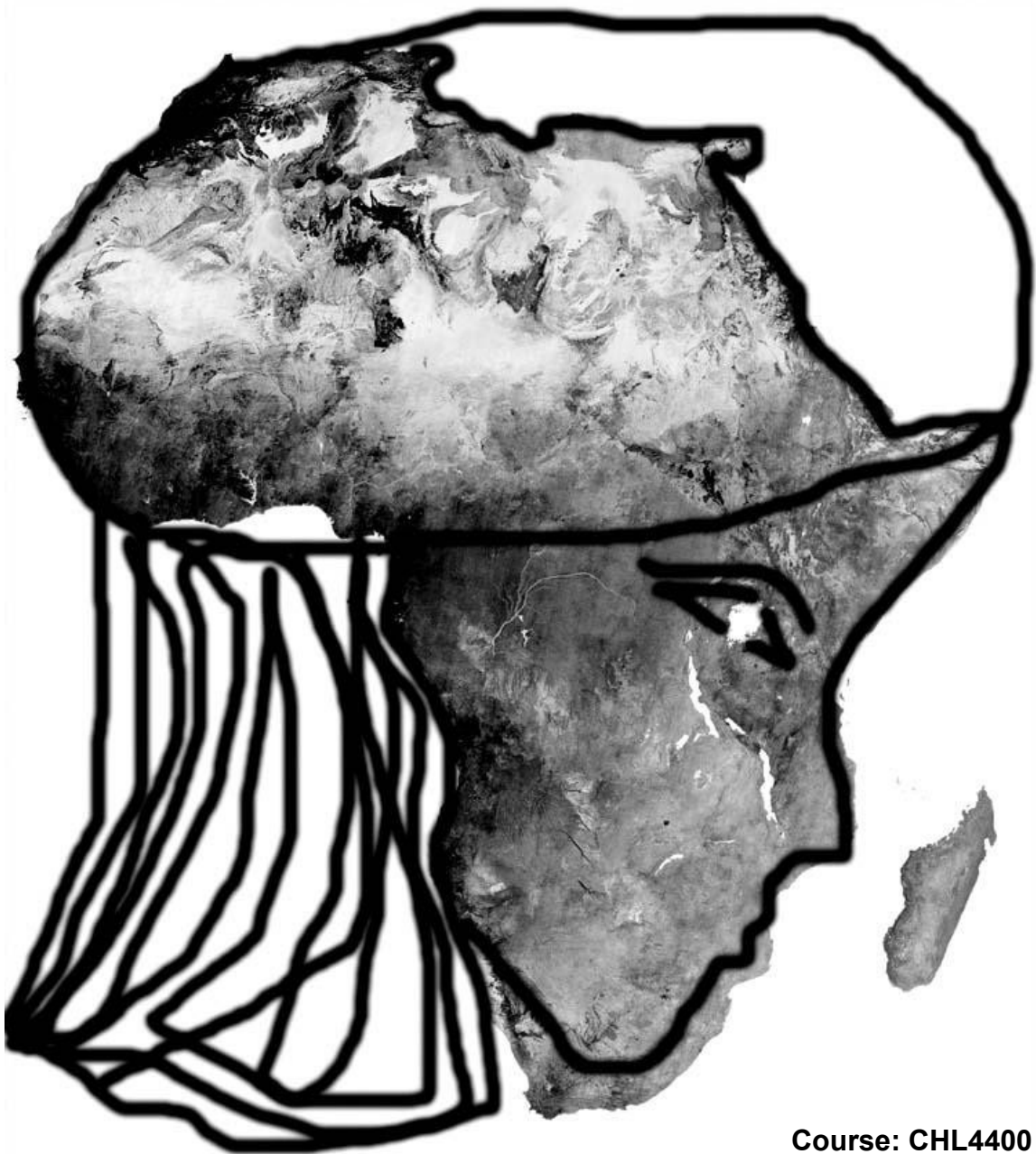


African Hermeneutics: The Current State

**By
Louis Krog**



**Course: CHL4400
South African Theological Seminary
November 2005**

~Table of Contents~

Chapter 1- Introduction & Research Outline

1.1 Background	5
1.2 Objectives and Research Questions	6
1.3 Purpose	6
1.4 Methodology	7
1.5 Value of this research	7
1.6 Overview	7

Chapter 2 – Biographic summary of the key Contributors and a Literature Survey

2.1 Key Contributors and Works	
2.1.1 Dr. Grant LeMarquand	10
2.1.2 Prof. Gerald West	12
2.1.3 Dr. John Mbiti	13
2.1.4 Prof. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza	14
2.1.5 Mercy Amba Oduyoye	16

Chapter 3 - The Current State of Hermeneutics in Africa

The Modern Development of Biblical Studies	18
in Africa and its Adjoining Influence on African Hermeneutical Method	

A Survey of Contemporary Exegetical Methods Employed in Africa

3.1 Liberation Hermeneutic	22
3.1.1 Feminist Hermeneutic	26
3.1.2 Deliverance Hermeneutic	31
3.1.3 Black Theology	32
3.2 White South African Hermeneutics	33
3.3 Missiological Hermeneutics	35
3.4 Neo-traditional Hermeneutics	37

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

39

Bibliography

42

- **Chapter 1 – Introduction and Research Outline**

1.1 Background

Biblical studies in Africa is comparatively a very new enterprise only dating back to the 1960's (Onwu 1984-5). The status quo of colonialism and 'western' theology along with the changing face of African politics saw the need to break away from what was labelled as 'the white man's Christianity'. This theology was not only alien to Africa, but also oppressive: "When 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 we opened our eyes, the white man had the land and we had the Bible" (Mofokeng 1988:34). Africa longed for an afrocentric theology that was indigenous in content and expression. Consequently, the 1966 Consultation of African Theologians conference was held in Ibadan, Nigeria, to discuss the way forward for creating such a exclusively African Christianity (Onwu 1984-5:36).

The task of formulating a true *Theologica Africana* was by no means an easy feat. A strictly inculturated theology would require a true African interpretation of Scripture, but since most of Africa's theologians then had received their theological education in western seminaries and universities, due to the lack of necessary academic infrastructures in Africa, constructing a framework for such an interpretation proved a challenge at first (Mbiti 1986:46). To create such an effective framework, these theologians had to rid themselves of 'western' ideologies, thought and criticism. They had to re-educate and inculturate themselves with the needs of the people, the land and the future. This was a very crucial phase in the developmental process of African theology because the assessments made then would literally redefine the face of African scholarship for good.

This assessment addressed three specific concerns affecting the lives of people and the future of Christianity in Africa: oppression, mission and politics. From these the main branches of hermeneutics in Africa would develop: liberation hermeneutics, mission for an African context and the value, authenticity and contribution of non-African scholars vs. neo-traditionalism in African hermeneutics (West n.d.).

This then brings us up to the current state of hermeneutics in Africa. On the whole, African hermeneutics has come along way in the last 45 years. Mbiti (1978:73) records that in the twenty years since the 1966 conference, more than 300 books and articles were published. This assessment might be 27 years out of date, but it does show that African theologians took the task of reshaping theology in Africa to heart, and it shows today. The development of African theology and hermeneutics has established itself, over the last 40 years, as a credible field of study and has made the Bible accessible to Africa.

1.2 Objectives & Research Questions

The objective of this thesis is to assess the current state of hermeneutics in Africa by way of a preliminary survey of exegetical methodologies employed by African scholars and interpreters over the past 40 years, i.e.: Who are the key contributors to this field of study? Why and how did African Biblical studies develop over the past 45 years? What is the contemporary result of this development in African Biblical studies?

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is both academic and personal. *Academic* – Primarily this is a preliminary survey that will surface problem areas associated with African theology requiring more detailed research/critique in further post-graduate studies in the field of African hermeneutics. To achieve further studies in this field of research, a sufficient knowledge of contemporary schools of thought in African Biblical studies is required for informed conclusions and contributions.

Personal – In addition to the primary purpose of this thesis, it will also aid me personally in my understanding of contextualised theology and the influence culture exerts on theology to eventually compile a contextually effective teaching programme for African preachers and leaders.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology can be divided into three stages: (1) A Literature Survey, (2) A Developmental Assessment of African Biblical studies and (3) A Survey of Contemporary Methods Employed by Africa for Interpreting the Bible.

The first stage (Chapter 2) - will be a brief literary survey of authors who are considered to be key contributors in the field of African hermeneutics. This survey will investigate (1) the views of these authors, (2) include a review of relevant publications by them and (3) a brief discussion on their non-literary contribution(s) to the development of Biblical interpretation in Africa.

The second stage (Chapter 3) - will give an introduction to the development of biblical hermeneutics in Africa. This will take the form of a brief summary highlighting the major developments in African Hermeneutics to date. The purpose of this stage is (1) to discuss the foundations of the various methodologies and (2) it will illustrate the parameters of my survey in chapter 4.

The third stage (Chapter 4) - will constitute the main section of this thesis, the survey of contemporary hermeneutics in Africa. In this section I will give attention to (1) the different methodologies, (2) the relationship and interaction that exist between them and (3) the significance of this interaction.

1.5 Value of this Research

African theology, like Africa itself, is very complex and diverse. Much has been written and publicised on matters relating to African Biblical studies, especially during the early 1960's to late 1970's (Onwu 1978:73). There are however many Bible scholars in Africa (for example see Mbiti 1986:177 & West 2000:46) who have expressed a need for more research to be done on many aspects of African theology, especially hermeneutics in Africa.

The value of this work might not immediately affect such further research and contribution, but will be formative in future research projects in specifically the hermeneutical process in African.

1.6 Overview

In chapter 2, I will profile the key academic contributors to the exegetical dialogue in African hermeneutics. Prof. West has written extensively on

liberation hermeneutics in Africa, with specific interest in the 'Black Theology' movement in South Africa. Prof. LeMarquand has conducted many surveys on exegesis in Africa; his phenomenal work *A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa* (2000) and his work on a missiological context for Africa has all contributed greatly to the development of Biblical studies in Africa. Dr. Mbiti, the father of African theology and the great campaigner for an indigenous African theology has written much on the validity of neo-traditionalism. Prof. Fiorenza's 'reconstructionist' method has been the foundation and inspiration for almost all of Africa's feminist exegetes. Finally, Mercy Oduyoye's anthropological approach to promote feminism in Africa has earned her a place as a key contributor to the development of feminism and feminist exegesis in Africa.

The actual survey will be undertaken in chapter 3. This chapter will discuss, with some detail, the variety of interpretative methods of Scripture in Africa. This is divided into 5 sub-sections, (1) an introduction to Development of Biblical Studies in Africa, (2) general comments on current state of Liberation Hermeneutics, (3) White South African Hermeneutics, (4) Missiological Hermeneutics and (5) Neo-traditional Hermeneutics.

The first section, will briefly discuss the development process of theological scholarship in Africa including: the impact of colonialism and the overall framework through which the Bible is interpreted in Africa, i.e. Afrocentricism. I will assess the interface of all these models and also explore how the culture, experience and motivations of the interpreter affect the exegetical process. The second section will explore the general state of liberation hermeneutics in contemporary Africa i.e., the answers and the solace people find in Scripture for the oppression and poverty they face daily, and have faced historically, in Africa. This section will also investigate the different manifestations of liberation theology: feminism, missiology and demonology. In the third section will discuss the contribution of white scholarship in Africa. This, specifically in South Africa, has become an issue of serious debate and dialogue: Can, and on what grounds, white South African scholars be counted as African? The change from missionary dependence toward (political) independence called for a change in the way Africans approach mission in their continent. This section

(4) will investigate how the church in Africa found a model for mission from Scripture and effective for Africa, with specific reference to Acts. The final section (5) will investigate the oldest method of interpretation one done by 'ordinary' readers. The vast majority of people in Africa are illiterate and theologically uneducated. The sharp rise in African scholarship overshadowed this method of interpretation, because it lacked formal scholarship. Recently, however, due recognition has been given to this method, hence the name neo-traditional. This section will, therefore, investigate the dynamics of this method.

- **Chapter 2 – Biographic summary of the key Contributors and a Literature Survey**

A contemporary survey of this nature must first of all begin with an analysis of relevant literature by the key authors. The reason being, that these key contributors are the people who have shaped, and continue to do so, the discipline into what is today, through publications, insights and other non-literary contributions. A correct survey of exegetical method in Africa would therefore require an understanding of their work, so to gain a correct and accurate understanding of contemporary schools of thought. Contributors to the development and shape of hermeneutics in Africa are by no means limited to the specific individuals profiled in this survey. There are many other scholars and lay readers who have brought their say to the theological dialogue. However, because African scholarship is a fairly new phenomenon¹, very few authors, apart from the mentioned, have made a significant contribution to the development and current state of African theological and hermeneutical discourse.

Although the primary focus of this chapter is a literary profile, due to stipulations, it would not be possible for me to mention all works by the profiled authors. I will therefore limit my survey to books I have consulted for research purposes or other relevant publications relating specifically to hermeneutical method in Africa.

2.1 Key Contributors and Works

2.1.1 Dr. Grant LeMarquand

Dr. LeMarquand, associate professor of Biblical studies and mission at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, Ambridge, can certainly be counted as a key contributor in African hermeneutics. He taught systematic theology in Kenya as a missionary for many years, his Th. D. dissertation discussed the interpretive dissimilarities in African and Western hermeneutics² and he has had a lifelong

¹ General consensus indicates that African Scholarship can mark its origin from about the 1960's onwards. See 'Introduction to Exegetical Methodologies in Africa: History and Development of African Scholarship' in this thesis.

² An Issue of Relevance: A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman (Mk 5: 25-34; Mt 9:20-22; Lk 8:43-48) in North Atlantic and African Contexts.

love and academic commitment to matters relating to theology in Africa. His commitment to the exegetical dialogue in Africa is unquestionably clear from his publications. His phenomenal work, *A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa*, is a comprehensive bibliographical collection on articles, studies and other academic literature (published and unpublished) related to the interpretation and use of the Bible in Africa (2000). It covers a staggering 161 pages. This bibliography is by far the most comprehensive ever published and is certainly an invaluable tool for anybody conducting research on African Biblical Studies. He has also published several surveys on the current state of Biblical exegesis in Africa. In the first of these, *New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa*, Dr. LeMarquand argues that there is no discontinuity between the New Testament and the Old Testament with reference to its homiletical and private use in Africa (2000:72-102). He made his observation amidst great debate in academic circles regarding the use (and usefulness) of the Bible in Africa. Many scholars felt, and still do, that the Old Testament is at an advantage in Africa because of its socio-cultural similarities with modern Africa. In light of this debate, Dr. LeMarquand's empirical conclusions gave much needed insight and direction on the necessary way forward. In the second, *And the rulers of the nations shall bring their treasures into it: A Survey of Biblical Exegesis in Africa*, Dr. LeMarquand presents a systematic survey of the different exegetical methods employed by African readers (1999). In his paper he calls for a re-evaluation of hermeneutical methodology in Africa; one that brings into consideration the phenomenon of neo-traditionalism in interpretation and awareness that theology in Africa face obstacles that need to be dealt with in context.

His lecture, delivered at the 1998 African Christianity: Past Present and Future conference held in Toronto Canada, entitled *Acts 19: A Neglected Model of Mission in African Exegesis?* is similarly held as a significant contribution to the exegetical dialogue, specifically because it deals with an aspect of African hermeneutics (missiology) that calls for much more investigation (unpublished)³. In this paper, Dr. LeMarquand drew a comparison between the approach to mission in African ecclesiology and that of the early church in Acts 19. Dr. LeMarquand's thesis was that although the Acts 19 church was unfamiliar with

³ See Mbiti 1986:177

mission, she was able to learn and effectively adapt her approach; infant stages in African missiology can therefore learn much from the Acts 19 adaptation. In line with Dr. LeMarquand's previous works, this paper contains a wealth of bibliographical references on works relating to missiology in Africa. As already mentioned, his doctoral thesis, examining the exegetical dissimilarities of Africa and the north Atlantic, was also very helpful in contributing to the development of African hermeneutics, especially in contextual exegetical praxis.

2.1.2 Prof. Gerald West

Prof. Gerald West, Professor of theology at University of Natal, is by far the most celebrated author in African liberation hermeneutics. As a 'socially engaged' scholar, a certain level of respect and sympathy for the oppressed, marginalised and the 'ordinary person' can be found at the heart of his work (West 1991:76). This is, perhaps, the result of much contemplation on the meaning of his direction in scholarship: "At the heart of liberation hermeneutics lies the interface between socially engaged readers and the lives of 'ordinary' marginalised communities" (1999:12). In his article *On the Eve of an African Biblical Studies: Trajectories and Trends*, for example, Prof. West presents a summarised thesis on challenges facing black people in South Africa, i.e. how they perceive and use the Bible in a new South Africa (1997). He presents a much deeper discussion on the neo-traditionalism in African hermeneutics in *Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa* (West n.d.) and *The Interface between Trained Readers and Ordinary Readers in Liberation Hermeneutics - a Case Study: Mark 10:17-22* (1993). Prof. West observed that the post-1994 political scene in South Africa completed the restoration of Africa and this had a positive effect on the recognition of ordinary readers conjoining with Africa academia (West n.d.:5).

His contribution to liberation hermeneutics, however, is not exclusively limited to Black Theology. He has also added his voice on the feminist dialogue in Africa. In *Silenced Women Speak: Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics*, in the definitive volume on African feminism *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, Prof. West surveyed the differing methods in feminist

interpretation (West 1991:76-90). His observation led him to conclude that despite the unity in plight, there is much diversity in method in feminist hermeneutics. In this survey, Prof. West identified two overriding interpretative methods he referred to as either reading 'behind' or 'in front' the text (1991:79). In the former, he observed that some women readers, especially in Africa “read the text in light of historical and social reconstruction” i.e. they seek to find the message of the text through a process of reconstructing the socio-cultural setting of the text, whereas the latter group, he observed, employed a more ‘authorial intent’ approach to Biblical exegesis, so not avoiding the ‘difficult’ passages (Ibid.).

A survey of Prof. West’s contribution to African hermeneutical dialogue will not be justified without mentioning *The Bible in Africa* (Dube & West 2000). It is the most comprehensive volume of articles that focus exclusively on the Bible in Africa, i.e. its contextual interpretation and praxis. His contributory article *Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch*, provide a good discussion on Black Theology in South Africa; investigating the Scriptural basis of this theology and the contribution it has made to African interpretation as a whole (2000: 29-53). He concludes that the Black Theology movement in South Africa have actually been very influential in shaping liberation theology for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

The limitations of this thesis does not allow for a more detailed discussion on Prof. West’s contribution, however, little justice will be done to him if the following two books are neglected in this profile⁴: *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (1991⁵) and *Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical reading of the Bible* (1990).

2.1.3 Dr. John Mbiti

Dr. Mbiti, the father of African theology, certainly deserves a place in a profile of most influential contributors to Biblical theology in Africa. Born in Kenya, his academic career has taken him from lecturing at University of Uganda to Geneva, Zurich, Harvard and Princeton Theological Seminary. He attained his

⁴ Reference will be made to them in Chapter 4.

⁵ Revised in 1995

Doctorate from Cambridge and has also worked as professor and director of the Ecumenical Institute with the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

If one aspect of Dr. Mbiti's academic contribution could be highlighted, it must be his work towards an indigenous theology for Africa, particularly in neo-traditionalism and missiology.

In his greatest work *The Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Dr. Mbiti wrote: "there are many theologians who, though not necessarily experts in biblical scholarship, are basing their theological reflection and writings on the Bible, and it is from them that I make a survey of their use of the Bible in the task of theologising" (Mbiti 1986:46). According to Dr. Mbiti, three types of theology exist: written, oral and symbolic (Ibid). As far as his assessment of these are concerned, written theology is largely limited to the west, whereas oral and symbolic theology, are inherent of third-world theology. There is no interface amongst these, according to Dr. Mbiti, thus leaving a clear line of separation between western theological method and African theological method. With such theological foci, a framework of criticism of white scholarship in African theology is almost unavoidable. Referring to questions about biblical studies in Africa, Dr. Mbiti writes: "There are few indications to the answers to these questions, but these questions come only from overseas scholars and not from African theologians" (Mbiti 1986:52).

With regards to an afrocentric missiology, Dr. Mbiti hopes for much more work to be done (*cf.* Mbiti 1986:177). He understood the significance of Africans evangelising Africans with an 'African' Gospel, especially in light of the political and social reconstructions of the 1960's on the African continent. These thoughts on African missiology were penned down in his book *The Crisis of Mission in Africa*⁶ (1971).

2.1.4 Prof. Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza

Prof. Fiorenza, Professor of Divinity at Harvard, has been hailed the "feminist theologian's feminist theologian" (*In Memory of Her*:2003). Her work has literally redefined modern theological feminism.

⁶ Out of Print

Prior to Prof. Fiorenza's work, the only significant work published on feminist exegetical method was *The Woman's Bible*, by Elizabeth Candy Stanton in the 1880's. However, its lack of academic integrity called for new approaches to feminist exegetical methods; which would be found in Prof. Fiorenza's "ground breaking" reconstructionist method (Sampson 1991:21). Her proposal was a reconstruction or reinterpretation of the position of women in the ministry of Jesus and in the early church (Ibid). Her method became the forerunner in interpreting Jesus as the 'father' of feminist justice; "this revolutionary praxis was actually realised and lived by Jesus and the Christian community" (Fiorenza 1998: 114). This approach would find favour with many feminists, as one can easily argue for a pro-feminist Christology and for the inclusiveness of woman (i.e. Mary, Pricilla etc.) in the early church as equal disciples (cf. Fiorenza 1998:114-117). Her book, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, is a complete expose of her proposed reconstructionist hermeneutical method (1998). This work has become very significant in theological feminism and is generally regarded as the 'bible' of feminist exegesis. Another work by Prof. Fiorenza: *Searching the Scriptures Vol. 1: A Feminist Introduction (1994)* is equally held as a significant contribution to feminist hermeneutical dialogue and has proven to be very influential for woman interpreters in Africa⁷. Two relevant articles in this volume, which will be discussed later in this thesis, are *Feminist Interpretation in Africa* by Teresa Okure and *Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church* by Katie Cannon (1994: 76-85, 326-337).

Profiling Prof. Fiorenza in a survey on African exegesis might seem unusual since her direct contribution has been rather minimal. However, "the work of Prof. Fiorenza is by far the most influential to Africa's feminists" (Cochrane 1991:21). African feminism is a very recent phenomenon and has therefore sought much needed inspiration and guidance from established western feminist ideology. Again, Prof. Fiorenza came to the rescue. The influence of her work on African feminist philosophy is far too complex to outline here, but, to get an idea of the extent of her influence in Africa, one would not have to look

⁷ Almost every discussion on African feminist hermeneutics cites this work either in their bibliography or recommended reading.

too far. In *Women Hold Up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, for example, no less than three articles have either been dedicated to her work or has made mention of her work (1991). This might seem an insignificant observation, but if one come to realise that the aforementioned volume is the definitive work on African feminism, which it is, then the significance and relevance becomes much clearer.

2.1.5 Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, M.A., is the Elisabeth Fiorenza of Africa, the 'lynch pin' of African feminism. In many ways, her work is pioneering and it continues to be as her influence of feminism in Africa is explored and applied. For example, three of Mercy Oduyoye's books are prescribed as textbooks by Maryknoll Institute of African Studies for their *African Feminist/Womanist Theology; A Source for African Christian Theology* course⁸. Her reputation in Africa cannot be better illustrated by *The Circle of Concerned African Woman Theologians*⁹, initiated by her in 1989. Her vision is to contribute to the promotion of feminism in Africa by undertaking and publishing academic research that will promote the role and contribution of woman in African society. Her reputation is felt much further a field than just the African continent. She has enjoyed a lecturing position at Harvard Divinity School and her books are prescribed textbooks at several western universities including: Brandeis University, Cambridge and Oxford, to name a few.

Despite her international reputation, it is interesting to note that her entire repertoire of published work focus exclusively on social justice and gender issues in Africa. Her approach, although influenced by Prof. Fiorenza's work, comes across as much more anthropological than theological. In an article on gender equality she wrote: "We to have a problem, not one that has been created by the arrival of Islam and Christianity, but is an integral part of our African Worldview" (Sampson 1991:58). It is her opinion that the problem of oppression of woman (physically, morally and academically) is predominantly an inherent problem with African culture. Unlike all other liberation theologians in Africa, Oduyoye appreciates the contribution of other faiths in the promotion

⁸ <http://www.mias.edu/course05.htm>

⁹ <http://www.thecirclecawt.org>

of feminism; “The women of the Circle are practitioners of African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and maybe others too. We do not ask for religious affiliations in the Circle, only that one should consciously live by a belief in God” (Oduyoye n.d.). Promotion of theological feminism is, seemingly, not an aspect of Oduyoye’s agenda thus making Christian absolutism not an option if a universal solution to female oppression is to be found. In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, for example, several contributing articles are from secular beliefs (Islam and Animism). The book is a call for the community to see women, not as merely biological beings who nurse and care for the family, but as people who fulfil important roles in society. This plea is realised by tracing and discussing the roles and contribution of women in African culture and in the Bible.

Two other books by Oduyoye worth mentioning are *Daughters of Anoma: African Women and Patriarchy* (1996) and *Beads and strands: Reflections of an African woman on Christianity in Africa* (2002). These do not specifically deal with exegetical parameters, but are nonetheless worth notice because of their respective contributions to the growth of feminism in Africa.

- **Chapter 3 – The Current State of Hermeneutics in Africa**

**The Modern Development of Biblical Studies in Africa and its Adjoining
Influence on African Hermeneutical Method**

Before proceeding with the intended survey, it would be helpful to give a brief introduction to the development of Biblical studies in Africa over the last four decades. The premise of this discussion will show that the development of modern theological academia in Africa cannot be limited to theological discussion alone. One must also consider the influence of political and social changes on the continent during this era, since these are essentially akin. For example, one might not see the significance in debating the validity of white scholarship as 'African' without understanding Africa's pain caused by colonialism, apartheid and the abuse of Scripture to justify such oppression. Also, the subjective nature of African exegesis cannot be fully understood or appreciated if one is not familiar with the political and social climate and related changes, its effects on Africa and her response to them.

In general terms, Africa has a long history of oppression whether it be physical, psychological, spiritual or economical. No era in the history of Africa, however, typifies oppression more than the colonialist period. Colonialism had many discombobulating effects on African epistemology and moral and cultural perception, as Mofokeng explains: "When 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 we opened our eyes, the white man had the land and we had the Bible" (1988:34). This very famous quote might, on the surface seem to deal exclusively with a politico-spiritual situation, but it soon evolved into the prototypical expression of grief and confusion by Africa's people. Two significant observations must be drawn here to illustrate Africa's disillusionment. Firstly, European missionaries¹⁰ were very often accepted as nothing more than mere colonialist advocates based on their participatory abuse of Scripture and social position for personal gain (land, slaves, etc.). Secondly, although the

¹⁰ The criticism of European missionaries here is quoted in general terms. It would be unfair to include all mission endeavours of the 19th century in Africa under the same criticism. Many missionaries and agencies have contributed much toward the improvement and development of Africa.

quote portrays the Bible in a negative connotation, many Africans would not accept the contorted message from missionaries, but instead sought to interpret Scripture for themselves thereby signifying the functional significance of Scripture during the many years of oppression, as invaluable.

The early 1900's, however, ushered in a new political epoch for Africa, one of political liberation. This era would prove to be a very fruitful and significant era in the development of Biblical scholarship. This is not to say that Biblical studies in Africa was the twin of political independence; we can trace Biblical studies in Africa as far back as Augustine of Hippo and Origen in the 2nd and 3rd century respectively. However, political freedom created a new sense of national (and continental) identity, which stirred within the heart of many men and woman a need to rid Africa of 'western' ideology, replacing it with one that is African in nature, expression and application. By the mid 1960's, the vast majority of Africa had gained its independence and accompanying this, a new sense of national pride expressed through culture, religion and the arts. Although independence offered many positive prospects for African religious expression, it also brought to surface much disillusionment and anger projected toward the Christian faith and the Bible, which were seen as reminders of a bygone era of oppression (Mofokeng 1988:36).

This being the main contributory factor, Africa's theologians convened at Ibadan, Nigeria in 1966 for the *Consultation of African Theologians Conference*. This consultation was effectually the defining moment of modern theological direction in Africa. Nlenanya Onwu commenting on the consultation writes: "The consultation was an expression of a deep longing that African theologians should rethink the Christian faith, which had come to them from European missionaries...the implication is that biblical studies are no longer the exclusive monopoly of Euro-American scholars" (1984:36). This consultation saw something of an African renaissance in terms of theological construction and praxis. Justin Ukpong writes: "...the period covering the 1970s-90, has been one of the most dynamic and rewarding periods of biblical studies in Africa" (2000:14).

Dr. John Mbiti also observed that since the consultation, more than 300 books and articles have been published (Ibid.). This observation might be 20 years

out of date, but it does demonstrate that Africa's theologians understood the urgent need in reshaping the Christian faith for an African context. The significance of the consultation cannot be more clearly expressed than through the resulting formulation of exegetical frameworks to construct such an indigenous theology. It is at this point, where the relevance of our discussion comes into view; born out of deep resentment and accompanied by a new-found identity, Africa embarked on a quest to reinterpret Scripture to conduce to 'Africa-ness', referred to as 'Afro-centricism' or 'Afro-centric Hermeneutics'. Although the origin and development of this afro-centric approach is debated¹¹, it is believed that the African Initiated Churches (AIC) were the forerunners in promoting and utilising this approach. Dr. Anderson wrote: "An appreciation for the "African-ness" of their understanding of the Bible, and the fact that the churches are founded and led by Africans, who have read and interpreted the Bible for themselves, is very meaningful. The AIC's are specifically geared to fulfil African aspirations and meet African needs, and in this sense, they have "enlarged" the meaning of the Bible to include this African-ness" (1996). Today, as further discussions in the chapter will show, this 'contextual approach' is very much subjective in nature (i.e., no dichotomy exists between the emotions, culture and experience of the reader(s) and the interpretation of 'objective' Scriptural truth in exegesis). Prolonged suffering, oppression and exegetical fallacies forced people to find answers and strength through the Bible, thereby nurturing a subjective interpretative approach. This process is a very complex discussion in itself with many influencing factors involved that, directly or indirectly, have contributed to the current state of hermeneutics in Africa or the motivation thereof. Although a detailed discussion on this is not possible here, two determinative factors that had a significant effect on the motivation behind hermeneutical change in Africa are worth mentioning.

Firstly, due to an insufficient academic framework in Africa prior to the 1966 consultation, many of Africa's theologians had no other choice, but to get their tertiary education from western institutions (Mbiti 1986:46, *cf.* Holter 2000:55-62). Western education, which is both socially and culturally non-African in approach, created a praxical dichotomy between theological scholarship and

¹¹ See Ritchie 1998

the demands of the 'ordinary' Christian in Africa (Holter 2000:59). "Theological articulation has been done in the west for a long time" writes Kwesi Dickson, "and theological education in the 3rd world has traditionally assumed the inevitability of theological insights emanating from the west" (1984:3). Western educated theologians had therefore done very little to ease this tension: "The consequence of western theological education in African scholars...has generally had the effect of producing theologians who are more at home with western theological thought...it is essential that African Christians should be in a position to express in a vital way what Christ means to them" (Ibid.). The 1966 consultation realised that theological scholarship is no longer exclusive to the west nor should theological thought 'emanating from the west' have to shape theology in Africa.

Secondly, during (or because of) the colonial era, the interpretation, translation and presentation of Scripture was almost exclusively accomplished by western missionaries with very little 'native' input. LeMarquand commenting on this says: "The missionary's reading of the text was filtered through cultural lenses which were not always congenial to African traditional life" (2000:2). The consequence of this is a continent indoctrinated for almost two centuries with foreign doctrine and practice. To a very large measure, the motivation behind African theological construction was a reaction against the 'manipulation' of Africa by the western world. Its motivation might therefore, give the impression of a disgruntled second place winner who set out to prove its winning ability, but in fact, theological method in Africa has been very successful in bridging the gap between scholarship and the needs of the ordinary reader, more so than their western counterparts.

This then brings us to the current state of hermeneutics in Africa. Today, African theology is a credible and very important field of theological scholarship. The proceeding discussion will focus on several specific methods employed by Africa. I will begin the discussion with perhaps the greatest interpretative framework in Africa today, liberation hermeneutics. Proceeding from here, I will continue with a discussion on the following: the exegetical contribution by white scholarship, missiological hermeneutics and neo-traditionalism in African hermeneutics. A qualification is necessary here; although these different

methods are discussed under individual headings and subheadings, they are not mutually exclusive. The complexity of African hermeneutics allows for an interface between all these approaches. Liberation hermeneutics, for example, incorporates neo-traditional exegesis in its approach, all of which is within the framework of afro-centricism. The compartmentalisation of these different methods is merely for pragmatic intent, to distinctly show the different exegetical approaches.

A Survey of Contemporary Exegetical Methods Employed in Africa

3.1 Liberation Hermeneutic

I purposefully began this survey with liberation theology. In light of modern history on the African continent, discussed in the preceding introduction, liberation theology is the most extensive theological construct in Africa today. Unlike many other continents, the political liberation of Africa is still very fresh in the minds of the people, none more so than South Africa who has just celebrated its 11th anniversary since 'liberation'. Africans are still coming to terms with their oppressive past and in addition to this, are also facing new (post-liberation) challenges from within its own ranks, e.g., female oppression and corruption. These will be discussed later in this chapter; for now, I will focus on the general direction of liberation hermeneutics in Africa.

Before proceeding, it might be helpful to give a definition of African liberation hermeneutics. Prof. Emmanuel Martey gives this definition: "Liberation as a theological paradigm in Africa *is a hermeneutic procedure that seeks to understand the African reality and to interpret this reality in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to bring transformation of the oppressive status quo* (n.d, Emphasis Added). Although this definition gives an adequate explanation it is somewhat marginal. Soteriology is certainly a major theme in African liberation hermeneutics, but this definition avoids the liberating message of the Old Testament and the contribution of culture in liberation process. As this discussion will show, liberation hermeneutics in Africa is a very complex process, taking into account not only political struggle, but also illness, poverty, AIDS, etc. and, therefore, an effective response would require a trans-Scriptural approach. For the purpose of this survey though, I will base my understanding of liberation hermeneutics in Africa upon this definition.

African liberation hermeneutics functions on two levels: academic and traditional. On the one hand, Africa's academic community has sought to change negative paradigms projected at Scripture and the Christian faith, whilst on the other hand, many readers in Africa have exerted their right to interpret Scripture for themselves. At any level, the questions remain the same: "Had

God forgotten us? Did God love Europeans more?” Fortunately, the pre-eminent status of the Bible in African spirituality survived, to some extent, the ideological onslaught of colonialism to remain the prime source of wisdom and guidance for many African Christians. Unfortunately, this is not the case for everybody.

The contemporary paradox, especially in post-liberated Africa, is that the Bible is part of the problem, but also part of the solution (Mofokeng 1988:37). As already discussed, the Bible was seen to partake of the oppressive ideology; being misrepresented and misinterpreted in colonial practice and preaching. Because of this, today’s black youth are asking serious questions about the place and relevance of Scripture and religion in modern society. For them, a liberation hermeneutic is not confined to Scripture alone, but also found in the rich history of their ancestors, the resilience of past generations and their uncanny knack to endure and survive. For this young generation of exegetes, functionality counts for much more than correct hermeneutical method. This has become the contemporary expression of liberation theology in Africa today. This move away from *sola scriptura*, however, has been the cause of much concern by older theologians. Dr. John Mbiti, for instance, has criticised modern liberation exegetes for citing very little scriptural ‘references’ in their work (Onwu 1985:36). Although many African scholars find this criticism unwelcome (even Onwu himself), it is characteristic of Africa’s subjective approach to Scripture, but more importantly, it is a visible projection of the contemporary Biblical paradox in liberation hermeneutics (*cf.* Mofokeng 1988:37). No scholar illustrates this contemporary state of liberation hermeneutics more than Itumeleng Mosala. For Mosala, the Bible cannot be the hermeneutical starting point for liberation theology (Mosala 1991:196). Commenting on the book of Micah, for example, he interprets it as “a ruling class document and represents the ideological and political interests of the ruling class” because it “is eloquent in its silence about the ideological struggle waged by the oppressed and exploited class of monarchic Israel” (*Ibid.*). Instead, Mosala proposes that, “those committed to the struggles of the black oppressed and exploited people cannot ignore the history, culture, and ideologies of the dominated black people as their primary hermeneutical starting

point" (1991:197). The western trained mind might immediately see this is a poignant example of the danger in hermeneutical subjectivism (i.e. supplementing 'objective' truth), but subjectivism is theoretically at least, characteristic of African hermeneutics. Despite all of which, Mosala's argument is not exclusively inherent of contemporary liberation hermeneutics though. As I mentioned before, modern liberation hermeneutics functions on two different levels, that is, on an academic level (e.g. Mosala) and on a traditional level. The difference in approach can be illustrated through the role of African Initiated Churches (AIC) in contemporary liberation hermeneutics. Allan Anderson explains: "The attraction of the Pentecostal-type AIC hermeneutics for African people is that probably above all other considerations, these churches are believed to provide *biblical* answers for "this worldly" needs like sickness, poverty, hunger, oppression, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits and sorcery" (1996, Emphasis Added). The Bible plays a much more poignant role in the understanding of ordinary readers. Fortunately, Mosala's contention does not include the African majority and this is largely attributed to the rise and influence of AIC. AIC have made liberation hermeneutics their agenda: "A concept that fundamentally affects the AIC hermeneutical process is that of liberation" Anderson explains, "African people themselves, without the help of white missionaries (representing oppressive former colonial powers), have discovered in the Bible their own freedom from bondage. They have discovered that, contrary to previous assumptions, the Bible is not a "white person's book" *providing answers to questions which African people are not asking*. Particularly since the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, Africans are discovering *that the Bible is relevant to Africa, that it does fulfil African aspirations and meet African needs, and that the Bible has much to say about issues that were largely left unaddressed in mission churches*" (Ibid, Emphasis Added).

In contemporary terms, the AIC movement has been very effective in breaking down the misconception that Scripture cannot be recognised as relevant any longer. As far as current methods in liberation hermeneutics in AIC are concerned, three prominent themes can be distinguished. Firstly, "God's agenda encompasses all of life" (LeMarquand 2000:21). God is not concerned with just religious matters; He is also concerned with politics, economics and

cultural matters. If any of these cause His people hardship, He remains concerned and compassionate. In the light of God's all encompassing agenda for the people of Africa, John 10:10 have become a 'key text' in liberation theology (Ibid.). "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (NIV) fits well within the cosmological worldview of Africa as Okure explains; "Jesus declares that the sole purpose of his coming into the world is so that human beings may have life, and have it to the fullest. Concern for personal, human welfare, characterizes Jesus' entire ministry" (Okure 1992:89).

The image of Jesus as liberator is very significant in liberation theology, which brings us to our second point: liberation is inherent of soteriology. As Onwu explain: "It is also within the context of liberation that most African scholars¹² now focus on the theme of salvation...in the Bible salvation as a theological concept cannot be complete without liberation as a socio-political concept" (1985:38). The Gospel is essentially a message of liberation, from sin and death, but extends also to include socio-political freedom as part of its message. Within AIC, soteriology features very highly in homiletics; "And so, for a disadvantaged people, *preaching often centres on salvation* here and now, on material security which "embraced health, wealth, and influence in community affairs and occupations" (Anderson 1996, Emphasis Added). Finally, the AIC's third contribution to contemporary liberation hermeneutics is its focus on the message of Exodus. Mofokeng relates his personal experience: "in the light of the internal and external difficulties encountered by Black Christians on our national "exodus" Black exegetes are attracted to the stories about the difficulties of the desert journey to the biblical promised land" (1988:41). It might be no surprise that liberation books such as Exodus is most often quoted in sermons on God's message of liberation, but it is the effectiveness of which it is expounded in the AIC movement that has made it the forerunner in liberation hermeneutics today.

The general direction and state of liberation hermeneutics in Africa today is much more advanced in theory and practise that this survey allows. To get some kind of an idea of this, the following subsections will briefly deal with more specific manifestations of liberation hermeneutics in the African context.

¹² Our discussion focus is AIC which is not necessarily divorced from 'scholarship'. In African theological construction, the learned and untrained collectively contribute to such academic dialogue.

3.1.1 Feminist¹³ Hermeneutic

Feminist hermeneutics is perhaps the most complex hermeneutical process in Africa. Many factors are contributive to this although: the relative immaturity¹⁴ of the movement to date, which has thus not been allowed to fully evolve its thinking and methods, can largely be blamed for this. Characteristic of this complexity, as will be discussed later, is the problem of 'paradox' which presents itself as 'exegetically' faltering much too often for the preference of many in Africa's female community. It is worth notice that these paradoxes are not merely defined in abstract theological thought, but also affects the lives of many women in real ways; "If man and woman were created in God's image alike, why are women considered less 'human' than men?" or "How does one unify the 'oppressive' narrative of the Old Testament with the liberation message and lifestyle of Christ in the New Testament?" The latter example might go some way in demonstrating the complexity and reality involved in feminist questions. It also, and perhaps more importantly, gives some indication that theological feminism still has a long way to go in engaging with contextual issues in hermeneutics. It must construct effective hermeneutical frameworks that will find adequate, Biblically based answers to the questions women are asking. To become effective these women must be encouraged to engage with Scripture themselves for the purpose of gaining workable solutions to feminist social-gender issues. In this regard, the following question begs an answer: Is there a need for such a pro-feminist theological construction, separated from liberation theology in general? Effectively yes, as Roxanne Jordaan explains: "both black and white woman suffer from a denial of independence and dignity...the augmented tensions of racial oppression..." (1987:43). All women, across the racial spectrum, are subject to some degree of marginalisation or oppression, but none are more so than black women, who are by and large the lowest paid workforce, accounts for 70% of the unemployed community and are obligated to fulfil their maternal responsibilities at home in addition to keeping a 'formal' vocation (Ibid.). Unlike liberation theology in general (yet another complexity), female oppression is not

¹³ By 'Feminism/Feminist' I do intend to convey the general impression of an "aggressive movement fighting for the equal rights of women" but rather, I mean to use this term as a collective name for Africa's female readers/exegetes of the Bible.

¹⁴ Although debated, the 'recognized' feminist movement in Africa is no more than at least 20 years old.

exclusively confined to a political sphere, but is also interfaced with culture, theology, and other socio-gender related issues. These socio-gender issues faced by women are vastly different from the political struggle Africa has faced, as discussed under the preceding section. Sadly, the church has done very little to ease the burden of these women in Africa, despite them accounting for at least 65% of church attendees on the continent. The church has very often dismissed feminist related issues as 'insubordinate' or not worth its time. This has unfortunately tarnished the church's appeal for many women, even to the extent where it has been labelled 'misogynist'. In essence, the insufficiency by the church, in addition to the relative immaturity of African feminist consciousness, has left many women with nothing, but the Bible (and tradition to a lesser extent) to seek efficacious ways forward in their struggle.

Before I proceed with the intended survey, two preliminary observations should be made in explanation of the current state of feminist hermeneutics.

Firstly, there is a certain prominent exegetical 'paradox' in feminist hermeneutics that has historically proven very detrimental for the related exegetical procedure. At one end of this paradox, the Bible has very often been portrayed as oppressive and degrading of women. Passages cited as obviously degrading or dehumanising of women, for example, include Genesis 3 in which the 'woman' is portrayed as the instigator of the fall, the multitude of forensic parameters in Leviticus disregarding the humanistic value of women and finally, the numerous Pauline passages displaying a disregard for the spiritual value of women's contribution to ecclesiastical matters in passages like 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. Indirectly, Scripture in general has repeatedly been used to justify oppressive intensions. Consequently, feminist readings are characterised as 'suspicious' of explicit patriarchal bias and the androcentricism in the authors of the Bible. At the other end, confidence in the immutability and the relative objectivity of Scripture is all that many women have. For them, disregarding Scripture is not an option. Instead, they have sought to find innovative ways of moving past the negative projection of Scripture, as Cochrane explains: "Because the Bible has been used as justification for specifically apartheid, many, especially young, black people have grown disillusioned with the Bible

and Scripture. *Therefore, the need for a contextually effective reading of scripture is desperately needed to re-engage people have been oppressed by the Bible with the Bible and Christianity*” (1991:17, Emphasis Added).

Secondly, the feminist movement have, and still does, struggled with the problem of androcentricism in Scripture. Androcentricism refers to that fact “that the Bible was written most likely only *by* men and, for the Hebrew Scriptures, most specifically *for* men (“my son”, “your wife”) in male-dominated cultures. Over the centuries, it has also been officially interpreted and applied only by men” (Okure 1994:80). For the feminist, there is no escaping androcentricism, whether it is exegetical or historical, therefore, the choice exists to either discount it or to acknowledge it. Unfortunately, ‘overlooking’ it will effectually compromise the reality and academic credibility of feminism, but similarly, engaging with such a complicated issue (within an insufficient exegetical framework) will have equally negative consequences. No choice is not an option, though and feminism have correctly, although prematurely, chosen to engage with androcentricism with mixed results. The focus of this discussion is not a critique on the feminist approach to androcentricism. However, the reasoning and consequential outcomes of this is in fact very relevant, since the methods employed in dealing with androcentricism are in effect partly an illustration of the current state of feminist exegesis. The following example will seek to illustrate how contemporary feminism has approached the problem of patriarchy in Scripture.

Many women have struggled with the notion that God is portrayed as male (a symbol of oppression) and have thus found it difficult to relate to him. Androcentricism has largely been blamed for ‘making’ God masculine. Feminists have responded by arguing that: “To address God as Father is a cultural and linguistic limitation only, there is not theological significant to this” (Cochrane 1991:24). Furthermore, one cannot define the emotional relationship between God and Jesus in purely masculine terms (Ibid.). Their ‘emotional’ relationship is characteristic of one that exists between mother and son. Regardless of whether these approaches are justified or credible, the latter is a very simplistic example that does clarify the cognitive process behind much of feminist exegetical thought. The purpose of these remarks is to highlight

specific factors, although not limited to these, which have had direct bearings on the development of feminist hermeneutics into what it is today, as will be discussed in the survey to follow.

An assessment of the current state of feminist hermeneutics in Africa could be described with a single word: Reconstructionism. In his survey on 'trends' within feminist exegetical method, Gerald West identifies one overriding approach by Africa's women, one characterised by historical and social reconstructionist intentions (West 1991:79). He refers to this as reading 'behind' the text, i.e., an exegesis concerned with reconstructing the socio-historical setting of a text to extract the message 'behind' the text (Ibid.). The motivation behind this method is to give due recognition to the people, mostly women, behind the text. This is a prime example of how the previously mentioned 'formative factors' manifests itself in the current state of this hermeneutical method. Many women contended, as West observed, that the Bible does not always give due recognition to the people 'behind' the text *because of its androcentricism*" (Ibid. Emphasis Added). This is particularly relevant to the role of women in the Bible which has by and large been confined to less pronounced positions. Many women would have no reservation in admitting that Scripture, in general, is not projected towards women, but on the other hand, an equal amount of women would have no reservation in admitting that the life and ministry of Christ is, in fact, the prime example of practical 'feminist social justice'. Before looking at specific examples it is, at this point, worth coming back to the work of Prof. Fiorenza. As mentioned earlier, her work has been very influential in the formation of modern African feminism and her methods have largely been employed, although adapted, as the norm in feminist exegesis. A very prominent theme in Prof. Fiorenza's work, upon which Africa's women have developed extensively, is the doctrine of justice; as Cochrane explains: "Woman, however, asserts that *the Biblical theme of justice includes freedom from the bondage of male-oppression* (1991:22, Emphasis Added). It is here where the practical outworking of 'reconstructionism' can be observed. Cochrane continues: "A feminist interpretation of the Bible will always require a critical mind capable of differentiating between the liberating

spirit of the Gospel and the culturally-bound historical context (1991:23). Modern feminist exegesis has thus moved away from the Old Testament because “The laws governing the lives of woman in the OT are very similar to those in African societies” (Ibid.). The difficulty does not exist in the similarity, but rather in the inadequacy of the Old Testament to offer workable solutions. The move away from the Old Testament has moved these women closer to the New Testament; attracted by the life and ministry of Jesus, as Prof. Fiorenza have pointed out: “Jesus is the ‘father’ of feminist justice” (1998:114). The rationale behind adopting Jesus as the pre-eminent figure of feminist social justice in modern feminist exegesis is an extensive theory of which I cannot comment here, apart from a few examples in explanation of this rationale.

The ‘legal’ victory of the cross has been very significant for feminism specifically because it attempts to go some way in finding a solution to the critique of Old Testament praxis, as mentioned previously. The choice of overlooking the Old Testament is not intentional; the fact remains though that the Old Testament is more obviously patriarchal by nature and therefore very difficult to come to terms with by women who accept patriarchy as oppressive. The Old Testament, however, is confined to the old covenant though and, as the rationale follows, the cross has broken the curses associated with the old covenant and, therefore, one cannot, post-resurrection, read and apply these passages literally and accept them as fundamental because of Christ’s death and the new-covenant (Cochrane 1991:25).

Furthermore, Christ’s approach and attitude towards women has been described as ‘revolutionary’ (Masenya 1995:195). Masenya continues: “...feminists also turn to the many stories of Jesus’ relationship with women as recorded in the gospels. His attitude towards women is viewed as exceptional and even revolutionary for his time...For African woman, Jesus is attractive because he fights for justice, he heals and he is a teacher” (Ibid.).

Apart from Scripture, and to a much lesser extent, a workable feminist hermeneutic must both include and exclude certain aspects of culture. As is the case with African hermeneutics in general “...the Bible cannot be accepted as

the absolute and final word of God, divorced from personal life experiences” (Sampson 1991:59). Culture is not all good though; many women have had to break the cultural *status quo* by eliminating certain aspects of their culture and communities. While much could be said with regards to the cultural influence on feminism, it is merely another example of afro-centricism in Biblical exegesis in Africa. Although contextualised, the phenomenon of afro-centricism is by nature fundamentally similar regardless of context. Since this has already been discussed previously in some detail, it is mentioned here only as an acknowledgement of its presence in theological feminism.

3.1.2 Deliverance Hermeneutic

Exegetical approaches for dealing with spiritual phenomenon is oddly the least developed hermeneutic in Africa today. Consider the bibliographical entries of this thesis, for example, only one out of forty six authors made some attempt to include this in their discourse on hermeneutics in Africa. Nevertheless, as the single author wrote, “African exegetes take seriously the reality of cosmic powers, treating them as some kind of organized disobedience to the will of God, which affects the course of human history” (LeMarquand 2000:20). This lack of interest could be blamed on many factors such as syncretism, academic disfavour or the fact the people are competent in dealing with malicious spiritual activity due to the duality of spiritualism and animism in African culture. Either way, deliverance hermeneutics is aspectual of the current state of African hermeneutics and therefore worth mentioning.

3.1.3 Black Theology

It is difficult to draw clear lines separating black theology from liberation hermeneutics (in general) due to the sharp similarities that exist between them. For this reason, this discussion will be limited to the distinguishing factors of Black theology alone.

The ‘Black theology’ movement is one that is geographically limited to South Africa, although academically part of ‘African’ theology. Its liberation intent was rejected exclusively by the apartheid regime and for the liberation of South

Africa's black community. This movement continued to exist post-1994 despite achieving the intended purpose, but facing new challenges. In the new South Africa, the challenge is not political freedom, but spiritual reorientation, as Mofokeng explains: "Young blacks in particular have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core" thus the best option "is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible" (West 1997). Again, the challenge for South Africa's black theologians exists; to break such misconceptions projected at the Christian faith and the Bible. It is for this reason that the Bible features as imperative in this movement. Black theology has its roots in the Bible insofar as it is capable of linking the struggles of oppressed people in South Africa today with the struggles of oppressed people in the communities of the Bible, specifically the Exodus narrative. For many 'black theologians' today, however, the Bible cannot be the exegetical starting point in the South African context, like it is for the rest of Africa. As LeMarquand pointed out, liberation theology in South Africa is much less distinctive than "African" theology. This distinctive can thus be defined in the above-mentioned hermeneutical approach. The leading figure in Black theology in South Africa, Itumeleng Mosala, encapsulates the ambiguity of approaching Scripture in such a manner most clearly. As far as he is concerned, there "is simply too much de-ideologization to be made before it (*the Bible*) can be hermeneutically straightforward in terms of the struggle for liberation" (West 1997, *Italics Added*). If any observation could be made as to the current state of Black theology in South Africa, it must be the ongoing theological debate on the use of Scripture in the new South Africa amongst the black community. Unfortunately, this debate is very extensive and complex and again I could not begin to do it justice in this survey. Since the aim of this thesis is a discussion on the current state of African hermeneutics, the above observation is sufficient.

3.2 White South African Hermeneutics

For many of Africa's black theologians, including the contribution of white scholarship in a thesis on 'African' Biblical studies would be considered either an insult or a misjudgement. Inevitably, a discussion of this nature will lean

more towards political and anthropological concerns than theological. By this I mean, that the real concern in the white/black debate is not theological content *per se* but rather questions related to ethnicity and political history. For example, Madipoane Masenya quite rightly asks the question what being 'African' really means (2002). Are there ethnical, political or any other delimitations to being 'African'? The very existence of this debate indicates that there are, and these are predominantly political delimitations. Masenya correctly pointed out that during the apartheid, "such definitions would not have been necessary because everybody knew who an African was. Needless to say, many non-Africans, including white South African scholars, did not want to be designated African" (Ibid.). Even today, some white South Africans would be very offended if they were referred to as 'African'. In the absence of clear criteria for deciding who can, or cannot, be 'African' though, it would be impossible to make objective judgements on the debate. What is certain though, is that serious generalisations like Masenya's are not constructive in anyway. Presupposing that all white people in South Africa were (are) racists and in denial of their 'African' heritage, is very misguided. From personal experience as a white South African male, the vast majority of my friends and family would take offence at being called 'European'. Regardless of the debate, one cannot deny the contribution of 'white' scholarship in African theology. Three of the five scholars profiled in chapter 2, for instance, are either white South African or 'western'. Where would African Feminism be without the work of Prof. Fiorenza or liberation theology without the contribution of Prof. West? There is no denying, that the work of these scholars has been an invaluable contribution to African theology as a whole. It is worth mentioning that this tinge of fanaticism is by no means a general feeling amongst black African scholars. Dr John O. Akao (University of Ibadan, Nigeria), for example, believes that: "If a Christian can adequately and objectively handle Islamic Studies, what prevents a White scholar from adequately handling African Biblicism? Whites, like their black counterparts, who were born and grew up in Africa with the proper orientation, should be able to think like the Africans apart from the colour differentia" (Boshoff 2002). Dr. Akao makes a valid point. Theology in Africa is very diverse and it has been very hospitable towards a wide range of

denominational orientations. This in itself is another indication that the white scholarship debate is politically geared. Africa has opened its arms to welcome Roman Catholicism that gets its theological direction from Rome, Anglicism that gets it from England or Pentecostalism that has its roots in America and yet, these are all authentically 'African'.

Fundamentally, the concern is that white South African scholarship is essentially western in thought or at least, historically rooted in western scholarship. Hypothetically, due to this, white scholarship cannot effectively contribute in 'real' ways to the people of Africa, as their 'eurocentric' tendencies hinders their comprehension of where African people are and inhibits their ability to address this effectively (Masenya 2002). Although this is certainly a valid concern, it is also one that extends to black scholars who have chosen to make western universities their home, like Dr. John Mbiti and Prof. Kwesi Dickson.

It would almost be impossible to give any kind of indication as to the current state of white South African hermeneutics due to its diversity, depth and international appeal. If anything could be said about the current state of this debate, however, Dr. Gerrie Snyman's comments would be a good indication: "Is there more behind Africentricity than beating up a Eurocentrist and being irritated by his or her presence? I would like to think that the posing of a binary opposition of Eurocentricity and Africentricity can be part of a process that moves towards what can be called a trans-modernity...It is a condition where victim (Africa) and perpetrator (the former colonial powers) co-realise themselves in a process of mutual creative fertilisation" (2002). Dr. Snyman's comments are very helpful in defining the current issues facing scholarship in the new South Africa. Unfortunately, many black and white academics appeared to have become 'contentious stagnates', (mis)guided by political agenda, not willing to progress towards 'trans-modernity' dialogue. The debate continues today, and by no stretch of the imagination could this simplistic discussion begin to display the gravity of it, nonetheless, white (South African) scholarship has contributed in great measure to African theology and if only for this, must be counted as a valid hermeneutical method in Africa.

3.3 Missiological Hermeneutics

Finding appropriate approaches for the church to effectively engage its 'own' people with the Gospel, has been of great concern for the African church over the last decade. The preceding three decades, have permitted the African church to become self-sustained, thus allowing it to divert its energy to 'non-critical' aspects in church life. By this I am not implying that mission is less critical than any other aspect of church life, but in the light of Africa's task of re-orientating religious paradigms, mission endeavours would have been a futile exercise in a culture of disillusionment and anger.

As Dr. Mbiti noticed that missiology, as an aspect of African exegesis, is seriously lacking in academic credibility due to the absence of any meaningful research (Mbiti 1986:177). Twenty years on, this is sadly still the case. Dr. LeMarquand's lecture, delivered at the 1998 African Christianity: Past, Present and Future conference entitled, "*Acts 19: A Neglected Model of Mission in African Exegesis?*"¹⁵ gives a thorough review of missiologically relevant publications by African scholars, but even in this paper one is hard pressed to find any substantial work relating specifically to missiological exegesis in Africa (1998). What this paper does contain, is helpful insights into the current state of mission and hermeneutical approaches. For this reason, the present discussion will largely be drawn from Dr. LeMarquand's comments made in this lecture.

Much discussion on mission in Africa has been centred on the book of Acts. This is primarily because "the churches described in the Acts are perceived by modern African writers to be in a similar situation to churches in Africa today, that is, in a 'missionary situation... by 'missionary situation' I mean a context in which the church is young, in a state of rapid growth, and in the process of developing its own culturally appropriate theology, structures and institutions' (1998:1). The book of Acts has proven to be a treasure chest of wisdom for the African exegete. Chapters that have been of specific interest to Africa's exegetes include the 'Ethiopian eunuch' in Acts 8, Acts 15 that recounts the struggles the early Church had faced in constructing an inculturated Gospel and Acts 17 in which Paul taught on utilising evangelism as a means to bridge

¹⁵ By Dr. LeMarquand's request, mention should be made of the fact that this paper is unpublished and therefore unedited.

cultures. Dr. LeMarquand has observed, though, that despite the academic attention the Acts have received, Acts 19 has almost completely been neglected (1998:6). This is rather unfortunate, since a thorough exegesis of this text reveals that it is, in fact, very relevant to mission approaches on the continent.

Ephesus was a very diverse city consisting largely of Christian, Jewish and gentile communities. Paul's preaching and evangelisation had, therefore, to account for such diversity. With this in mind, Dr. LeMarquand drew an analogy to the current state of mission in Africa. Although the diversity of Africa and Ephesus are incomparable, the context of the Gospel remains the same. Many decades of mission enterprise in Africa has shown that there are those who gladly accept the message of Jesus (v. 1), there are those who require more articulate hermeneutical approaches to convince (v. 8) and lastly, those who refuse to negate their culture and religion for Jesus (v. 23-41). Dr. LeMarquand's assessment is understandably somewhat oversimplified, not really reflecting the depth and diversity of Africa nor accounting for the challenges facing the African church and mission. One thing that is certain, though, is the colonialism did the image of 'foreign missionaries' no favours. Consequently, Africans have exerted the right to interpret Scripture for themselves; finding 'African' contexts for inculturated evangelism and apologetics. Of all the different aspects in African hermeneutics as discussed in this thesis, Africa's hermeneutic in defining its missiology is, nonetheless, still the least developed exegetical method. As Dr. Mbiti and LeMarquand have shown, much more study is required of African academia to establish such effective and credible mission approaches. If any observation could then be made with regards to missiologically relevant exegesis in Africa, it must be the continuous effort by Africa's exegetes to expound Scripture so to find contextually effective means of communicating the Gospel to the African continent.

3.4 Neo-traditional Hermeneutics

The final section of this thesis is concerned with the phenomenon of neo-traditionalism in African hermeneutics. The term 'neo-traditionalism' is

somewhat misleading since this method is in fact the oldest form of exegetical approach on the continent. The acceptance of 'ordinary' interpreters of the Bible as an inclusive aspect of scholarship, is a recent development of Biblical studies in Africa, hence the 'neo' prefix. This term is one that Prof. West made popular: "Emerging work in the interface between orality and literacy and my own preliminary analysis of neo-indigenous forms of biblical interpretation have yielded a finer, though still tentative, account of what might be called a "neo-traditional" hermeneutic" (n.d.:10).

The extent to which 'ordinary' readers are accepted as aspectual of scholarship is not clear (West n.d.:4). They would, for example, not be invited to speak at conferences or participate in theological debating. Their acceptance does, therefore, not interface with the 'formalities' of established scholarship. The role of 'ordinary' scholarship functions more on an 'informant' level. Daniel Smith-Christopher delineates an area where 'ordinary' readers can contribute to biblical hermeneutics within the capacity of 'informants'. He notes that liberation theologians, for example, "have long talked about an 'exegesis of the poor'" (Ibid.). He then comments that what liberation theologians "normally mean to suggest (by this phrase) *is that the poor have a unique insight into the Bible ... because their socio-economic circumstances are in some ways similar to the circumstances of those who drafted the Bible, or those spoken about in large sections of the Bible*" (Ibid, Emphasis Added). The ordinary reader of Scripture has very often outdone their learned counterparts with respect to praxis leading from exegesis and as a result, Africa's 'learned' community soon realised the intrinsic value for these expositors. The dividing line between neo-traditionalism and formal scholarship is very fine in Prof. West's assessment, but Dr. Mbiti's assessment is much clearer. He identifies three categories of theology in Africa; written, oral and symbolic (1986:46-7). Written theology is limited to those with formal education, whereas oral and symbolic theology is practised by the African majority. Dr. Mbiti's comments are very helpful for the purpose of this discussion since it provides an adequate platform for showing why neo-traditional hermeneutics is conducive to the African context.

As discussed previously, African hermeneutics functions within a framework of 'Afro-centricism', which refers to the understanding that African exegesis is not

divorced from the culture, experience and perception of the interpreter. This framework separates it from 'western' scholarship where exegetical objectivism is the ruling norm. Contextual perception breaks down the dividing wall between readers, trained or illiterate, allowing for an exegetical pool incorporating every reader. This distinction is clearly seen in Dr. Mbiti's assessment. Written theology is European/Western (although also an aspect of formal scholarship in Africa *cf.* Mbiti 1986:177), whereas oral theology is characteristic of Africa, trained or untrained. In addition to this, a neo-traditional exegetical approach is "the purist form of hermeneutics" as it fulfils the intended function of hermeneutics; to allow for everybody to interpret scripture for themselves. This again disqualifies this approach for the west, since hermeneutical methodologies have been so overcomplicated that very few could in reality engage in this discipline. Lastly, a neo-traditional approach to hermeneutics is not confined to stiff guidelines for correct procedure, but a "hermeneutic characterised by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical text themselves" (West 2000:39). There are many additional factors that have proven formative in neo-traditional hermeneutics in Africa such as Bible translation into African vernacular languages and economic limitations allowing for Biblical interpretations without the aid of commentaries, dictionaries, etc.

It is hard to make an assessment on the current state of neo-traditional hermeneutics in Africa, partly because it is a continuous process that has historically been characteristic of one thing: addressing the needs of the people. In terms of its future projection, Prof. West comments "...the directions African biblical scholarship takes and the questions it admits to the scholarly task are *shaped more by the life issues, such as AIDS, of local communities than they are by the interpretative interests of the scholarly community...*" (2000:43, Emphasis Added). Biblical scholarship in Africa might have made huge strides in the right direction, but socio-political conditions on the continent has improved very little since the colonialist era, and if the effectiveness of this aspect of African hermeneutics has any future and value, its concern should remain the people, not the disciple.

• Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Delimiting the current state of exegetical approaches in Africa is grossly oversimplified in this thesis. Due to stipulated limitations, the true extent of its diversity, complexity and continuing development could not be adequately addressed here. In addition to this limitation, surveying the current state of hermeneutics in Africa under separate subsections has complicated the task even further. It should be clear from this thesis that the different dynamics constituting 'African hermeneutics' are all interfaced and collectively functions within an afro-centric framework. Due to this, I am often guilty of generalisation and oversimplification. Nonetheless, the primary purpose of this thesis was not an extensive expose, but a general survey of major themes in contemporary African hermeneutics and as a secondary intent, to demonstrate in what manner socio-political interface has proven a cogent catalyst for modifying such exegetical approaches.

Deducing from this thesis, an all encompassing concluding observation on the current state of African Biblical studies would be that it is in a very vulnerable yet exciting place. Biblical studies in Africa are comparatively very young and are, therefore, vulnerable to outside influence that could potentially prove very counterproductive. Unfortunately, the prediction that Africa has "assumed the inevitability of theological insights emanating from the west" has become more of a reality than an assumption in African scholarship today. Although not many African scholars would admit this, an academic divide is slowly creeping into African scholarship; dividing the trained from the untrained. One example of this is the soon to be published *'African Bible Commentary'*. Nothing is essentially done wrong by this commentary, but it does in effect negate neo-traditionalist philosophy by implying that certain interpretations, and therefore interpreters, are more valid than others. In this sense, African hermeneutics has succumbed in its vulnerability. On the other hand, though, African hermeneutics enjoys a very privileged position today. Everything is new and fresh and the absence of any rigidity allows for it to manipulate approaches and ideas effectively to conform the message of Scripture to a trans-cultural African context. Motivated to keep its identity, contemporary hermeneutics in Africa has

become characterised by reconstructionist methods; reconstructing not only socio-historical contexts of Scripture, but also reconstructing Scripture around the culture and experiences of the intended context. To some extent, this approach has caused considerable debate between black and white scholars today and a consequential epistemological rift as far as Scriptural truth, and so application, is concerned.

Amidst such ambiguity, one thing is certain, African theology requires much more academic investigation. With Dr. Mbiti calling for more research to be done on missiological approaches in African hermeneutics and Prof. West calling for more work to be done on neo-traditionalism, such a task can hardly be overlooked.

Admittedly, these are only characteristics of the current state of African hermeneutics. The juxtaposition of continuous theological evolution in Africa and its relative immaturity makes any concrete assessment of hermeneutical procedure impossible, but it makes future predictions viable. I would, therefore, like to conclude this thesis with two concluding remarks pertaining to the future direction of hermeneutics in Africa.

Firstly, African hermeneutics has largely been preoccupied with reconstructing damaged lives discombobulated by its unfortunate political history (i.e. oppression, apartheid and corruption, etc.). This has led it to partially adopt an anti-western/anti-white ideology, hence the white/black debate discussed in the previous chapter. Although Africa has every reason to lament over its history, the time *must* come for hermeneutic approach (and Biblical studies in general) to move past its defeatist parameters towards a theology incorporating the liberation/victory narrative of Scripture. This observation might perhaps be an easy to make from a western perspective, but the overall impression delineated from certain debates and practice in African academia seemingly suggests political motivation rather than true liberation.

Second and last, for hermeneutics in Africa to remain “the purist form of hermeneutics”, it must ward off the temptation of over-complication. By and large, the current state of hermeneutics in Africa allows, and accepts, for the African majority to engage in Biblical interpretation as equals to its theologians. This of course is not true of western ideology in hermeneutics, which inevitably

has had certain detrimental effects for authentic Christian expression in the West. As I mentioned before, the danger signs of this is beginning to show in African scholarship. This would be very unfortunate for African scholarship since its contemporary expression has proven much more effective, in exegetical intent, than hermeneutical directions adopted by western approaches.

Bibliography

Ackermann D M 1997. Forward from the Margins: Feminist theologies for life. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997) 63-67.

Ackermann D, Draper J A, E Mashinini (eds.) 1991. *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*. South Africa: Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

Anderson A 1996. *The Hermeneutical Process of Pentecostal-Type African Initiated Churches in South Africa*. Online Article:
<http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/aanderson/Publications/hermeneutic.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Boshoff W 2002. Can 'White' South African Old Testament Scholarship be African? *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*, Issue 12.

Cannon K G 1994. Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church. In Fiorenza E S, Matthews S (eds). *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 1: A feminist introduction*. London, England: SCM Press by arrangement with Crossroad Publishing.

Cochrane R 1991. Equal Discipleship of Woman and Men. In Ackermann D, Draper J A, E Mashinini (eds.). *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*. South Africa: Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

Course: AFST 542: African Feminist/Womanist Theology; A Source for African Christian Theology, 2005. Online:
<http://www.mias.edu/course05.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Course: AFST 546: African Traditional Religion Interprets the Bible, 2005. Online: <http://www.mias.edu/course04.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Dickson K A 1984. *Theology in Africa*. London, England: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Dube M W, West G O (eds) 2000, *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, US: Brill.

Ezeogu E M n.d. Essays in African Theology: Bible and Culture in African Theology, Part 1. Online Article: <http://www.munachi.com/t/bibleculture1.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Felder C H n.d. Afrocentrism and Biblical Authority. Online Article: <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1992/v49-3-article6.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Fiorenza E S 1998. *Sharing her word: feminist biblical interpretation in context*. Boston, USA: Beacon Press.

Fiorenza E S, Matthews S (eds) 1994. *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 1: A feminist introduction*. London, England: SCM Press by arrangement with Crossroad Publishing.

Holter K 2000. Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River. In Dube M W, West G O (eds), *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, Mass: Brill.

In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, 2003. Online Article: <http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/sf1.html#contents>, 2005-08-26.

Jordaan R 1987. The emergence of black feminist theology in South Africa. *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 11 Nov 1987.

LeMarquand G 2000. A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa: A Preliminary Publication. In Dube M W, West G O (eds), *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, Mass: Brill.

LeMarquand G 2000. New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa. In Dube M W, West G O (eds), *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, Mass: Brill.

LeMarquand G 1999. *And the rulers of the nations shall bring their treasures into it: A Survey of Biblical Exegesis in Africa*. Online Article <http://www.tesm.edu/articles/and-the-rulers-of-the-nations-shall-bring-their-treasures-into-it.html>, 2005-08-19.

LeMarquand G 1998. *Acts 19: a neglected model of mission in African exegesis?* Unpublished.

Martey E n.d. Theology and Liberation: The African Agenda. Online Article: <http://www.pucrs.br/pastoral/fmtl/noticias/martey.doc>, 2005-08-19.

Masenya M M, 2002. Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African? *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*, Issue 12.

Masenya M M 1995. The Bible and Woman: Black Feminist Hermeneutic. *Scriptura* 54, 189-201.

Mbiti J S 1986. *Bible and theology in African Christianity*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Mofokeng T 1988. Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation. *Journal of Black Theology*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 34-42.

Mosala I J 1991. The Use of the Bible in Black Theology. In Sugirtharajah R S (ed.) *Voices from the Margin*, London England: SPCK.

Mosala I J 1991. The Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: The case of Micah. In Sugirtharajah R S (ed.) *Voices from the Margin*, London, England: SPCK.

Mosala I J 1989. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Michigan, Grand rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Pub. Co

Myers W H 1991. The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student. In Felder C H (ed), *Stony the Road we Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis, USA: Fortress Press.

Oduyoye M A n.d. Gender and Theology in Africa today. Online Article: http://www.thecirclecawt.org/focus_areas?mode=content&id=17292&refto=2629, 2005-08-19.

Oduyoye M A 1996. *Daughters of Anoma: African Women and Patriarchy*, US: Orbis Books.

Oduyoye M A 1992. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, US: Orbis Books.

Okure T 1994. Feminist Interpretation in Africa. In Fiorenza E S, Matthews S (eds). *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 1: A feminist introduction*. London, England: SCM Press by arrangement with Crossroad Publishing.

Okure T 1992. A New Testament Perspective on Evangelization and Human Promotion. In Ukpong J, Okure T, Anyanwu J E, Okeke J C and Odoemene A N (eds). *Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millenium: Challenges and Prospects*. Port Harcourt, Nigeria: CIWA Press.

Onwu N 1984-5. The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa. *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 42/2: 35-46.

Ritchie I 1998. *The Messiah whose nose know: The Legio Maria as Case Study*. Online Article: <http://www3.sympatico.ca/ian.ritchie/Legio.htm>, 2005-08-19.

Sampson C 1991. The Bible in the Midst of Woman. In Ackermann D, Draper J A, E Mashinini (eds.). *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*. South Africa: Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

Snyman G 2002. Playing the Role of Perpetrator in the World of Academia in South Africa. *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*, Issue 12.

Upkong J S 2000. Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions. In Dube M W, West G O (eds), *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, Mass: Brill.

West G O 1999. *Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical reading of the Bible*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic.

West G O 1997. On the eve of an African Biblical Studies: Trajectories and trends. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (November 1997) 99-115.

West G O n.d. Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy. Online Article: http://www.willamette.edu/chorastrangers/articles/pdf/gow_Indigenous_Exegesis.pdf, 2005-08-19.

West G O 2000. Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch. In Dube M W, West G O (eds), *The Bible in Africa: transactions, trajectories, and trends*. Boston, Mass: Brill.

West G O 1991. Silenced woman speak: Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics. In *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*. South Africa: Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

Yorke G L 2003. *Biblical hermeneutics: an Afrocentric perspective*. Online Article:
<http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=7348&PXSLFile=unisa/accessibility.xsl>, 2005-08-19.