

# MUSA W DUBE AND THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA

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## *Abstract*

This article tells the story of Musa Dube's interpretation of the Bible. It is not a biography of Dube's personal life but rather a story of how she has contributed to the direction of African biblical scholarship; it is a story of how biblical scholars can participate in the life of Christian communities. The article begins with a brief biography of Dube. This section is followed by a panorama of the history of African biblical scholarship. The methods Dube uses to interpret the Bible are then reviewed. The article concludes by showing that although Dube has built on a foundation that was laid by earlier African biblical scholars, her contribution has been revolutionary.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

African women have made significant contributions to the growth of the Christian faith on the African continent. Such contributions have been varied. Many women have done so through their membership and active participation in the various activities of the churches; others founded strong Christian churches;<sup>1</sup> and others still contributed through the mighty power of the pen.<sup>2</sup> This article looks at the last category of contributors. It tells the story of Musa W Dube's contribution to biblical studies in Africa. This is done through a review of her published works.

There is no doubt that Musa Dube's publications have significantly revolutionised the area of biblical studies in Africa. At a recent

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conference in Cape Town, during which I introduced myself as “a lecturer in the department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana”, a young postgraduate student from the USA came to me and asked: “So you work with Musa Dube?” He went on to tell me that he had read her works, was looking forward to meet her in person and was happy that at least he had met me, her colleague. Who, then, is Musa Dube?

## 2 MUSA DUBE: THE PERSON

As stated in the introduction, this article tells the story of Musa Dube through a review of her publications. Although I know her personally, I have decided not to tell her personal story but rather her story as an African biblical theologian. Fortunately, even in this way, we learn a lot about this prolific academic.

Musa Dube is a Motswana mother and academic. Ethnically Ndebele (thus having some Zimbabwean roots), she tells us that she is often referred to as a “mokwerekwere” by native Batswana. In describing social location as a method of biblical interpretation, she writes:

Ethnically in my country, I do not belong to what has been named the “eight principal tribes”. This means that every time Batswana hear my name, they start saying that “I am a green Californian (one who comes from the north), a raw barbarian.” They say I am not a Motswana. I am “a *mokwerekwere* or a barbaric foreigner” (Dube 2003a:105).

A holder of degrees from the universities of Botswana, Durham and Vanderbilt, she is a professor of New Testament Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana. She is also a lay preacher in the United Methodist Church. It is mainly her academic, social and Christian backgrounds that have influenced her theology.

## 3 MUSA DUBE AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

Musa Dube is among few African Christian women whose theology is expressed in writing. She has written on many aspects of biblical studies in Africa, mainly from feminist and post-colonial perspectives. She has written for academia, for church leaders, for the Christian ecumenical community and even for Christian youth. Her main contribution, however, has been in the area of biblical studies and HIV/Aids. Dube has published books, chapters in books, journal articles and Christian newsletters. She has also edited several books. In addition, she has coordinated the writing of several books, particularly on gender and biblical studies. Although she was trained in New Testament studies, her publications also address Hebrew Bible texts. What major contributions has she made to the study of the Bible in Africa? Before we look at her contributions in this area, it is important to present a panorama of the history of biblical interpretation in Africa.

#### **4 BIBLICAL STUDIES IN AFRICA: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Justin S Ukpong (2000:11-28) gives a good summary of historical developments in biblical studies in Africa. He divides the history of biblical interpretation in Africa into three phases:<sup>3</sup> The first phase was the period from the 1930s to the 1970s when African biblical scholarship was reactive and apologetic, focusing on legitimising African religion and culture. The second phase was the period from the 1970s to the 1990s when African biblical scholarship was both reactive and proactive, using the African context as a source for biblical interpretation. The last phase began in the 1990s and is dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies, recognising the ordinary readers of the Bible and also taking the African context as the subject of biblical interpretation. It is in this third phase that Dube's work falls.

In an article on current issues in biblical studies, Dube (2004a:39-62) also gives us a brief survey of the history of biblical interpretation. She notes that, although most African scholars were trained in Western schools that are steeped in the historical critical methods of biblical interpretation, their works have departed from these methods of biblical interpretation and most are influenced by the method of inculturation. She makes a very important observation that whereas

the rest of African biblical scholars were engaging in inculturation biblical hermeneutics, the picture was different in South Africa where scholars mainly employed liberation biblical hermeneutics. Dube also traces the history of African women's biblical scholarship by highlighting its growth. She shows that African women's biblical scholarship has mainly been concerned with issues of gender and gender discrimination.

After this sketch of the history of biblical scholarship in Africa, let me now turn to Musa Dube's history of biblical interpretation. My *modus operandi* is to present the different methods Dube has used for biblical interpretation, briefly explain how she has applied the methods to specific biblical texts and discuss how such interpretation opened new avenues for biblical interpretation in Africa.

## **5 MUSA DUBE'S METHODS OF INTERPRETING THE BIBLE**

Dube's interpretation of the Bible is influenced by her conviction that biblical texts have multiple meanings (Dube 2004a:50). She believes that each biblical text can have as many meanings as the readers of the text and the methods they use to interpret the text. Methods of interpretation are then determined by the social conditions of the readers/interpreters. Based on these convictions, Dube has used a number of methods of interpretation, depending on the issues she seeks to address. Below I discuss some of the methods she has used.

### **5.1 Reading with non-academic readers**

Musa Dube entered the stage of biblical interpretation when some people had already started to express disappointment with the historical critical method (Powell 1999, Saayman 2005 and Randolph Tate 2006). As Bosch (in Du Plessis 1990:77) observed then, biblical scholarship had become a highly specialised and sophisticated science (Saayman 2005:205-213). The historical critical method's emphasis on the world of the text and the original meaning of the text kept the biblical texts in their original world with little or no meaning to the modern readers. It kept the Bible as the property of intellectual readers only. Musa Dube challenged this methodology from the

naked truth that in Africa most of the users of the Bible are not schooled in the “critical” reading of the Bible. Like her contemporaries, Gerald West (2003, 2006), Musimbi Kanyoro (1997:363-378) and Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie (2001:114-144), Dube recognised the importance of ordinary (non-academic) readings of the Bible and sought to bring them into the academic interpretation of the Bible. She was convinced that “[i]f all reading is socially conditioned, academic interpretations may be no ‘better’ than readings of untrained readers” (Dube 2004a:50). She recounts how she came to read with non-academics:

The story of how I come to “read with ordinary readers” is about my long walk in a hall of mirrors. As a black Motswana African woman, I am indeed privileged to be admitted in this hall of magnificent mirrors; I have, nevertheless, struggled to see my image. Its mirrors occasionally give me a piece of what should be my face, and it is usually something undesirable (Dube 1996a:10).

Thus in *Readings of Semoya* (1996b:111-129) Dube engages in reading Matthew 15:21-28 with Batswana women. This method of biblical interpretation was ground breaking and it is therefore no wonder that the article was first published in *Semeia*, the highly acclaimed experimental journal of new methods in biblical studies. In the article Dube argues that ordinary readers’ interpretation of the Bible also follows specific methods. Four such methods are identified in African Independent Churches’ interpretations: communal interpretation, participatory interpretation, interpretation through dramatised narration and interpretation through repetition.

In another article Dube (1999a:33-59) shows how ordinary readers resist colonial biblical readings and translations. She notes how “evil spirits” in the earliest Setswana Bible was translated as “badimo” (ancestral spirits) in order to discourage Batswana from ancestral veneration. As a way to resist this translation, Batswana readers of the bible in African Independent Churches (AICs) have resurrected “badimo” from the colonial graveside through their readings of “Semoya” (the Spirit).

This method of interpretation brings the academic reader to the community and allows a collaborative reading. As Ukpong (2002:24) puts it: "Through such a process the academic reader accesses the resources of popular readings of the Bible and the academic scholarship is informed and enriched by the resources outside its circle, while the ordinary readers acquire the perspective of critical reading."

## 5.2 Postcolonial biblical interpretation

Dube has also pioneered the use of postcolonial theory for biblical interpretation in Africa. She did this first in her doctoral thesis, which was published as a book entitled *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* by Chalice Press in 2000. Although earlier African theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye had worked on the area of cultural criticism, as Kwok Pui-lan correctly observes, they did not "draw explicitly from the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory" (Pui-lan 2004). Dube did this explicitly, drawing from postcolonial theory and interpreting the Bible in Africa in the light of the theory.

In *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible*, Dube uses the theory to argue that the Bible is imperialistic for the subjects of the Two-Third's World. She links this to the popular African saying that "[w]hen the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we 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" (Dube 2000a:3). She then suggests that it is only a postcolonial reading of biblical texts that can liberate readers from this imperialistic oppression (Dube 2000a:198-199). In fact, in another article on postcolonial biblical interpretation, Dube argues that the use of the theory is imperative for Africans. She refers to postcolonial biblical interpretation as "reading for decolonisation" and insists:

Reading the Bible and other cultural texts for decolonisation is, therefore, imperative for those who are committed to the struggle for liberation. While the Bible is a usable text in imperial projects, how it should be read in the light of its role are central questions to the process of decolonisation and the struggle for liberation. As a Motswana woman of Southern Africa, my reading for decolonisation

arises from the historical encounter of Christian texts functioning as the “talisman” in imperial possession of foreign places and people (Dube 2002a:60).

In the same article, Dube (2002a:51-75) then interprets John 4:1-42 by means of postcolonial theory. She concludes that biblical critical practice should be dedicated to an ethical task of promoting decolonisation, fostering diversity and imagining liberating ways of interdependence.

In her engagement of postcolonial biblical interpretation, Dube also addresses the modern buzzword “globalisation”. Her publications tend to equate globalisation with imperialism. For example, in her article in *Reading the Bible in the global village: Cape Town* (2002b:41-63), she describes globalisation as a grandson of colonisation. Her argument for this equation is clearly stated in the article *Looking back and forward: Postcolonialism, globalisation, God and gender*. Here she writes:

If we understand postcolonialism as a study of international relations of how ideology of domination, collaboration and resistance are expounded and enacted between nations, then globalisation fits very well in this framework. If we understand postcolonialism as underlining the fact that relationships of domination and subordination that were created in modern imperialism did not end when geographical independence was won (sic), then globalisation is a “mutation”, a new form of an old problem. Indeed if we regard modern colonialism and other forms of imperialism as the search for markets and for profit making, by extending one’s influence beyond their national borders, then the relation of globalisation is evident. (2006a:183)

In light of her view of globalisation as some form of imperialism, Dube then articulates a reading of biblical texts that resists globalisation. In the article *Praying the Lord’s prayer in a global economic era*, she advocates that in order for people to pray that “your kingdom come”, they have to be responsible partners, guardians of justice, active

daughters and sons in the establishment of God's rule in this world. This, for Dube, means resisting the globalising forces - especially because they affect Africa and the Two-Thirds World negatively. Another article in which Dube calls for resistance to globalisation is entitled *Villagising, globalising and biblical studies* (2002b:41-63). In this article she calls for the African concept of villagising in place of globalising. Unlike globalisation, which is uni-directional, Dube says that villagisation is multi-directional because it has something to offer in terms of community care, an economic system that strives to empower all its members and reverence for life (Dube 2002b:62).

### 5.3 Feminist biblical interpretation

From its beginning, feminist biblical interpretation has not consisted of a single method; it has always been multi-methodical. This is the same way that Musa Dube has used the method. In fact, in one of her publications Dube (2002c:100-120) describes feminism as a worldwide political movement of many colours. However, Dube has mainly approached feminist biblical interpretation from a postcolonial perspective. Indeed, her first published book was entitled *Post-colonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* (2000a). She has argued strongly that although women in general are oppressed by patriarchy, African women - or rather women of the Two-Thirds World - face double or triple oppression (i.e. from patriarchal systems and from colonialism or neo-colonialism) (Dube 1999b:213-228). It is in this light that Dube has interpreted biblical passages either to liberate women or to expose the oppressive nature of biblical texts. In the article *Woman, what have I to do with you?* (1996c:244-258), she interprets John 2:1-11 and John 19:25-28 in terms of women's liberation. She argues that Jesus' ironical address of his mother in both texts was meant to challenge the male disciples' view of women. By using the same texts, she challenges the African church's refusal to accept women as full human beings who are entitled to serve God even through leadership. However, Dube also points out that there are biblical texts that are oppressive to women. Some texts view women as nameless except for their association with men; others associate women with sin, sickness and all forms of evil (2001a:3-24).



Dube's feminist biblical interpretation has not been limited to academic circles, theorising and debating sources and forms. She has interpreted the Bible to address what women in Africa are experiencing both in the church and outside the church. In her interpretation of the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), she compares the experience of the woman who had been married to five different husbands to what many African women are experiencing: poverty and starvation, violent civil and ethnic wars, oppressive international financial policies, HIV and Aids (2001a:3-24). Thus, through biblical interpretation, Dube has fought for the liberation of the African woman.

#### 5.4 Translation studies

One neglected area in biblical studies in Africa is translation studies. This is a worrying scenario, considering that the Bible - as it is used in Africa - is a product of a long process of translation from the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew for the Hebrew Bible and Greek for the New Testament). Although translation studies as a method of biblical interpretation started in the 1970s and has focused on examining the literary and cultural history of translation practices with an emphasis on the role of the translator in the praxis of translation (Randolph Tate 2006:381), African biblical scholars have given very little attention to the method.<sup>4</sup> Dube revolutionised African biblical scholarship by applying this method in an article entitled *Consuming a Colonial Cultural bomb: Translating badimo into "demons" in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)* (1999a:33-59). In this article she critiques the London Missionary Society agents for wrongly translating "evil spirits" into "badimo" (ancestors) and explicates that for Batswana "badimo" means the "High Ones, Ancestral Spirits who are mediators between God and the living". They are therefore not evil but divine. She concludes that the missionaries deliberately translated evil spirits as "badimo" as a colonial strategy to discourage Batswana from venerating their ancestors. She puts it thus: "... the translation invites us, the Batswana biblical readers, to distance ourselves from Badimo, the demons, and to identify ourselves with Jesus, a Christian divine power" (Dube 1999a:35). Thus, as other scholars on translation have noted, translation is much more

than a technical discipline; rather it is a metaphor for forms of inculturation (West 2001:90) or, as Dube would agree, a metaphor for forms of colonisation.

Dube's article, originally presented at a Society of New Testament Studies post-conference at Hammanskraal in South Africa, raised interesting debates (Maluleke 2005:355-374). Eric Hermanson responded stingingly to the article. On Dube's position that early missionary Bible translators had ulterior motives, he wrote:

Perhaps the time has come for suitably qualified mother-tongue speakers of the language to produce a new translation. However, no matter how competent and qualified the mother-tongue speakers are, they need to be guided by the principles and the procedures of modern exegetically-based, linguistically informed, communication-oriented and receptor-sensitive Bible translation. Until then, rather than blaming the early translators and suggesting they had ulterior motives, that really serves little purpose in the study of the New Testament, let us say *Badimo a ba robaleng ka kagiso* – May the spirits of the ancestors rest in peace (Hermanson 1999:8).

In response to Hermanson, Dube (2001b:145-163) shed more light on her understanding of translation studies in an article. Informed by postcolonialism, she describes Hermanson's response as "deeply and unapologetically engrossed in a colonising ideology and authority" (Dube 2001b:153). Through an interpretation of John 19:22 where Pontius Pilate declared "What I have written I have written", Dube says that Hermanson behaves in like manner in defending the translation that renders "badimo" as "evil spirits". She then enumerates 13 ways in which Hermanson's colonial and colonising approach emerges. What comes out from this response is that Dube advocates for postcolonial biblical translation studies. For her, such an enterprise should be "based on the standards, cultures and methods set by mother-speakers (sic), the former colonised, who now read the Bible as one of their cultural banks" (Dube 2001b:163).

## 5.5 Divination

Divination as a method of biblical interpretation is a typically African, or even Southern African, method of reading the Bible. For academics, it is a method that developed from reading with non-academic readers of the Bible. Dube (2000b:67-80; 2006b:193-207) brought academics' attention to this method of reading the Bible. She came across this method as she read the Bible with Botswana women in AICs. The method is influenced by the African practice of throwing bones to diagnose human problems and to find answers to these problems. Dube noted that in the same way that bones or other such divining objects were used by traditional healers, Christians in AICs used biblical texts. Instead of throwing bones, AIC prophets would hand the Bible to the patient and ask her to open a text and hand it back to the prophet. Through interpretation of the opened text, the prophet would divine the problems of the patient and offer a remedy.

Dube uses this method to interpret biblical passages. In the story of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28), Dube sees the story of international relations. She divines the Canaanite woman as representing African leaders who go to the Western world (Jesus) to beg for aid and foreign direct investments. In the same way that Jesus said that the children's bread should not be given to dogs, Western powers consider aid to Africa as throwing money into a bottomless pit (Dube 2006b:203). It is only through the woman's insistence and Jesus' realisation of her faith that her daughter is healed. Dube concludes that it is only through the combined effort of the Western world and the Two-Thirds World that international relations for the good of all humanity can be improved.

Another text to which Dube (2000b:67-80) applies divination is the story of Ruth. Through divining, the two major characters of the book (Ruth and Naomi) is seen as representing two different nations. Dube therefore sees a story of international relations in this text. Ruth and Naomi represent Moab and Judah in her interpretation. The two countries have different fortunes: one (Judah) is struck by famine and the other (Moab) is fertile. However, instead of developing a relationship of interdependence, Judah (Naomi) wants to control Moab (Ruth). Although Moab suffers under Judah's control, Judah suffers

too. It is only when they develop a relationship of liberating interdependence that the relationship can be a healthy one. Dube uses this story to call for healthy international relations. She writes: "Building a relationship of liberating interdependence demands that the lands' interconnection be encouraged – openly built to be fair to both – and recognised as the core of their existence and survival; nations are not islands" (Dube 2001c:194).

### 5.6 Storytelling and social location

Another method that Dube uses for biblical interpretation is the storytelling method. As she states in her introduction to *Other ways of reading*, stories and storytelling are central to African societies (Dube 2001c:3). She therefore advocates for a biblical interpretation which makes use of African tales or one that uses African methods of storytelling. Thus in *Fifty years of bleeding*, Dube (2001c:50-60) gives a storytelling feminist interpretation of Mark 5:24-43. She uses the story of the bleeding woman who spent all her money on physicians who could not cure her to tell the story of Africa's problems from pre-colonial times to this era of HIV/Aids.

Dube uses storytelling together with social location. Social location is the context(s) in which individuals understand, make judgments, value and think (Randolph Tate 2006:340). Such a context can be biological, educational, cultural, ideological or even religious. It is on the basis of social location that Dube strongly argues for storytelling as a method of biblical interpretation in Africa. This is because, as she correctly observes, "all readers interpret the text according to their social experiences" (Dube 2001c:60). In this way she reads the story of the woman with a haemorrhage in the context of an oral African tale of a young girl who is buried by her friends but who sings from her grave to tell her story. Dube takes this young girl to be Africa and tells the story of Africa's dispossession from colonialism to globalisation. She also uses the method to interpret the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), comparing the story of this woman to that of African women and the African land (Dube 2001c:42-65). She compares the Samaritan woman's experience with many husbands to Africa's economic and political crises under foreign and local political powers.

## 5.7 HIV/Aids reading of the Bible

Although Dube has made significant contributions to biblical interpretation in Africa, it is for her work in HIV/Aids and the Bible that she is most known. To give an exhaustive account of her work on HIV/Aids and the Bible would require a separate article or even an entire book. This is because she has not only published a lot on the topic but has also spent three years (2001-2003) as a World Council of Churches Theological Consultant for Ecumenical HIV and Aids Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) for Sub-Saharan Africa, during which time she trained more than 700 theological educators on how to mainstream HIV and Aids in theological education. I will therefore only summarise the main issues that she has dealt with in interpreting the Bible in the era of HIV/Aids. Dube has read the Bible in terms of HIV prevention, treatment, care and destigmatisation. She has also written to address social and cultural factors that tend to promote the spread of HIV: gender inequality, child abuse, poverty, violence, international injustice, age, race and ethnic discrimination.

In the article *Talitha cum! A postcolonial feminist and HIV/Aids reading of Mark 5:21-43* (Dube 2004b:115-140), Dube interprets the biblical text in terms of HIV prevention. She isolates social injustice as the major driving force of HIV and notes that it was social injustice which led the physicians of Jesus's time to take the woman with haemorrhage's money without curing her. In the same way, it is social injustice that denies people access to HIV/Aids drugs; that denies them choices and decisions that will protect them. It is international social injustice that promotes poverty and many other social ills which are the breeding ground for HIV and Aids. In her reading of Mark 5:21-43, Dube calls for communities to put on the spirit of Jesus and to provide healing to the haemorrhaging world: "One must ask how the economic and political policies of their country have led to the bleeding and the death of many nations who need the healing touch of justice. But even more importantly, one must struggle with how they can take the challenging role of calling, *talitha cum!* to the dying and the dead in the age of HIV/AIDS epidemic" (Dube 2004b:138). In order to achieve this, Dube reads the

same story as calling for a women-men partnership in the struggle against the epidemic (Dube 2003:71-83).

In a book that still has to be published, Dube interprets Luke 6:36 as underlining the need for the church to be compassionate: “Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” She emphasises that Jesus gave this as a command, as a must; thus the need to be compassionate is God’s commandment. In the same chapter she examines Matthew 25:31-46, highlighting the need for the church to provide care to the infected and affected. In interpreting this passage, she notes that the criterion that will be used to divide those who have to be saved and those who have to be punished will be compassion. Those who have cared for the ill, the imprisoned, for the thirsty, for the naked, etc will receive eternal life; while those who showed no compassion will receive eternal punishment.

Dube not only addresses HIV/Aids through her interpretation of specific biblical texts but also directs a call to African biblical scholars and academics to mainstream HIV/Aids in biblical studies (Dube 2003a:10-23). She even suggests specific methods for mainstreaming HIV/Aids into biblical studies. Social location, storytelling and the prophetic method are some of the methods she suggests in *HIV/AIDS and the curriculum: Methods of integrating HIV/AIDS in theological programmes* (2003).

## **6 MUSA DUBE AND THE NEW DIRECTION OF AFRICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

There is no doubt that Dube has made a departure from the methods of biblical interpretation she was trained in. Trained in the Western world (United Kingdom and USA), her education was based on historical and literary methods of biblical interpretation. These methods – which emphasise returning to the world of the biblical texts, objective reading, reading out (exegesis) and not reading in (eisegesis) – advocate neutral or disinterested reading. However, Dube is not the first person who departed from these methods. The founding scholars of African biblical scholarship, such as John Mbiti, were the first to make such a departure. What, then, has Dube contributed to African biblical scholarship?

I find Dube's major contribution to biblical studies in Africa to be her social engagement. An assessment of her work shows an attempt to take the Bible back to grass-roots level. Yes, earlier African biblical scholars were involved in inculturation. However, their interest lay mainly in showing how the African world compares to the biblical world. This is not what Dube has done and is doing. Rather, she has noted the way in which the majority of Africans read the Bible and has read it to address the needs of her contemporary society. Thus, her method of biblical interpretation can be described as socially engaged biblical scholarship. This type of scholarship is elaborately defined by Ukpong (2002:21): "(It is) inserted within the dynamics of the ordinary people's committed action and seek to articulate the people's experience of their life in Christ as well as provide insights for reflecting on such experience". Thus socially engaged biblical scholars "... are not mere armchair theoreticians but active pastoral agents who are involved in the life of the people" (Ukpong 2002:22). A look at how Dube departed from traditional biblical scholarship to socially engaged scholarship helps to illuminate this point:

As I went about with business as usual, teaching the Synoptic Gospels from a feminist, narrative, historical or redactional criticism and the like, there came a point that this academic approach began to become artificial and strange even on my tongue. I began to ask myself: why am I talking about historical contexts of Jesus, redactional criticism, narrative and all this stuff and skirting the main issue in this context and the gospels; namely sickness and healing. I began to ask myself a question, which every student also had in mind; namely, if Jesus can heal this much, why can't Jesus heal us of HIV/AIDS in our nation and the world? With the HIV/AIDS death scare, stigma, suffering and fear of dying or contracting a disease, how do you read the Synoptic Gospels? The social setting of illness, fear and discrimination against the sick and orphans demanded a re-reading (Dube 2002a:64-65).

Dube has therefore engaged her biblical scholarship in addressing the needs of society. In doing so, she has brought the interpretation of ordinary readers into academia and vice versa. Unlike traditional

Western biblical scholarship which concentrates on the academia, Dube's reading serves both the academic and the confessional communities. Indeed, some of her writings can be described as liturgical biblical interpretation. This is a new direction in African biblical scholarship.

Related to socially engaged scholarship is Dube's holding of the Bible as a sacred text. Traditional biblical scholarship tends to view the Bible as a purely ancient literary work that has to be subjected to objective critical enquiry like any other literary work, ancient or modern. Although Dube is up in arms against the way in which some biblical writers present the divine message, especially in the way they present women; she still respects the Bible as a sacred book. Her interpretations (as we have seen above) therefore present the liberative message of biblical texts.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The history of Christianity in Africa is incomplete without looking at the use of the Bible. This is because the Bible was central in the introduction of Christianity in Africa; it was central in its expansion and is likely to remain central in the future life of the church. Calls by some theologians to rewrite it (Banana 1993:17-29) have been met with tremendous resistance. For this reason, Musa Dube's contribution to African Christianity is indeed invaluable. This article is a first attempt to look at Dube's contribution to African Christianity through her published theological works. It has looked at her academic life through a review of her publications, specifically her publications in the area of biblical studies. This review has shown that although Dube has built on a foundation that had already been laid by earlier African biblical scholars, her contribution has nevertheless been revolutionary. This is particularly so in the area of bringing academic and non-academic readers together; employing African storytelling techniques in biblical interpretation; challenging colonial and gender discriminatory readings of the Bible; and reading the Bible to address Africa's needs, particularly her number one enemy – HIV/Aids. On a continent where pure academic biblical interpretation (as practiced in the West) is of little or no significance, Musa Dube's socially engaged



biblical scholarship is indeed commendable and, to a large extent, groundbreaking. *A luta continua, Mma Aluta!*

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#### ENDNOTES

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- 1 Christian independency in Africa is often traced back to Kimpa Vita, a Congolese woman Christianised Dona Beatrice, who protested against the Catholic teaching (Martin 1975). Other notable women founders of churches in Africa are Mai Chaza of Guta RaMwari Church in Zimbabwe, Alice Lenshina of Zambia and Ma Nku of St John's Apostolic Faith Mission (Amanze, 1998).
  - 2 Mercy Amba Oduyoye stands out amongst the earliest African women theologians. Other African women who made significant contribution to theology in Africa through their publications include Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike.
  - 3 The three phases Ukpong refers to are those phases when the concern of biblical interpretation creates an encounter between the biblical text and the African context. Otherwise, it is possible to talk of five phases if one includes the phase of allegorisation during the patristic age and the phase of the historical critical method.
  - 4 There are, of course, a few publications on bible translation in Africa. Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the message: The missionary impact on culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) is the most well known.