast for slaves and by local struggles for control of resources. These included the *Mfecane* in Southern Africa, in which the rise of King Shaka and the expansion of the Zulu state in the eastern region of Southern Africa, the resistance of African chiefdoms to the efforts of the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay who were pushing south in the search for slaves, and raiding parties of Griquas and Bergenaars from the south to meet the demand for bonded labour in the Cape Colony set up a series of chain reactions among neighbouring clans (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:167–169). Not only did these movements of Africans themselves become carriers of Christianity and the Bible, the social upheavals generated both by external and internal forces produced a whole range of dislocated groups and individuals who were willing to engage with the new formations brought about by Christianity, its Book, and other associated goods of power.

The third wave (1920–1959) of missionary-colonial influence in Sub-Saharan Africa is closely related to the second, but can be considered to be

the transition from a colonial period to that of the independent African state. While the First and Second World War had a significant impact on Africa, these two “white-mens’ wars” destabilised and, ultimately, deconstructed the European myth of empire and civilisation. This was particularly true of the First World War, much of which was fought on African soil, drawing millions of Africans into the conflict, either directly as soldiers or indirectly as carriers and labourers (Sundkler & Steed 2000:610-612). In the wake of the First World War, the ‘Missionary Popes’, Benedict XV and Pius XI, stressed the need for an educated African clergy who would take over the leadership of the churches in their respective countries (Sundkler & Steed 2000:626). Up until the early 1900s, ninety percent of all village education was mission schooling, whether Catholic or Protestant, and the form of this schooling was an extension of the catechumens’ class. However, this changed between 1920 and 1945, when schools became the concern of colonial governments, intent on training a loyal black elite who would form the core of a black administration (Sundkler & Steed 2000:636–637). Across villages and towns in Sub-Saharan Africa, first the mission-educated African and then the African educated by the colonial government “began to act as a local or regional centre of opposition” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:608). Some became leaders of missionary established churches, others founded African Independent Churches, and still others founded liberation movements, each in their own diverse ways providing sites of opposition and resistance. Central to each site was a foundational vernacular book, the Bible, and through it, African Christianity began “to talk back” to power.

The Bible was present throughout these waves of imperialism and mission, playing a variety of roles, from iconic object of power, to aural authority, to vernacular textbook, to the medicine of God’s Word, and to political weapon of struggle. Though the forms of its reception and interpretation are as diverse and distinct as the particular African contexts within which it was engaged, there are significant family resemblances to the reception of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa.

#### **African autonomy transacting with the Bible**

In most African contexts in which the Bible was first encountered, Africans were firmly in control. The traders, explorers, and missionaries who were the first to bring Bibles among African peoples were themselves the vanguard of the colonial infrastructure that would follow them. But in most cases, the full force of colonialism was some distance off, so that these traders, explorers, and missionaries were part of a landscape with which they were unfamiliar, and over which local African clans were in control. This is expressed clearly in a letter written by the missionary John Campbell, who had been sent by the London Missionary Society to southern Africa in 1812, when he says that he

and his companions were “completely in their power”; and he was particularly disconcerted by the freedom with which the Tlhaping people “narrowly inspected us, made remarks upon us, and without ceremony touched us”.<sup>1</sup> Their movements were constantly monitored, and where and when they went was controlled by the leadership of the Tlhaping people (Campbell 1815:199–200).

African transactions with the Bible and Christianity (and indeed, Islam) took place, initially, on African terms. Therefore, in a significant sense, the relatively recent changes brought about by the advent of Christianity (and the Bible) in Sub-Saharan Africa need to be placed within “the long span of African history” (Peel 2000:3). African society was never static, and so, long before Europe showed an interest in Africa, African societies were subject to change, even religious change, as they transacted with each other. Trade was common across Sub-Saharan Africa, but it was not only material goods that flowed across chiefdoms in the region. Ritual expertise was also sought after, with many local leaders recruiting, for example, “rain-makers”, sometimes from far afield (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:163–164). It has been argued that this kind of exchange gradually brought about a shift within some African societies as they moved from life in confined, small-scale settings, symbolised by local or ancestral spirits, into a wider social sphere, symbolised by the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion. Religious change, on this account, is rooted in an already existing African religious paradigm, which includes both local ancestral spirits and the Supreme Being (Horton 1971; Peel 2000:3). As African communities come into contact with other African communities, so the common belief in a Supreme Being gains priority over local ancestral spirits, but as local concerns come to predominate in particular instances, so the ancestral spirits gain priority over the Supreme Being.

What the advent of the monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, contributed to existing patterns of African change were highly developed notions of the Supreme Being and a rapid increase in social scale. In an important sense, African transactions with the Bible were part of an ongoing, albeit accelerated, process of cognitive and practical adjustment to changes in their social experience within the terms of an existing paradigm (Peel 2000:3).

### **The Bible as an object of “strange power”**

The Bible was simply one among the many objects with which Africans transacted as they engaged with European traders, explorers, and mis-

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<sup>1</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

sionaries (and other later colonial agents). In their initial transactions with European traders, some of whom were also missionaries, whether officially or unofficially, the Bible was an object of little significance. For example, in the earliest encounters between the Tlhaping people of southern Africa and Europeans, the dominant interest was trade. In the early 1800s, Chief Molehabangwe had a consuming interest in potential lines of trade and alliance with the Colony, so much so that the first missionaries who visited his community were simply treated as traders, and nothing more. He showed no interest at all in Christianity. That these first missionaries, Jan Matthys Kok and William Edwards, earned their living by trading, having only a tenuous relationship with the Suid-Afrikaanse Sendinggenootskap (SASG, South African Missionary Organisation), served to confirm Molehabangwe's impression that they were traders. Though the SASG did send the gift of a Bible to Molehabangwe in 1802, it does not appear to have been acknowledged by Molehabangwe. He was more concerned about the possibilities of trade with the Cape Colony to the south (Du Bruyn 1982:1989).

Missionaries were an important part of the great chain of trade that linked Molehabangwe and the Tlhaping to the Cape Colony, its goods, and the world beyond. Such was the conviction of the Tlhaping that the missionaries were really just traders that Molehabangwe's son, Mothibi, would say to the missionary John Campbell "that whenever the missionaries have got enough they shall be at liberty to depart". Campbell was appalled by this, in his view, misconception. He comments in a letter to the London Missionary Society that, during his visit, Chief Mothibi was "still [in 1813] supposing trade a part of their [the missionaries'] object." "[H]e cannot indeed", continues Campbell, "yet think otherwise from the example of Kok and Edwards".<sup>2</sup>

However, from the beginning, part of the attraction of whites to the Tlhaping "flowed from the mystical qualities attributed to them and their things in a hinterland where raids were endemic and where guns, beads, and tobacco had become prime valuables" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:179). Tobacco, along with beads and knives, were prized objects of exchange and trade, obtaining their power both from their intrinsic value to the Tlhaping (whether utilitarian or aesthetic) and the increasingly complex trade transactions the Tlhaping were participating in (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:183–184). Guns, like tobacco, were greatly desired by the Tlhaping, but were much more difficult to extract from missionaries and traders because of their scarcity and a reluctance to arm local peoples (unless of course this suited colonial objectives). The power of the gun, the "most condensed source of European power" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:201), is easily understood.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

Apart from the threat to life the gun posed, possessing a gun signalled some contact or alliance with missionary-colonial forces, an association that was in itself a powerful protection against attack from neighbouring groups, including other indigenous peoples and white (mainly boer) settlers.

Mirrors, watches, and telescopes are more problematic with respect to determining their power. Missionaries clearly believed that these goods demonstrated the superiority of their culture and civilisation, and so they were either constantly exhibiting or consistently hiding them. What is certain is that “none of these objects was introduced into a void, and while they brought novel values into the Tswana world, they also acquired meanings different from those intended by their donors” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:184).

This is certainly true of the Bible, as is illustrated in one of many encounters between the Tlhaping and the Bible. John Campbell, a director of the London Missionary Society, had been commissioned and sent to the Cape in 1812 “to survey the progress and prospects of mission work in the interior” (Campbell 1815:178). Campbell arrived in Dithakong on 24 June 1813, ten months after Burchell had left. Chief Mothibi was away at the time, and so Campbell and his companions were made to wait, forbidden to “instruct the people”. While they waited, Campbell has a conversation with Mmahutu, senior wife of Mothibi, using the opportunity of her presence “to convey some information” to her (Campbell 1815:199).

What follows is a remarkable exchange, capturing as it does the Bible as iconic object of power and an aural text of power. Campbell records this encounter with the Bible as follows:

We explained to her the nature of a letter, by means of which a person could convey his thoughts to a friend at a distance. Mr. A. shewed her one he had received from his wife, by which he knew every thing that had happened at Klaar Water for two days after he left it. This information highly entertained her, especially when told that A. Kok, who brought it, knew nothing of what it contained, which we explained by telling her the use of sealing wax. The bible being on the table gave occasion to explain the nature and use of a book, particularly of that book – how it informed us of God, who made all things; and of the beginning of all things, which seemed to astonish her, and many a look was directed towards the bible (Campbell 1815:199).

Here the missionaries draw Mmahutu’s attention to the power of the letter in at least two respects. First, an object like this can represent “every thing” that happened in a place in a person’s absence. Second, an object like this can be

made to hide its message from the bearer and reveal its contents only to the intended receiver. Turning from the letter, to a quite different genre of text (from the perspective of the missionaries), the Bible, but here conflated with the letter (from the perspective of Mmahutu), the missionaries use the interest generated in their exposition of the letter to return to their preoccupation with the contents of the Bible, particularly the matter of origins.

That books in general, and the Bible in particular, were presented by Europeans and perceived by Africans as objects of iconic and aural power is clear across Sub-Saharan Africa. “My books puzzled them”, writes the missionary Robert Moffat, speaking of southern Africa peoples, “They asked if they were my ‘Bola’, prognosticating dice” (Moffat 1842:384). In east Africa, when Chief Mamkinga of the Chagga people of Tanzania asked the missionaries who had come among them in May 1849 where they obtained their distinctive items, such as the umbrella, the blanket, the candle, and the gun, the missionary John Rebmann took his Bible in his hand and said “that it was to that book that we ‘Wasungu’, Europeans, owed the things he had seen” (Magomba 2005:60). The chief drew nearer and took Rebmann’s Bible in his own hands, and started “turning its leaves to and fro” with great interest (Magomba 2005:60).

### **Vernacular translation of the Bible**

But Christian missionaries to Africa were not content with the Bible as an iconic and aural object of power. The Bible must become a book read by Africans in their own vernaculars. So among the most urgent tasks undertaken by missionaries in Africa was the translation of the Bible into the vernacular.

However, prior to the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, both the supply of and access to the Bible were severely limited (Sugirtharajah 2001:51). Indeed, there was grave doubt that any vernacular, in the words of Archbishop Berthold of Mentz (in 1486), “was capable of expressing what great authors have written in Greek and Latin of the high mysteries of the Christian faith” (Sugirtharajah 2001:46). The 1408 Oxford Convocation prohibited anyone from translating or even possessing an English version of the Bible without the licence of the bishop, and no English translation appeared until Tyndale’s version was printed in 1525. But having a Bible in English did not mean that ordinary people had access to it. For example, in 1530, King Henry VIII made it illegal for ordinary women and working class men to read the Bible for themselves, though noble women were permitted “to reade to themselves alone and not to others” (Sugirtharajah 2001:47). And even when ordinary people were permitted to read a vernacular Bible for themselves, there were very few available. The 1611 King James Bible, for example, had its supply regulated and controlled,



with no more than 5 000 copies per print run for each of the five editions it went through before 1640 (Sugirtharajah 2001:50). The few copies that were available were also costly; when Mungo Park, the Scottish missionary, visited The Gambia in the late 1700s, he came across an Arabic translation of the Pentateuch that cost the equivalent of a prime slave (Sugirtharajah 2001:50).

However, Protestant convictions concerning the sufficiency of Scripture, its authority over tradition, its capacity as the incorruptible Word to ward off human error, gradually shifted the Bible from the institutional to the private sphere, hence the mass campaign encouraging people to read it in the vernacular. As the slogan asserted, “Protestants without Bibles are soldiers without weapons, ready neither for conquest nor for defence” (Sugirtharajah 2001:52).

So with the rise of the modern missionary movement in the late 1700s, a product both of emerging European imperialism and evangelical piety, one of the aims of the British and Foreign Bible society was “to make these Holy Writings known, in every nation and in every tongue, and, as far as may be, to render them the actual possession of every individual on the face of the whole earth” (Sugirtharajah 2001:53).

Returning to the example of the Tlhaping, it was already clear in the visit of Campbell in 1813 that translation of the Bible was a central concern (Campbell 1815:192). Robert Moffat’s arrival in 1821 gave substance to Campbell’s promise to Mothibi that the Bible would be translated into their language (Campbell 1815:208–209). A London Missionary Society visitor to Moffat’s mission station in Kuruman in 1849 comments in a letter that “Mr. Moffat’s time seems mainly occupied in translation of the scriptures” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:214). Moffat’s dedication to the translation of the Bible into Setswana was predicated on two related convictions. First, in the words of Rev Hughes, cited by Moffat, that “the simple reading and study of the Bible alone will convert the world”, for which it was required of the missionary “to gain for it [the Bible] admission and attention, and then let it speak for itself” (Moffat 1842:618). Second, in the words of Moffat himself, that this one language, Setswana, “with slight variations, is spoken as far as the Equator” (Moffat 1842:618). Therefore, once the Bible was translated and the Tlhaping were taught to read, then the chain of “scattered towns and hamlets” towards the interior would have “in their hands the means not only of recovering them from their natural darkness, but of keeping the lamp of life burning even amidst comparatively desert gloom” (Moffat 1842:618).

Three things are clear from Moffat’s commitment to the translation project at Kuruman, and many other translation sites around Sub-Saharan Africa. First, there was the basic assumption that translation could indeed take place. So, for example, in the case of the Tlhaping, most of earliest “conversation” took place through the mediation of Griquas, operating between

English, Dutch, and Setswana, and with a less than fluent grasp of any of these languages. In addition to the constraints of the actual languages themselves, there was also the constant presence of cultural “noise”. None of the actors in these early encounters were neutral; all had something to gain from the encounter (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:216). Yet despite these very real limitations, Moffat “believed” that communication of the most vital and sacred matters could take place. Second, because of these constraints in conversation, Moffat, like many other missionaries, was committed to learn the local language for himself. And while many missionaries held naive views about the “simplicity” of African languages, Moffat was aware of just how difficult it was to learn the language proficiently (Moffat 1842:291–292), but he was determined to do so. An additional factor in Moffat’s pursuit of proficiency was his conviction that “[a] missionary who commences giving direct instruction to the blacks, though far from being competent in the language, is proceeding on safer ground than if he were employing an interpreter, who is not proficient in both languages and who has not a tolerable understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel”. He goes on to say that “Trusting in an ignorant and unqualified interpreter, is attended with consequences ... dangerous to the very objects which lie nearest the missionary’s heart” (Moffat 1842:293–294). Third, though Moffat was disparaging about the linguistic and theological competence of the Tlhaping themselves, he did not question “the potential of their language to bear the meanings that civilization [and particularly the Gospel] might demand of it” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:217).

While Moffat, like most missionaries, was a product of the prejudices of his people, his translation project did allow Africans to engage with the Bible on their own terms. The Bible would “speak for itself”, but like the letter Campbell showed to Mmahutu, the Bible would not always speak as the ones who carried it anticipated, as Isaiah Shembe was to show a century later.

### **African ownership of the Bible**

The founder of the large and still thriving African Independent Church, Ibandla lamaNazaretha, the Church of the Nazarites, Isaiah Shembe, recounts in a sermon he preached in 1933 how the Bible was stolen from the missionaries. Petros M Dhlomo, the great collector and historian of Isaiah Shembe’s life and ministry (Papini 2002:xiii–xiv), tells the story of Shembe’s sermon in the home of Ndlovu, “the headman of Zibula at Lenge, in the year 1933” (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:224). Here, Shembe tells the story or “the parable of the liberating Bible”.

In olden times there were two might[y] nations who were fighting over a certain issue. In their war the one conquered the other one and took all their cattle away. They took even their children captive and put them into the school of the victorious nation ... (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:224-225).

The story continues with a focus on three of these children, “three sons of the same mother”. Among the tasks given to these children was that they “had to sweep the houses of their teachers and the house of the Pope” (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:225).

Shembe goes on to tell that “All these children made good progress in school and passed their examinations well. Then they were trained as bishops.” However, Shembe goes on immediately to recount how there was a certain book that was locked away from them. The implication is clear. Children of the conquered nation had limited access to the texts of the victorious nation, thereby allowing them to rise to a level no higher than that of bishops. The Pope alone had access to one special text. This was the Bible: “In the house of the Pope there was a Bible which was kept under lock by him and only read by himself” (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:225).<sup>3</sup> However, Shembe goes on to relate,

On a certain day he [the Pope] had to go for a few weeks to another place and he forgot to lock the Bible up at home. When the boys were sweeping his home they found the Bible unlocked. When they began to read it they discovered that their nation which had been demolished so badly by the war could never be restored unless they would get a book like this one and they considered what to do.

When they came back from school they bought a copy-book and copied the whole Bible. When they had finished their work, they returned the Bible to its place. Thereafter the Pope came back and saw that he forgot to lock his Bible in. He called the boys who worked in his house and asked them whether they had opened this book. They denied it and said that they did not see that it had not been locked up. Then he forgot about it. The boys considered how they could bring this book to their parents at home.

At another day, they went and asked permission to visit their parents at home. They were permitted to go and they were given a time by which they must be back. When they came

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<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that Shembe has a particular problem with the Roman Catholic Church, though they are the custodians of the Bible in this parable.

home, they did not stay there, rather they went from home to home and preached about this book until their time of leave was over and policemen were sent to look for these boys. Then they left this book there and returned to school (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:225).

Shembe's sermon goes on to explore the importance of this stolen book for the life of the amaNazaretha, clearly demonstrating that he considers the Bible to be an African book (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:225–228).

### **African resources for reading the Bible**

African appropriations of the Psalms are a particularly good example of how the Bible has become an African book, appropriated within an African worldview and using African conceptual categories. Psalms in particular are well-known, well-loved, and well-used in West Africa (Oduyoye 1995:34-35), particularly in the large African Independent Churches, but also in “main-line” missionary churches. Psalms are categorised according to local cultural concepts into protective, therapeutic, and success Psalms (Adamo 2000:337). The Yoruba, for example, inhabited a world full of potential threat, where every material threat, such as debt or sickness, had a spiritual origin, either in one's own personal enemy (*ota*) or in an array of other local indigenous deities (*orisa*) (Adamo 2000:337; Peel 2000:259). Indeed, “the primary concern of their day-to-day prayers [and their use of the Psalms in their prayers] was to enlist the power of God for the same kind of help and protection which the *orisa* provided for their devotees” (Peel 2000:259). The Bible became central to this daily concern for protection, healing, and success, becoming the prime source of imprecatory potent words (*ogede*), used on their own, or recited over amulets containing various natural ingredients and/or the actual written words of a Psalm (Adamo 2000:338–339). The Psalms closely resembled the traditional resources they had been instructed to abandon by the missionaries, and because the Bible was considered an iconic and aural object of power, it was readily appropriated and prescribed by African Christian practitioners. For example, Chief Ogunfuye prescribes Psalm 7 for protection against enemies and the evil one, either together with a special prayer recited every day or by writing the Psalm on a pure parchment and putting the amulet in a special consecrated bag kept under one's pillow. The prayer to accompany the Psalm is as follows:

O merciful Father, Almighty and everlasting King, I beseech  
Thee in the holy name of Eel Elijon to deliver me from all  
secret enemies and evil spirits that plan my destruction always.  
Protect me from their onslaught and let their evil forces be

turned back upon them. Let their expectation come to naught and let them fail in their bid to injure me. Let their ways be dark and slippery and let Thy holy angels disperse them so that they may not come nigh unto my dwelling place. Hear my prayer now for the sake of holy Eel Elijon. Amen (Adamo 2000:340-341).

Similarly, Chief Ogunfuye prescribes Psalm 6 to relieve a sick person of pain and worries, once again using a special prescribed prayer (Adamo 2000:342), and Psalm 133 for success in the family (Adamo 2000:344). Other practitioners use a range of other ingredients, including “the use of herbs and parts of living and non-living things in conjunction with the reading of specific Psalms, together with the burning of candles, prayers, and recitation of the names of God a certain number of times” (Adamo 2000:346).

Much of the old spirit world was, and is a continuing reality for African Christians. While most missionaries denigrated and even demonised African religion and culture, when Sub-Saharan Africans began to read the Bible for themselves, they found in its pages, particularly in the Old Testament, many of the religio-cultural practices the missionaries had condemned, including polygamy, ancestors, and local deities (Mafico 2000). But it was not only the content of the Bible that enabled Africans to appropriate the Bible as an African book, it was also their interpretive methods, for Africans did not come to the Bible empty-handed.

### **A post-colonial Bible**

But we must not forget that these forms of African appropriation took place against the steady attempts of missionary-colonial forces to take control of African resources, and that the Bible was one of the tools they used to do so. So the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa was a contested resource.

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us “let us pray.” After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.

This anecdote is told all over Sub-Saharan Africa, and captures succinctly the role of the Bible in the establishment of colonial control. So while the early encounters with the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa took place when Africans were substantially in control, African appropriation and ownership of the Bible took place under various forms of colonial control. Recognising this reality, but casting it in a positive and political light, Desmond Tutu has on occasion followed his retelling of this anecdote by saying, “And we got the

better deal!”<sup>4</sup> Tutu, speaking in the context of South Africa, where the Bible was one of the building blocks of apartheid, clearly lays a counter-claim to the Bible as an African book, and a book that is essentially about liberation and wholeness and therefore on the side of Africans in their struggles.

This is nowhere clearer than in the post-liberation struggles in Tanzania. Following *uhuru* (national independence) in 1961, the first president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, initiated a village-based national project, known as Ujamaa. In the immediate wake of political liberation, Ujamaa was a socio-political project aimed at economic and cultural liberation (Frostin 1988:30). Writing in 1962, Nyerere says about Ujamaa, “Our first step must be to re-educate ourselves; to regain our former attitude of mind. In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men” (Frostin 1988:30; Nyerere 1969:166). Even though, as a political leader in a religiously pluralistic country, Nyerere (like Nelson Mandela after him) was careful not to adopt a specifically Christian identity, but drew substantially on the Bible and the work of Christian liberation theologians (Frostin 1988:49; Magomba 2005:135–136). Apart from the Bible, his two other primary sources for Ujamaa were African culture and Marxism (and so there are many similarities between Ujamaa Theology and South African Black Theology).

Ujamaa, a Swahili word with a root meaning of “family” or “community”, was invoked by Nyerere as a critique of capitalism, individualism, and neo-colonialism, and explicitly drew on values rooted in the pre-colonial culture, aspects of a contextually appropriated Marxism, and elements of prophetic Christianity. Within Nyerere’s own theological reflections and those of more formally trained theologians on Ujamaa, there are three related biblically derived concepts: God as community, humanity as community, and church as community (Frostin 1988:48). With respect to the first and foundational concept, for example, Ujamaa theologians took their starting point within the pre-colonial holistic world-view, over western dualism, emphasising the concept of “participation”, whereby each human being is a part of the whole and therefore has the right to participate in political and economic life on an equal footing (Frostin 1988:49–52). Theologically, because this participation by all is a participation in both the material and the sacred, the search for God is also the search for one’s own and the community’s welfare (Frostin 1988:52–54). The theological concept used by Ujamaa theologians to consolidate this understanding of God as community was the trinity, since the interrelation between the three persons in the trinity is a sharing of the

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<sup>4</sup> I have been unable to find a published source for this comment, but I have heard him make the comment on two public occasions.

entire being. Therefore, life in community is a vocation for all creatures (Frostin 1988:55).

Though not in a systematic manner, Nyerere turned again and again to the Bible to affirm and encourage commitment to the Ujamaa project. Indeed, Nyerere even produced his own Swahili translation of the Gospels and Acts (Magomba 2005:136), drawing on both in his public speeches. On 29 February 1968, just a year after he had launched the Ujamaa project, Nyerere challenged students and staff at the University of Liberia, in Liberia, on participating in the African community building process, saying,

You know better than I do that two thousand years ago, Jesus said: “For unto whoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they shall ask the more”. What is it, then, that we require of those in our societies who have education? We require service to the community – and service in geometric progression according to the amount they have received (Magomba 2005:136).

He saw the struggle against poverty, ignorance, and disease as a struggle for “abundant life”, alluding to John 10:10, and made it clear in a speech to the Maryknoll Sisters in New York in 1970 that “Ours is a living faith, if you like, a revolutionary faith, for faith without action is sterile, and action without faith is meaningless” (Magomba 2005:137).

While Nyerere sought to transform African society with a political project to which the Bible made a contribution, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o sought to transform African society through his novels, and here too the Bible made a substantive contribution, even though Ngugi was fully aware of “how deeply this book is in the propagation of ideologies which naturalise the hierarchical oppositions of slave and master, black and coloniser, pagan and Christian, savage and European, Black and white, etc. upon which colonial and imperial rule were predicated” (Mwikisa 2000:164). And while Nyerere and Ngugi used the theological content and shape of the Bible in their projects of transformation, the priests of the Mwali (the indigenous name for the indigenous Supreme Being) rain-making shrines in Zimbabwe invoked “the voice” of the God of the Bible, for the One who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai was the same as the One who spoke from the indigenous cult-shrines in the Matopo hills (Mafu 2000:410–412). And while the priests of the Mwali rain-shrines believed that “God’s methodology has not changed with times, but what has changed is the venue, the location and audience” (Mafu 2000:412), African Christian diviners among the Yoruba in Nigeria dispense amulets for protection made up of biblical inscribed parchment (Adamo 2000:340).

That the Bible is sacred and significant in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is no doubt, whether as a resource for an Africa leader in guiding a nation on its post-liberation path, or for an individual African searching for success in his or her daily life. For while early African engagement with the Bible was in terms of their own religio-cultural heritages and trajectories, the engagement was mutual, with the Bible also exerting its own “trans-historical memory” and its own stories (Peel 2000:9). So, even when colonialism exerted its destructive grasp on African societies, the Bible became a resource for resistance, notwithstanding its “external” (i.e. complicity with colonialism) and “internal” (i.e. inherently oppressive passages) ambiguities (Mofokeng 1988).

### **African biblical scholarship**

Sub-Saharan African biblical scholarship shares the neo-indigenous heritage of ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. However, added to this hermeneutic strand is another, for African biblical scholars have been inducted into the discipline of academic biblical scholarship, usually in Western contexts or by Western practitioners. African biblical scholarship is also a relatively recent development in African biblical reception and interpretation. Though the earliest piece of biblical scholarship on the Sub-Saharan African continent was probably the work of Pierre Simond, the minister of the French church at the Cape, who in June 1699 began a new translation of the Psalms into the French language (Denis 2000:205), African biblical scholarship done by Africans dates from the 1930s.

While most characterisations of African biblical hermeneutics tend to portray a bi-polar approach, referring for example to “the comparative method” (Anum 2000:468; Ukpong 2000:12; Holter 2002:88–89), in which the African context and biblical text interpret each other, it would be more accurate to describe African biblical hermeneutics as tri-polar. Implicit in bi-polar-like formulations are aspects of a third pole mediating between the poles of the African context and the biblical text, namely appropriation. Knut Holter, for example, refers to the ways in which biblical text and African context “illuminate one another”, and Justin Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method, refers overtly to the goal of comparative interpretation as “the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today’s context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation” (Ukpong 2000:24). What connects text and context, then, is a form of dialogical appropriation that has a theological and a praxiological dimension. This ideo-theological third pole can take various forms, resulting in at least four different emphases in African biblical interpretation: inculturation, liberation, feminist, and post-colonial hermeneutics (West 2010).



While a great diversity of African issues are brought to bear on African biblical hermeneutics, there are moments when particular issues dominate the landscape. The emergence of African feminist hermeneutics across the African continent in response to gender issues is one example (Dube 2001). More recently, the continental crisis of HIV and AIDS has summoned all four major forms of African biblical hermeneutics to respond (Dube & Maluleke 2001; Dube & Kanyoro 2004).

### **The Bible in Africa's "new Christianity"**

Many millions of ordinary African Christians have not needed the African academy to show them how the Bible might be "a weapon" in the personal and political struggles of everyday life in Africa. In the three decades since Takatso Mofokeng did his analysis, the Bible has become the central resource of emerging forms of what Paul Gifford calls Africa's "new Christianity" (Gifford 2004). Of course, this African Christianity is not really "new", drawing as it does on forms of African Evangelicalism and aspects of African (Traditional) Religion. In terms of the former, these new forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity emphasise personal conversion and the centrality of the Bible (Gifford 2004:23, note 7). In terms of the latter, they live in a reality in which beings and objects are "charged with varying degrees and qualities of supernatural power" (Gifford 2004:83) with which this new Christianity must contend. Emerging in the 1980s, alongside the more familiar four forms of African Christianity, namely, Catholic, Protestant, established Pentecostal, and African Independent (or Initiated) (Gifford 2004:20), these new forms of African Christianity forge new combinations from elements of the old. What makes these various forms 'new' is their predominant emphasis, which is economic success, wealth, and status in this world (Gifford 2004:44–70). Economic prosperity has been "the motor that has powered this entire explosion" (Gifford 2004:81). Healing, the predominant emphasis of more established forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and African Independent Churches has been superseded in these new churches by economic success. In addition, an other-worldly millennialism has been replaced by a this-worldly prosperity (Gifford 2004:81).

The second emphasis, from which the first is fuelled, is the absolute centrality of the Bible (Gifford 2004:71–82). Though not read in great portions or detail (Gifford 2004:28, 78), the Bible is *the* fundamental authoritative resource for life (Gifford 2004:71–72), and speaks to the individual about God's intervention in the here-and-now (Gifford 2004:72–75) in a pragmatic form of Christianity in which the Bible has the answers to the existential problems of Africans, "especially to their most pressing existential problem, economic survival" (Gifford 2004:ix, 76).

The wider societal economic and political role of these ‘new’ churches remains the subject of debate. While all agree that the political realm is spiritualised, such that “circumstances are simply not relevant in comparison with what the Word of God says must be the case” and where the focus is on the blessed believer who is not afflicted by the national and continental “curses of poverty” (Gifford 2004:165–166), so relativising the role of governments, there is less agreement on the effects that this individualised gospel has, through its individuals, on the wider society.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Having begun this article by dividing the analysis of African biblical reception and interpretation into two historical and geographical sections, it remains, in conclusion, to acknowledge that the Sahara desert no longer divides “Africa” in the way it used to. The Coptic Church is now represented on the southern-most tip of the continent, in Cape Town, where its biblical heritage is currently contributing to and engaging with various forms of South African biblical interpretation. And the debates within South Africa concerning the ambiguity of the Bible and the appropriate methodologies to use in its interpretation have found their way to Ethiopia (McEntire 2000). Now it is not missionaries and colonial forces that carry the Bible across the continent, but Africans themselves. So the mapping provided in this article must remain provisional. The territory that is the appropriation of the Bible in Africa is far from static, as new forms of African Christianity emerge from the old, each drawing substantially, though differently, on the Bible.

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of “implicit politics” in (Gifford 2004, 169-172).

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