

Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Volume 3

Article 4

12-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Okoye, James Chukwuma C.S.Sp. (2009) "Voices from the Margins: African Women's Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 3, Article 4.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol3/iss1/4>

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Voices from the Margins: African Women's Hermeneutics

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In this article delivered during the 2008 Annual Meeting in Chicago, Okoye describes several landmarks in African biblical interpretation from the various lenses of race, class, and gender. From the early days of a culturally-sensitive African hermeneutics in the 1960s, to modern popular readings of the Bible, to women's unique readings of the shades of meaning therein, Okoye focus on the intersection points of biblical and cultural interpretation and the ways a marginalized people have found meaning in the Bible.

Luke 12:31 reads as follows: “no; set your hearts on [God’s] kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well” (*New Jerusalem Bible*). Brian Blount chose this text for a youth Bible study, a text that always gives him spiritual upliftment as it promises reward in the end after a disciplined existence of delayed gratification. He was taken aback when the text met with violent resistance from one of the young girls. She was appalled that it counseled leaving everything to God rather than a concerted human effort to transform her

reality of constant deprivation.¹ “Every reading bears the stamp of who reads.”²

Since 1970 a plethora of approaches is being used in biblical interpretation. An emerging factor is the shift away from the translation model (coding—decoding, “what it meant”—“what it means”). Current theories tend to focus on the ongoing dialogue of text and reader. African readings bear the stamp of the African context and culture. Hermeneutics has proven to be a sharp tool for liberation, racial liberation in South Africa under apartheid and cultural and gender liberation for African women in their double struggle with culture and Bible/church.

1. Landmarks in Biblical Interpretation in Africa

In the Conference of Berlin, 1885, the then-European powers took out a map of Africa and carved it up among themselves. Between 1930 and 1950 several nationalistic movements began to dot the map of Africa; the spirit of *négritude* promoted by Senghor³ was in the air. Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) became “independent” in 1956, the first African nation to throw off the British colonial yoke. 1956

¹ Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

² Mary Ann Tolbert, “The Politics and Poetics of Location,” in *Reading From This Place. Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) 305-317, here 314.

³ Leopold Senghor was elected president of Senegal in the 1960s, and retired from office in 1980. Poet as well as politician, Senghor’s concept of ‘negritude’ encompassed the artistic and literary expression of the Black African experience.

also saw the first Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris. Between 1956 and 1975 most African nations regained independence, except Zimbabwe and South Africa. Now began the immense task of retrieving African identity and culture.

The first recent attempt to develop a culturally sensitive hermeneutics in Africa was, to my knowledge, the first Consultation of African Theologians on *Bible and Africa* which met at Ibadan, Nigeria in 1965; it was published as *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*.⁴ The method was mostly that of comparative hermeneutics. Then in 1970 the Black Theology Seminar at Wilgespruit, South Africa was greatly influenced by James Cone and his *Black Theology and Black Power* published the previous year. From this seminar emerged the South African black theology of liberation, one of the forces that brought down the apartheid regime. Political hermeneutics of liberation in South Africa used to be contrasted with African inculturation theology in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, but post-apartheid South Africa is rediscovering culture as a factor in hermeneutics, while sub-Saharan Africa has been developing various forms of liberation hermeneutics.

In 1975 the West African Association of Theological Institutions (WAATI) planned Bible commentaries to look afresh at the Bible from an African perspective and relate biblical interpretation to life situations in Africa. For financial

⁴ Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, eds. *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutherworth Press, 1969).

reasons the project barely got off the ground before dying with the death of the general editor, Fashole-Luke, in 1991. The next significant contribution to hermeneutics in Africa was the Kairos Document, *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Situation in South Africa*, 1985.⁵ The theologians who worked on this document challenged the type of hermeneutics that created apartheid, which dispossessed black people of their land and gave the better part of it to God's "chosen people," the white Boers. The Institute for the Study of the Bible, Natal was founded in 1990 and took on "reading with" ordinary readers as a favored project. A major landmark was the founding in 1989 of the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana, henceforth The Circle. The Circle, barely ten of whose members are trained biblical academicians, has nevertheless been an important voice for African hermeneutics in general and African women's hermeneutics in particular. Its first hermeneutical input was, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*.⁶ Ever since 1995 Mugambi has been advocating paradigms for political and social reconstruction based, not on Exodus but on the reconstruction program of Ezra-Nehemiah.⁷ The University of Stellenbosch, South Africa began a database of the *Bible in Africa* in 1999; it currently has over 2000 entries. Some of this database appeared in *The Bible in Africa:*

⁵ Second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁶ (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2001).

⁷ Jesse Kanyua Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 1995); *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*. (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

Transactions, Trajectories and Trends, edited by Musa Dube and Gerald West.⁸ This 800-page work contains almost 200 pages of bibliography of biblical interpretation in Africa and by Africans. Recently the one-volume, 1585 pages, *Africa Bible Commentary*⁹ by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa (AEA) appeared. The seventy contributors were all African scholars and pastors: Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Church of Christ, Pentecostals, ECWA,¹⁰ AIC's, but naturally no Catholics. The policy states that the commentary should be African in authorship and content, and include issues affecting the continent. It should use African thought forms and practical applications that suit the African context. The contributors should be as diverse as the continent, including men and women, the various denominations and languages. They are also to work from the Hebrew and Greek originals and from translations into their mother tongue.

2. Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa

In the days of mission, “the Bible was very often the first and the only literature available to people in their own language.”¹¹ Some of the older folk can still read nothing else but the Bible in the vernacular. Exegesis in the African cultural background remains predominantly oral, and is done

⁸ (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000).

⁹ Tokunboh Adeyemo, general editor (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

¹⁰ Evangelical Church of West Africa.

¹¹ Wynnand Amewowo, “Experiences and Discoveries with the Bible in West Africa.” *Mission Studies* 3/1 (1986): 12-24, here 14.

principally through sermons and drama. A sermon may use various artifices to interpret the text: e.g., repetition of verses with emphasis, songs, proverbs, stories either from the Bible or from culture and life. Drama generally interprets the text in the African perspective (see below).

Field studies on popular uses and interpretations of the Bible show that many regard the Bible as literally Word of God. In his research Justin Ukpong found that ordinary readers of the Bible have a dogmatic and reverential stance towards it. They do not approach it with a questioning mind, rather it serves for prayer and devotion and as norm for morality. He writes:

They are interested neither in the literary analysis of the biblical texts nor in the history behind the text. They are interested in the theological message in the text and how that message might be useful to their lives.¹²

Spiritual churches use the Bible as well for healing and exorcism, and, partly for this reason, they are gaining many converts from the mainline churches. For them the Bible has a spiritual and universal meaning and is not subject to cultural interpretation.¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, 588.

¹³ Justin Ukpong, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), 588.

Some accord the Bible magical powers, not unlike Muslim attitudes to the Quran.

It is used to ward off spirits, witches and sorcerers; it is placed under the pillow at night to ensure God's protection against the devil, put in handbags and cars when traveling to ensure a safe journey, and used in swearing to bring God's wrath upon the culprits.¹⁴

An exegete¹⁵ recounts how his father wrapped the Bible in white cloth and kept it under lock! It came out ceremonially for the swearing of oaths; hence it functioned like the *ofò* in Igbo traditional religion. The Cherubim and Seraphim and the Celestial Church of Christ have devised ritual uses of the Psalms¹⁶ for protection, welfare and the fight against enemy forces. Such rituals are not unlike the use of traditional talismans. For example, Ps 109 is potent against enemies when recited in the middle of the night or at 1 p.m. in an open field, between three candles placed north, east and west, and read with the name of El, the name of the enemy, and the name of his/her mother in mind.

¹⁴ Ukpong, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa," 587.

¹⁵ Ernest Ezeogu, "Bible and Culture in African Christianity," *IRM* 87 (1998): 25-38, here 25.

¹⁶ David Tuesday Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics," in *Vernacular Hermeneutic*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 66-90, here 75.

Ukpong also notes that people generally read the Bible for individual benefit and that there was:

lack of societal transformation as a motive for reading the bible ... The bible is not read from the perspective of political or economic commitment.¹⁷

Several scholars are responding to this situation with programs of “reading with” orally educated folk. This practice, as far as I know, began around 1990 with Gerald O. West and the Institute for the Study of the Bible, University of Natal. His method has four elements: read from the perspective of the poor and marginalized, “read with,” not listen to or speak for, relate the Bible to social transformation, and read the Bible critically.¹⁸ Ukpong¹⁹ and other African scholars²⁰ have also developed methods of “reading with.” The goals and approaches are not always the same. For example, Musa Dube does not insist on critical apparatus nor

¹⁷ Ukpong, “Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa,” 591.

¹⁸ Gerald O. West, “Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated,” *Semeia* 73 (1996): 21-41, here 28. A workshop by West on Mark 5:21—6:1 is reported in his “Constructing Critical and Contextual Readings with Ordinary Readers,” *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 92 (1997): 60-69. Another on Mark 10:17-22 is reported in *Neotestamentica* 27 (1993): 165-180.

¹⁹ Getui, Mary, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong, “Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, ed. Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2001): 188-212: on Matt 20:1-16.

²⁰ Musimbi Kanyoro’s work with Bware women (Kenya) on the book of Ruth will be reported later. See also Apheus Masoga, “Redefining Power: Reading the Bible in Africa from the Peripheral and Central Positions,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed. Justin Ukpong, Musa Dube, Gerald West, et al. (Atlanta: SBL, 2001) 95-109: on John 5:1-10. Masoga advocates what he calls “conversational hermeneutic.”

does she consciously goad readers towards social transformation; she only facilitates the process of interpretation with questions and merely records the people's own readings and approaches. I shall now examine two readings of the book of Ruth.

3. Hermeneutics of Resonance: Bware Women (Kenya) on Ruth

Musimbi Kanyoro held a three-day "theater of biblical hermeneutics" (as the women themselves called it) on the book of Ruth with 150 rural women of Bware village in Western Kenya.²¹ They were to interpret the book through dramatization. The women were divided into five groups. The first would read the whole book and retell it in a story using their own words. The second group would present their interpretation of Naomi; the third would interpret Ruth, the fourth, Orpah. The fifth would retell the story of Ruth and Naomi back in Bethlehem after their return. After this facilitation Kanyoro left the women alone to interpret the story as they pleased. Here are salient features of their interpretation.

Mahlon and Chilion were punished with death because the family neglected their own customs for foreign ones. It may also be because they emigrated secretly leaving other kith and kin to suffer and someone in the family of Elimelech pronounced a curse against them. Perhaps they did not return

²¹ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Ancient Palestine and the Contemporary World." *RevExp* 94 (1997): 363-378.

occasionally to pay homage to the dead and now suffered their curse. Ruth was the obedient and faithful daughter-in-law; her husband was a violent man who was mostly absent, and when present often beat her. Naomi was Ruth's refuge and consolation, so the two became very close friends. The two decided to return to Bethlehem maybe to offer sacrifice and ask the elders to cleanse the family. Boaz was rich and polygamous and that was why Ruth married him; he tricked the poorer man who should inherit Ruth.

Orpah was acted by a high school teacher who wore fashionable clothes. Split between cultural demands and a life on her own, she opted for the latter. While the other women poured scorn on her for being an educated rebel she stood her ground, but left alone on the stage she began to be confused and to cry saying, "could they be right? Should I have gone to Bethlehem with Ruth and my mother-in-law Naomi? Should I have gone to my parents?"²² Then she ran off the stage. She later married a man of Moab and had children, but complained that "my story does not appear in the Bible, because Naomi never came back to visit me."

When asked what the story was about the women gave various answers. It was about the problems of refugees and the consequences of abandoning one's own customs. It was also about the problems of widows who have to fend for themselves. It was about inter-tribal marriages and accepting other tribes, about "wife-inheritance" (their term for biblical levirate marriage) and having good and responsible mothers-

²² *Ibid.*, 374

in-law. They debated, and agreed to differ, about a wife's right to joint ownership of land and property. Some condemned polygamy, others justified it as part of culture.

A short reflection on the exegesis follows. The African conceptual framework underlies the hermeneutics above: themes of curse and witchcraft, the importance of adhering to tradition, and life as life in community. The women simply interpreted the text in terms of its resonance in their own culture, never asking the expert what the text meant. Hence, I characterize their hermeneutics as "*hermeneutics of resonance*." Their only concern was lest the church penalize them for being critical of any biblical character or adducing witchcraft as explanation for the many deaths, or for using cultural songs to present their interpretations. We can see that their church was loath to integrate faith and culture. But the women preserved the African concept of the unity of life whereby sacred and profane form one reality.

4. Divination Hermeneutics: Musa Dube on the Book of Ruth

The Bware women's critique of culture and Bible was inchoative; Musa Dube foregrounds such critique. She brings what she calls "divination hermeneutics"²³ to the study of this book. A divination session involves three parties: the divine powers, the diviner and the consulting reader. Enabled by the spirit, the diviner asks questions and creates patterns; the

²³ Musa Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 179-195.

consulting reader must confirm or deny that the patterns represent what he/she knows about his/her life and relationships. He/she is charged with discerning and embracing what makes for the life of the community within which he/she also finds life. African Initiative Churches in Botswana use the Bible to diagnose the relationships of the consulting reader. Not all diviners are diviner-healers: the diviner-healer's goal is to "assess all existing social relations and [encourage] healthy relations."²⁴ For Dube, "the book [of Ruth], in other words, divines its readers, confirming or confronting their experiences and offering alternatives."²⁵ She then examines what the story tells us of the relationships of Israel and Moab, and what light this may throw on international relations. Here are some of her conclusions.

Ruth represents Moab, Naomi Judah; the relationships of the two are unhealthy. Judah is land of divine blessing, Moab land of divine absence, of famine, infertility and death. Married to a young man of Moab Ruth remained childless, but married to an old man in Judah she immediately had a child. Naomi answers Ruth's speech of belonging with silence. Dube agrees with Amy-Jill Levine²⁶ that Naomi does not commit herself to Ruth, and with Athalya Brenner²⁷ that Ruth's pledge to Naomi is not the mutual love of friends but akin to "a slave's love for his master in Exod 21:2-6." She clings to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, "Ruth," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ring (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 80.

²⁷ Athalya Brenner, ed. *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 159.

Naomi only to become property bought and used to perpetuate the line of Mahlon—no relationship of equals. The son is born to Naomi, not to Ruth or both of them. “Ruth is acknowledged for serving the interests of Naomi/Judah.” The reader is instructed to avoid Moab or embrace it at the cost of disaster and death. Judah refuses to recognize the divine powers at work in Moab. It is “unwilling to contribute equally to Moab. Judah rejects Moab’s right to benefit equally from their relationship.”²⁸ This is a paradigm of what is happening in our “globalized” world. But the health of our world calls for a “relationship of liberating interdependence.” Dube concludes that

creating and maintaining healthy relations is indispensable medication in healing our world, and in proclaiming life and success within and outside the nations.²⁹

5. African Women's Hermeneutics

We see that African women use a variety of methods. Among members of the Circle, however, there are shared convictions.³⁰ The focus is on “doing theology from women’s

²⁸ Dube, “Divining Ruth,” 194.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁰ In what follows, I rely mainly on the following: Musa Dube, “Introduction,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2001), 1-19; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, (New York:

perspective.”³¹ American and European feminists focus on sex and gender, African American womanists and Latina *mujeristas* add concerns of race and class, while

African women’s hermeneutics embraces issues of sex, race, class and adds culture in a search for wholeness for the woman herself and for humanity.³²

The quest is for the fullness of life, of men and women and of the cosmos itself. Teresa Okure of Nigeria asserts that what is at stake in women’s struggle against patriarchy is nothing short of “humanity’s own revolution.”³³

A double hermeneutics is advocated: biblical hermeneutics in dialogue with cultural hermeneutics.³⁴ No culture is perfect and the Bible contains unwelcome vestiges of ancient culture. Culture and Bible have been tools for the oppression and domination of women. Cultural hermeneutics critiques both and identifies elements that are life-affirming.³⁵ Biblical exegesis merges with theology in the one quest for “the full liberation of women and men in, by, and through

Crossroads, 1993), 76-85; idem, “Invitation to African Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 42-67.

³¹ Okure, “Invitation to African Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns,” 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 49

³³ *Ibid.*, 42

³⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-14.

Christ.”³⁶ These women “intertwine theology, ethics and spirituality ... [moving] to commitment, advocacy and a transforming praxis.”³⁷ Historical theology (patristics, medieval dogmatics, the Reformation ...) is given no significant role.³⁸ Exegesis and theology start from reflection on stories from the Bible, Africa's history and culture and women's experiences of social change.³⁹ Dube employs

storytelling as a feminist theory of analysis and as a method of rewriting the patriarchal silences about women's lives in the biblical texts and African history.⁴⁰

African women read with the “sisterhood,” which embraces Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and followers of African Traditional Religion. Sugirtharajah terms such reading “inter-faith hermeneutics.”⁴¹ While some accord authority to the Bible, for Dube and others authority belongs to what promotes life and wholeness for women and the community, no preference being given *prima facie* to the biblical canon. The Bible is read with the canons of African oral cultures and other religious canons.⁴² Some invoke as canons the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the liberative Constitutions, like the new constitution of South Africa. The

³⁶ Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” 83.

³⁷ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 16.

³⁸ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dube, “Introduction,” *Other Ways of Reading*, 5.

⁴¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Inter-faith Hermeneutics: An Example and Some Implications,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Revised edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 306-318.

⁴² Dube, “Introduction,” *Other Ways of Reading*, 14.

reader must never give up the task of discernment for what is life-giving and must read for healing, knowing that “all diviner-readers are not healer-diviners.”⁴³

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17

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