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EDITORIAL

In this special issue of *Journal for Semitics/Tydskrif vir Semitistiek* articles by scholars from Austria, the Czech Republic, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States are collected. The title “Song of Songs: African and Western studies” reflects a broad variety of methodological approaches and cultural backgrounds. On two occasions, in 2012 and 2013, papers were presented at symposiums, respectively in Basel and Pretoria. The first meeting was hosted by the University of Basel, in co-operation with the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Vienna and the Swiss Society for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (SGOA). It was the kick-off event for a successful series of academic meetings.

The second meeting, at UNISA, was the first ever at which a number of black African scholars presented papers on this topic. It is a shame that 20 years after the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa race should still be an issue. Yet, even though Song of Songs is one of the most interpreted books of the Old Testament, and has kept the attention of scholars of all ages and backgrounds, black African scholars have shown little to no interest in this book. At this meeting more papers by black African scholars were presented than ever before – thus meeting one of the objectives of the research project, from which this is the first published result. Some of those contributions are published here; others are still being finalised and will be published in the next conference proceedings.

Lukwikilu Credo Mangayi explicitly asks: “Why do black African Old Testament scholars not write on Song of Songs?” Sam Ndogo followed the avenue of intercultural studies and created an Afrocentric dialogue on the request for love by the woman in Song of Songs. Annalet van Schalkwyk presents an ecofeminist reading of Song of Songs. Stefan Fischer, who works on its rhetorical function, investigated the famous garden scene of the unification of the lovers. In another article he takes a literary approach, claiming that the figure of Solomon reinforces the theme of love but is not needed for the plot of Song of Songs. Jackie du Toit looks into children’s Bibles and draws conclusions on the contemporary adult religious community’s changing societal imperatives and resultant didactic prerogatives. Eben Scheffler offers a celebration of sexuality in Song of Songs. Pieter van der Zwan adds a psychological

WHY DO BLACK AFRICAN OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS NOT WRITE ON SONG OF SONGS?

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ABSTRACT

For this reflection on why black African Old Testament scholars do not write on Song of Songs five scholars from the University of South Africa were briefly engaged by means of personal interviews. The findings reveal that the main reasons for this situation could be classified into three categories, namely (i) cultural constraints, (ii) technical reasons (e.g., lack of skills to interpret Song of Songs in culturally accepted language) and (iii) doctrinal (e.g., doubt about the content of Song of Songs). Customary and culturally relevant communication tools such as poetry, drama, dance and the like that already exist in an African context are suggested as resources that could be unearthed by scholars who want to write about *eros* without shame and reservation. Further research is also suggested as this would bring to the fore reasons that are deeply rooted in society.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND REMARKS

Soon after I started writing this article, it dawned on me that my scholarly engagement centred on African urban missiology, integral mission, local economic development, development and HIV/AIDS, and not on the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the fact that there are not a substantial number of black African scholars who have written on Song of Songs impelled me to consider this opportunity and challenge for two reasons. First, to quote Madise (2012:2), “Africa could stand up to count itself among the best in defining its own status as a legitimate contributor” and, second, to raise consciousness about human sexuality from an African perspective. Of course, there

are reasons for this situation. What are they? This is what the purpose of this research is and, hopefully, it can make a contribution towards the reversal of the situation.

At the outset, two introductory remarks are warranted. First, Christians have been unduly influenced by Greek asceticism, which makes both the human body and its normal activities out to be evil (Utley 2010:136). This notion contradicts parts of the Bible that affirm, on the one hand, the goodness of physical creation (cf. Gn 1:26-27, 31) and, on the other, while acknowledging the results of human rebellion (cf. Gn 3), still look to that day when this curse shall be removed (cf. Rm 8:18-22). Second, maleness and femaleness are God's idea. Human sexuality is part of God's creation and plan for human beings made in His image. "Sex is not something we do. It is something we are. Every area of our thoughts and lives is affected by sexual orientation, as interpreted by our cultures" (Utley 2010:136). Thus, in this attempt to answer the question, how black African scholars might be unduly influenced by Greek asceticism, and how culture and traditional interpretation of human sexuality might have inhibited scholarly enterprise will be explored. The views of other (African) colleagues on the matter through personal interviews were collected. In the arguments that follow their views are engaged in a way that will, hopefully, assist in explaining some of their reasons why black African Scholars do not write on Song of Songs.

Generally, the argument in this article stands in opposition to asceticism, and is thus in support of one of the main truths that Song of Songs conveys, which is the affirmation of the purity and beauty of human sexuality (Song 8:6-7). Hence, my personal view is that Song of Songs is a celebration of physical love in monogamous marriage. Yet, I admit that this view is contentious, since there is no monogamy and no marriage in Song of Songs. Nevertheless, I visualise the affirmation and celebration of physical love portrayed in Song of Songs as befitting a monogamous marriage or relationship. Further, in the light of the persistent Greek religious dualism this affirmation is crucially needed today. The point being that spirituality is not conditioned on asceticism as rightly articulated by Utley (2010:119): "the physical is not evil in essence". In the same vein Guthrie et al. (1967:579-580) cited Young who

said: “So long as there is impurity in this world we need, and need badly, the Song of Solomon”. With regard to African cultural and traditional interpretation of human sexuality, my starting point is to argue from the fact that in the African worldview, reality is viewed as a holistic, integrated unit (Kathide 1999:72).¹ Since this is the case, black African scholars have to consider human sexuality in their scholarship. The fact remains that although scholarship has overlooked this, the African traditional religious reality and the Bible take human sexuality seriously as is highlighted in what follows.

SELECTED BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

This article is in many ways an application of Utley’s comments on Song of Songs. The fact that a book such as Song of Songs is in the canon proves the point that the Bible contradicts the Greek asceticism notion and challenges certain cultural constraints. Utley (2010:115) elaborates further by directly quoting Rabbi Akiba.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Akiba (at one of the councils of Jamnia, A.D 90), it (Song of Songs) was finally accepted as canonical. He said of this book, ‘For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the holy of holies’ (Mish. Ya daim. III, 5).

The worthiness of this book was not an issue in the Hebrew canon called the *Megiloth* (five scrolls). “Song of Songs was read at the Feast of Passover (on the eight day)” (Utley 2010:15). Passover symbolises and serves as a reminder of the gracious love of God for Israel. This is most likely in agreement with those who have understood the book as an allegory of Christ’s love for the Church (cf. Guthrie et al. 1967:579).

¹ In this book, Kathide writes from an African Pentecostal perspective, with the hope of challenging the church to be a usable instrument in advancing the cause of the kingdom of God. He speaks, among other things, about how the African perspective has been omitted in missiological enterprise, which has led to misunderstanding of the African religious reality.

Regardless, I concur with Guthrie et al. (1967:579) “that the song must be taken literally, i.e. as what it appears to be, a song about human love written in the form of a series of dramatic poems with this one unifying theme”.² Furthermore, I contend that the literal content of this book is in agreement with some portions of the Bible which, in many instances as I will show in the following lines, contradict asceticism. Guthrie et al. (1967:579) support this view when they write:

The book is a censure on lust, polygamy, and infidelity. It encourages a love which is exclusive and absorbing (4:12). It highlights a love which is unquenchable and unpurchasable (8:6f). It endorses the place of physical love within legitimate relationship. For these reasons alone it more than justifies its place in the canon. Its presence indicates the completeness of the Holy Scripture, for God is concerned with every aspect of our living; this is the only book which, as a whole, treats this important subject.

Guthrie et al.’s point was mainly to assert the fact that the content of this book is canonical, and treats an important and current issue that deserves attention from scholars, including those of African descent. In what follows here selected Biblical insights that put human sexuality in context are highlighted. However, it is acknowledged that the contexts of these different verses of the Bible differ dramatically.³

In Genesis there is an original mutuality (cf. 1:26-27; 2:18) and sexual activity was a mandate from God (1:28). The original mutuality and sexual activity, together with all creation, were affirmed as “very good” in Genesis 1:31. Women are not opposites of, but complements to men (2:18). Even after the Fall and its consequences, physical love is affirmed in Scripture. Proverbs 5:15-23 asserts life-long monogamy and

² I am aware that there are other methodological approaches that could be applied to this text, such as the dramatic or allegorical approaches, but my preferred approach to this text is literary. This way the content of the message, which is human erotic love, is neither misrepresented nor hidden.

³ I do not read these verses context-less but I am indicating here what would be perceived by many/most Bible readers as parallel expressions in different parts of the Bible.

regular sexual activity. While Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 suggests the enjoyment of life in all its aspects while one can, sexual activity within assumed monogamy is what Song of Songs affirms in no uncertain terms. The Bible also makes it clear that sex is more than procreation (1 Cor 7:3-5) and that the body simultaneously belongs to God (1 Cor 6:19-20) and to one's spouse (1 Cor 7:4). There are also other insights from the Bible pertaining to God-given boundaries for expressing human sexuality (e.g., marriage and singleness). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that "the abuse and idolatry that surrounds disordered sexuality contributes to wider social decline" (Lausanne Movement 2011:46).

From the above, I deduce, first, that sexuality is God's plan for a full earth. Second, sexuality has been affected by the Fall. Third, the best sex education is two persons who love each other selflessly and, fourth, sex can be wonderful or awful. Sex was meant to fill the earth, bond two people together, form the family and be enjoyed. It is clear that a biblical perspective depicted in the biblical verses mentioned above contradicts asceticism and is in support of the message of Song of Songs. Thus, it teaches that human sexuality is not evil. Why then do black African scholars not write on this book? Is human sexuality not an important issue in the African context? Does this issue not deserve scholars' attention? Some answers to these questions could be linked to Greek asceticism on matters of sex and some answers may be found in the cultural and traditional interpretation of human sexuality.

CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

In the African context, sex is a public act yet, admittedly, *eros*⁴ is a silent topic in the plain expressions of communication and, in terms of boundaries, it is confined to either monogamy or polygamy. The fact is that sexual talk among Africans is public

⁴ *Eros* is the Greek word for sexual love (erotic love). It is related to sexual desires and pleasures between two partners in love.

but only secretive to outsiders who do not understand the idioms and symbols. De Gruchy and de Gruchy (2005:237) allude to this prevailing silence when they write: “It is possible that African cultural constraints around the public discussion of sexuality, or the dominance in the public domain around issues of sexuality by conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches has shaped this silence”. Although, research proves that, in the main, many African Initiated Churches who declared themselves autonomous made adjustments to items of doctrine, “the most oft changed being the Western prohibition of plural marriages” (Isichei cited in Burton 2007:233). This newly found freedom “meant that they did not have to endorse the countercultural missionary interpretation of Scripture, and were free to walk in the ways of Abraham, David and Solomon!” (Burton 2007:234); thus, confirming that the Bible has many voices or perspectives regarding polygamy and that polygamy has to be understood in context. Regardless of my personal theological belief which subscribes to monogamy, I argue that given the fact that plural marriages are common in Africa, *eros* should therefore not remain secretive and hidden in idiomatic expressions understood by a few.

Furthermore, I argue that in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis that Africa faces, one would have expected some level of freedom of speech on the topic of human sexuality and *eros*. For me the purity and celebration of physical love in monogamy portrayed in Song of Songs provides insights for the promotion of fidelity among partners who love each other. The celebration of their physical love has to be in the public domain, in a community, because it is a normal activity of the human body and it is not an evil act. Sadly, this is not yet the case in many African contexts.

OTHER FACTORS THAT COULD HAVE NEGATIVELY INFLUENCED BLACK AFRICAN SCHOLARS

Social history of Africa

According to Madise (2012:4), “community history complements history of

communities from below and models social history". The endemic problem of multiple sex partners in South Africa, for an example, could be linked to the migrant work system that was the norm during apartheid. This system orchestrated long-term separation of two lovers, which led one to resort to a mistress or concubine to meet sexual needs. In some instances relationships with these concubines were formalised into marriages and in others they remained illegitimate unions and objects of shame. The latter is part of social history in many African communities, which is shrouded in silence because it is a matter pertaining to human sexuality. In this case individuals, including scholars, who share this history will naturally avoid talking about something that is shameful to them.

Treating human sexuality as a taboo topic in the (black) African context

Expanding on cultural constraints and with reference to HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa, de Gruchy & de Gruchy (2005:36) observed:

It is true to say that the AIDS crisis is part of a crisis to do with human sexuality . . . One would therefore think that the churches (and scholars) would turn to this with all haste to consider responsibly the matter of human sexuality. Yet as we have just noted the taboos, stigma and incoherence around precisely this area.

The concern articulated by de Gruchy and de Gruchy is sadly a reality in many communities in Africa. I once worked with a group of women who, after attending a week-long training session on an ethical values-based HIV/AIDS prevention strategy, explained that it was taboo for them as women to express their love to their partners for fear of being considered "a bad woman" or "a woman of the streets". These women suggested that the church could facilitate a process that could set them free in this area. According to the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA) the silence has led to sexual abuse and sexual harassment, and advocates that all issues that lead to the abuse of women should be discussed so that the culture

of silence that had viewed women as private affairs be broken (PACSA 2009). Unfortunately, the church and scholars have not seized this opportunity. Scholars in particular could play a strategic role in breaking the “ice” by writing about human sexuality from an ethical perspective within traditional African culture. Their silence, I argue, has contributed to the entrenchment of asceticism and cultural constraints to say the least.

Theological/missionary training as source of silence among African scholars

In most parts of Africa sexual morality was compromised due to the forced domestication that Africans underwent through colonisation and missionary enterprise. With particular reference to South Africa, de Gruchy and de Gruchy (2005:236) depict the collapse of African sexual morality in what follows:

In the past 200 years South Africa has witnessed the collapse of two hegemonic sexual systems. In the first instance, colonial conquest, missionary teaching and migratory labour destroyed the sexual ethical system of traditional African culture. At the same time this former system was collapsing, the colonial powers introduced a conservative sexual ethical mix of dour Dutch Calvinism, British missionary piety and upright Victorianism.

This comment incites me to ask to what extent this conservative sexual-ethical mix influences African Old Testament scholars not to write on a book that openly celebrates physical love between two people. I will tentatively affirm that it has, to some extent, played a part for this behaviour. I submit that most of these scholars have been trained in institutions where this conservative sexual mix has been internalised. The point is that their silence might be rooted in the theological education these scholars received; people are conditioned by the kind of education they receive.

So far from literature, various reasons such as asceticism, cultural constraints and other factors, namely the social history of Africa, human sexuality being a taboo topic

and the collapse of African sexual ethical system have been discussed briefly. All these reasons have the potential to inhibit African scholarly enterprise. It was also shown from a biblical perspective that the central theme of Song of Songs fits the purpose of biblical teachings on human sexuality, and that this book should not be read in isolation from other books of the Bible canon. What follows is a discussion of the views of the respondents interviewed for the purposes of this study:

INPUT FROM RESPONDENTS

Methodology

Five⁵ respondents' views were collected through personal interviews. The purpose of the interview was explained to them and their consent was requested. They were handed questionnaires on which to work on their own and they provided written answers when they were ready. Two basic, open-ended⁶ questions with sub-questions were used in the questionnaire: (1) Do you preach from Song of Songs? Name at least three occasions when you used the book for preaching? Give reasons why you chose to use Song of Songs on these occasions? (2) As a scholar, what do you think are the reasons why African scholars do not write on the book of Song of Songs? Give reasons? Responses to these questions are embodied unaltered in the findings. The findings are analysed and discussed, and conclusions are drawn.

⁵ Five colleagues – three women and two men – participated in these personal interviews. They are South African emerging theologians, in the age range 28 to 35. One of them hails from KwaZulu-Natal, and the others were born and grew up in the townships of Tshwane, Soweto and Ekurhuleni in South Africa. Two (one man and one woman) hold master's degrees in theology and the other three have honours degrees in theology. Their specialities and research fields of interest include intercultural and interreligious relations and dialogue, Old Testament, liberation theologies and black theology.

⁶ According to Babbie (2010:256), open-ended questions are questions for which the respondent is asked to provide his or her own answers. This type of questioning befits the purpose of this study.

Findings

To question 1, respondent 1 affirmed that he had preached on Song of Songs.

I was preaching in the youth banquet, secondly in the church and addressing a political meeting/workshop on 'blackness' where the emphasis was on "black is beautiful" (Song 1:6). My emphasis was on purity, premarital counselling, and biblical guidelines for love. In the church the message was about love, honesty, faithfulness the centrality of having one partner in a world that is promiscuous/adulterous. In the political meeting, the message was political protest against white supremacy, the affirmation of black power, black consciousness and pan-'Africanism'.

To the same question, respondents 2, 3 and 5 stated that they had never preached on Song of Songs, and did not give reasons for their behaviour.

Respondent 4 affirmed that she had used Song of Songs in her preaching, especially during wedding ceremonies. She articulated the following reasons for using the book:

- a) Maybe because I love poetry.
- b) I find the book interesting, the way it paints the picture of love in a dramatic way of poetry.
- c) I have realised many pastors do not use the book, on any occasion. That is why I quoted from it.

To question 2, respondent 1 named the following reasons:

- a) The book does not mention the word 'God', does not deal with doctrine and popular biblical themes like faith, salvation.
- b) This book is not commonly used in Europe, America not only Africa because it focuses on sexual relations, love, romance and purity.
- c) African artist have depicted this book in art, drama, poetry, dance. We must not limit the meaning of this book merely to preachers and Bible scholars.

- d) This story has political implications; it has galvanized blacks in the USA and Africa to construct black theology. The emphasis on the beauty has made African feminist scholars take a particular interest in the book and unpack power plays in love between the two lovers.

To question 2, respondent 2 said:

- a) In a context where I come from the immediate texts need to speak about hope since it is a context that is affected by social injustice and inequality.
- b) In African black communities it is not easy to express love by using a poetic language like the one used in Song of Songs, we usually express ourselves in actions (actions speak louder than words).

To the same question, respondent 3 gave the following reasons:

- a) They are too romantic for traditional Africans.
- b) They are more personal than social.
- c) They are intimate and explicit (taboo).
- d) They reflect weakness to the masculine Africans.
- e) They are for whites.

Respondent 4 named one reason, namely “Africans are ashamed to express love publicly”. Respondent 5 stated various reasons as captured in the following citation:

As the book of Song of Songs is a poetic book, African scholars find it difficult to write about it. It might be found too difficult to interpret the poems into understandable language to the people. It is also mentioned that poems are understood as a way of Western practices due to the fact that it expresses everything about love affairs. As we also know, the Westerners are the ones who always use poems to express or show their partners how they do love them. During the past time it was very rare to find an African quoting or reciting a poem to express his/her love to a partner. Poems are anyway not that easy to understand so therefore they

need to be interpreted by someone who understands its language. Even pastors and ministers are afraid to use its scriptures in marriage ceremonies because they might find it difficult to interpret. Someone once said “writing about the Song of Songs, it’s very hard”, even scholars do not go deep into it but one hint is the issue of the heterosexual, monogamous type of marriage depicted in the Song of Songs contrasted to the polygamy type of marriage of the Africans.

Analysis and discussion of findings

Responses to question 1

The responses of the two respondents who have used Song of Songs in preaching situations showed that the book had been used on various occasions (i.e., youth banquet, at church, at a political meeting and at wedding ceremonies), and for various purposes and reasons: emphasis on purity in relationship; premarital counselling; provision of biblical guidelines on love; teachings on love; and honesty and faithfulness in monogamy. Furthermore, they added that Song of Songs was used to affirm blackness in protest against white supremacy, to affirm black power, black consciousness and pan-Africanism. The book was also used out of a love of poetry because the book was interesting, the picture of love was presented in the dramatic way of poetry and to preach on a book many pastors shied away from.

This attempt, though nominal, gives me hope that a day will come when African pastors and preachers will stand boldly before their congregations to preach unreservedly on Song of Songs as canonical material. It also shows that not all Africans believed the notion of Greek asceticism. Furthermore, from a missiological perspective, it proves that “God’s mission, as we will find in the Bible, includes the whole of creation” (Wright 2010:27). This implies that a pastor/preacher has a mandate to equip the flock even on matters of human sexuality because it is part of God’s creation.

I also think that some reasons and purposes given for preaching on Song of Songs

such as purity in relationships; premarital counselling; biblical guidelines on love; teachings on love; and honesty and faithfulness in monogamy generally befit the main theme of Song of Songs, which is the celebration of the physical love between two people in monogamy. With reference to premarital counselling and teaching on love, I suggest that the focus should be on inciting lovers to learn and imitate the two lovers of the Song of Songs. While I applaud the attempt, I nevertheless think it is a little bit far-fetched for someone to preach on Song of Songs at a political meeting. The purpose of a political meeting is crowded with other agendas. I also think it is poor hermeneutics to read political protest against white supremacy, the affirmation of black power, black consciousness and pan-Africanism in Song of Songs. While, I concur that black is beautiful, I still think Song of Songs 1:6 was not about black consciousness. It was rather stating the fact about the dark skin of the Shulammitte.

Responses to question 2

All five respondents answered this question; most responses are sketchy without much detail. They provided 18 reasons why African scholars do not write on Song of Songs. These reasons are summarised as follows:

1. Regardless of the fact that it is common in some African contexts to use idioms and poems to express love, respondents raised lack of tactics and skills on how to convey the explicit erotic love message of the Song of Songs in gatherings as one of the issues. Six reasons were given in relation to this.
2. Three reasons are related to the uneasiness and reluctance on the part of preachers and scholars to devote time to a book on *eros* which, in their eyes, seems not to be a pressing doctrinal matter in comparison to matters such as faith, salvation, and social justice and inequality considered pressing in their immediate contexts.
3. Three other reasons were associated with misperceptions and biases that Africans are less romantic than other groups of people in the world.
4. Two reasons claimed that the usage of the book is confined to art, and feminist and black theology perspectives and so forth.

5. The other reasons vaguely relate to personal choices and privacy, and reflect the weakness of masculine Africans.

The summary of the input provided by these respondents clearly shows that there are various reasons why African scholars do not write on Song of Songs. For the purpose of this article, these reasons are divided into three categories, namely (i) cultural, (ii) technical and (iii) doctrinal.

First, under cultural, it is obvious that the number of reasons linked to the ways of life of Africans seem to be the leading factor on why African scholars do not write on Song of Songs. Contrary to the fact, as stated earlier, that Africans have accustomed ways of expressing love albeit a little secretive to outsiders, the respondents suggest that it is not easy for an African to express his or her love in a poetic way; that the type of romance in Song of Songs is too much for an African; that it is not good to be intensely personal; and that being at the same time intimate and explicit is a taboo. Furthermore, the reasons given by the respondents also show that they are less informed about African practices whereby, for instance, poetry was recited while courting or that praise poetry was recited in bed during sexual contact. This might also point to the possibility that this group of respondents is a bit distant from African traditional ways of life since they live in urban areas.

The five respondents pointed out that those cultural constraints were an inhibiting factor. This confirms the concern raised earlier on by de Gruchy and de Gruchy in as far as Africans remaining silent in public about explicit communication on sexual matters. By implication, this suggests that Africans are not supposed to be fully humans when it comes to sexuality. This assumption contradicts the African worldview that, according to former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, among others, “rejects popular dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, the material and spiritual. All life is religious, all life is sacred, all life is a piece” (Tutu 1995:xvi; see also Muchena 1996:170). It further contradicts Pato’s views that “the African sees creation and life as the places of encounter with God. This is one of the treasures of Africa (Pato 2000:97; see also Kathide 1999).

Sadly, African scholars have not yet stepped into a place where these places of encounter with God would inspire and liberate them to write on human sexuality regardless of the fact that they have the cultural resources to do so. Muchena (1996:170) seems to link this attitude with the way Christianity came to Africa:

Christianity, in the way it came to our continent, promoted this type of compartmentalised thinking. It usually presented itself to us through the mission station, an island surrounded by the unconverted heathen. Modern educated Africans have embraced this compartmentalised worldview. This is evident in the economic and scientific determinism that characterises our development, thinking and planning.

Second, under the technical category (e.g., lack and or inability to interpret Song of Songs) respondents enlisted six reasons. One of the challenges is the fact that there are many interpretations of this book (Utley 2010). There are, for example, a number of theories surrounding Song of Songs 1:6. This is perhaps why even suspicious interpretations (e.g., Song of Songs has political implications) features among the reasons given by one of the respondents. Furthermore, I submit that this may be one of the reasons why allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs is most preferred rather than literal interpretation, especially in conservative evangelical churches and training institutions. The language appears to be a problem, especially for scholars and church leaders trained by these institutions.

That is why I concur with Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000:ix) in that “the concepts with which they work are not contextualised with African cultural tradition”. This is perhaps one of the key technical reasons that have inhibited African scholarship of Song of Songs in that they are not in a position to contextualise such explicit erotic material coming straight from its ancient Jewish background.

Third, under doctrinal (e.g., doubt on the content of Song of Songs), reasons the respondents gave seemed to look at Song of Songs in isolation from other parts of the Bible. Earlier, I showed how parallel expressions of various Bible verses speak and support, by implication, human sexuality. Thus, it is essential to read this book as a

chapter in a volume, which is the Bible. This way one will see that even if the name of God is not explicitly mentioned, the message of Song of Songs resonates with the revealed will of the Creator on matters concerning physical love between a man and a woman. This “type of sensual or physical love” (Nixon-James quoted in Naidoo and Ngubane 2013:175) is God’s gift to humanity (cf. Genesis). Contrary to views propagated by Kierkegaard (Mendham 2007:607) that erotic love is characteristically pagan because it is based on drives, inclination and nature; *eros* is a beautiful and legitimate gift of the Creator to humanity.

Therefore, given the fact that some Africans know how to use poetry in personal love expressions, scholars and preachers of the Bible could draw from this secretive, culturally adapted tool to communicate the message of Song of Songs in the African context. Their task will be to make public what has been secretive to outsiders. Muchena (1996:174), with reference to pre-colonial societies, rightly said: “people expressed their views through debates, discussions, poetry, music, dance and drama”. These accustomed means of communication are perhaps what could open the door for scholarly work on the Song of Songs by Africans.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The specific reasons that explain why black African scholars do not write on the Song of Songs need to be thoroughly researched, documented and added to for the purpose of improving scholarship. This article attempted to find out possible reasons by searching the literature and collecting views of five African respondents from the University of South Africa. Drawing from literature, this article has identified asceticism, cultural constraints and other factors such as social history, human sexuality being a taboo topic, and disruption of the African sexual ethic system as possibly having an inhibiting effect.

Through personal interviews, 18 reasons were collected from respondents; these were grouped into three categories, namely (i) cultural, (ii) technical and (iii)

doctrinal. For these respondents, cultural reasons outweighed the rest, followed by technical reasons. These findings showed that cultural constraints, together with technical reasons pertaining to language, interpretation skills and communication, are major stumbling blocks that must be overcome before this situation can be reversed.

Hence, this article suggests it is necessary that customary communication tools such as poetry, drama, dance and the like to be unearthed as avenues for preaching on Song of Songs – based on scholarly enterprise that will write about *eros* without shame and reservation. In addition, further research on a large scale is needed to study reasons that may be deeply rooted in society than did this research. Preferably, with respondents who are better acquainted with African traditions and cultures.

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