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Learning from African Theologians and Their Hermeneutics: Some Reflections from a German Evangelical Theologian

Hans-Georg Wuench

There are at least two dangers in comparing African and European (or Western) theology. These dangers are generalization or even stereotyping, on one hand, and subjectivity or even arbitrariness on the other hand. One should not think of all Africans as similar in their way of doing theology. In fact, there is nothing like *'the African theology'*, just as one cannot identify *'the European theology'* or even *'the European Evangelical theology'*. This article therefore presents a very subjective and selective view. In no way is it meant to be an exhaustive academic survey of the specialties of African theological thinking.

Some years ago, I was a co-supervisor for a German master's student in Old Testament at the University of South Africa (UNISA). We were at a study conference for master's and doctoral students in Germany, and my student was presenting a paper on the ideas and plans for his dissertation. Two UNISA professors were also present at this presentation. At the end of it, one of them asked the

student what the relevance of his dissertation would be for the church in Germany and his own personal Christian life. I shall never forget the look on my student's face. He had never ever thought about this. His dissertation was on an academic-theological question. Why should it have relevance for the church or for his own Christian life?

I observed the same phenomenon time and again in the students who followed him. It became clear to me that there is a difference in the understanding of *'theology'* between Africa and Germany. In this article, I shall look into this difference in greater detail.

In the first main section of this article, I will refer primarily to essays from *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton. This book serves as a starting point for an attempt to identify ways of looking at theology that could be considered especially African.

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I. African Theology on the Way: Identifying Specialties

1. African theology as opposed to Western theology

In his article on biblical hermeneutics in Africa, Gerald West from the University of KwaZulu-Natal presents his hermeneutic as a development of so-called 'intercultural hermeneutics', which is, according to West, the 'most common African form of ideological orientation'.¹ One important element of this intercultural hermeneutics is 'the recognition that African biblical interpretation is always in some sense "over against", or in opposition to, the forms of biblical interpretation imposed by and inherited from missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies'.²

The period of colonization and mission, which were connected to a great extent, strongly influenced theology in Africa. Perhaps one should rather say that it dominated African theology for a long time. Missionary theology was imposed on African churches as *the* theology of the Bible. There was no distinction whatsoever between the Bible and the theology proclaimed by missionaries.

This missionary theology had at least two main weaknesses, as John Parratt points out. The first was the 'awareness that Christianity had been introduced into Africa during the colonial era, and seems to have prospered largely because it had been

supported by the ruling European powers'. The second weakness 'was the tendency of missionary Christianity to devalue traditional African culture and especially to dismiss traditional religion as heathen or pagan'. This leads to 'the two chief concerns of theology in Africa', as Parratt goes on to say, namely, 'on the one hand its relationship to political power, and on the other its relationship to African culture'.³

It is, however, not only the influence of the missionaries in presenting the gospel, defining theology and building churches that must be noted. The missionary influence also led to the prominence of Western (very often German) academic theology in African theology. As South African Bishop Desmond Tutu complained in 1997, 'We are too much concerned to maintain standards which Cambridge or Harvard or Montpellier have set, even when these are utterly inappropriate for our situations'.⁴

For a long time, for example, one had to study at least a few semesters of theology in Germany if one wanted to be a 'real' theologian in South Africa. These two forces, 'missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies', as West puts it,⁵ are still very strong in Africa. Hence defining an 'African theology' always means consciously grappling with this reality.

This discussion with the colonial

1 Gerald O. West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), 23.

2 West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 24.

3 John Parratt, 'Introduction', in Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 3–4.

4 Desmond M. Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology: Soulmates or Antagonists', in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 43.

5 West, 'Biblical Hermeneutic', 24.

past can be seen in almost every essay cited in this article. The responses are manifold and in part even contradictory. What *has* found consistent approval among all of them is the stress on the necessity to connect biblical truth to everyday life in Africa.

2. Integrating real life and theology

Something that strikes a European theologian as very specifically African—even if it is not explicitly mentioned in any article—is the numerous citations of African proverbs in many of the articles. The very first sentence of Stinton's book is a proverb: 'When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.'⁶ This may not sound strange to African readers, but for theological books in Germany, it would sound somewhat strange and inappropriate to start with a proverb.

This shows one of the major differences between African and Western theology: African theology always strives to be rooted in everyday life. According to Holter, this '*presence* within the social, political, and ecclesiastical context of Africa' can be seen as a 'most characteristic feature of African theology'.⁷

6 Diane B. Stinton, *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), xiv.

7 Knut Holter, 'It's Not Only a Question of Money! African Old Testament Scholarship between the Myths and Meanings of the South and the Money and Methods of the North', *Old Testament Essays* 11, no. 2 (1998), 241.

3. Integrating real life means integration of non-academics

Gerald West writes, 'The African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy alone; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities'.⁸ Whereas there is a growing distance between the academic world and the everyday life of Christians in Germany (and also in many other countries of the Western world), African theology consciously tries to bring these two worlds together.

Stinton, a Canadian/African theologian, stresses this in her preface to her edited volume. There she refers to the story of the Emmaus disciples:

Just as the Emmaus disciples shared their hopes and fears, their certainties and their doubts, their grief and their joy 'on the way' of discovering the Risen Jesus with them, so African believers continue to grapple with recognizing and appropriating the Risen Christ in our midst today.⁹

Stinton calls this discussion between the disciples and Jesus a 'Christian Palaver' that has many similarities with the African culture. One very important element in this kind of African palaver is the following: 'Every member of the community has the right to participate, whether in speech or symbolic action. Hence African palaver guarantees equality in terms of accessing speech'.¹⁰

8 West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 29.

9 Stinton, *African Theology*, xx.

10 Stinton, *African Theology*, xvii.

4. Integrating real life leads to a less strict and extreme theology

The fact that theology in Africa seems far more rooted in everyday life than is often the case with European theological thinking has certain consequences. One of these is that African theology often seems less strict and extreme than Western theology. Or, as the late Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako wrote in his reflections on William Wade Harris, he (Harris) 'appropriated the truth of the Bible not as patterns of "belief in" the truth, but more in line with the African pattern of "participation in" the truth.'¹¹

In his article in Stinson's book, Gerald West depicts liberation theology and feminist theology in Africa. What is very clear from his presentation is that both theologies are rooted in the experiences of everyday life. With respect to feminist theology (with their special African implementations of 'womanism' and 'bosadi'), West writes, 'It is from within African feminist hermeneutics that the most sustained engagement with postcolonial hermeneutics has come.' This theology has its 'starting point in the realities of ordinary Africans'.¹²

The Catholic theologian Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator formulates this idea with the following words: 'Theology is about life.' Making sense of the experiences of everyday life, Orobator says,

in the light of faith is what makes theology contextual. Understood

this way what we call theology differs considerably from the exact sciences. Researchers engaged in the latter always strive to isolate their experience so that they can examine the data objectively, that is, without allowing their emotions, feelings and personal experience to influence the result of the experimentation.¹³

Another consequence of integrating real life and theology is that the personality of the theologian is not excluded from but consciously included in her or his theology.

5. Integrating real life means integrating the theologian himself or herself

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a consistent thrust in the academic world at German universities for a 'neutral' and 'nonbiased' approach to theology. Students in their first semester were asked to leave their childish faith behind when they entered university. Only in the last two or three decades has this view gradually changed. It has now finally been replaced with an increasing realization that there is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to theology. This realization is often viewed as something very sad, but which cannot be changed.

African theology, in contrast, gladly embraces the fact that we as human beings as well as our circumstances and cultural surroundings always were and will be part of our theology.

¹¹ Kwame Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scriptures', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 16.

¹² West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 24–27.

¹³ Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, 'Contextual Theological Methodologies', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 4.

As S. I. Ihuoma says, 'All that happens in one's life has some religious connotations. ... This is not a problem which we have to cope, but an opportunity to make our theology "fit for life"'.¹⁴

Many articles thus contain references to personal aspects of the author's experience. Stinton explicitly encourages the reader to pay attention to these aspects: 'Even before listening for the content of their ideas, get a feel for who the speaker is through the bio-data provided and through any additional research you can do. A person's theology almost certainly reflects his or her life experience, so try to discern what has shaped the person's view.'¹⁵

6. Integrating real life means dialogue between culture and Bible

The last and most important consequence of integrating real life and theology is the importance of the context for theology. West cites Justin Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method, who says that 'the goal of comparative interpretation is the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation.'¹⁶ To West, this is

something that distinguishes African biblical hermeneutics from traditional Western hermeneutics:

While Western forms of biblical interpretation have been reluctant, until recently, to acknowledge that text and context are always, at least implicitly, in conversation, the dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. ... Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context. ... While Western forms of biblical interpretation have tended to hide or omit the contemporary context of the biblical interpreter, African biblical interpretation is overt about the context from which and for which the biblical text is interpreted.¹⁷

For Orobator, the concentration on the African context is most important. Context for him is 'the primary factor of theological reflection in African Christianity and presents theology as a discipline grounded in the ordinary experience of Christians and their faith communities'. An appropriate theology, therefore, is a theology 'that makes sense not only to the theologian, but also especially to his or her community. ... Context is to faith what soil is to a seed.'¹⁸

The dialogue between the biblical text and today's context can be seen as a very dynamic one. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, professor at the University

¹⁴ Sylvester I. Ihuoma, *Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture in Dialogue with African Theology: A Contextual Analysis* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2004), 193–94.

¹⁵ Stinton, *African Theology*, xx

¹⁶ West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 22, citing Justin S. Ukpong, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions', in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa:*

Transactions, Trajectories and Trends (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 24.

¹⁷ West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 22–23, 31.

¹⁸ Orobator, 'Contextual', 3–5.

of Pretoria and professor extraordinarius at UNISA, writes as follows:

I opt for the ... approach, which allows unrestricted movement between the text and the context. On the one hand, the context provides the operational platform on which theology has to be done. On the other, the text provides the analytical stimulus for creative reflection. The theology of reconstruction is based on this two-way communication between the text and the context.¹⁹

With the term 'theology of reconstruction' Mugambi denominates a theology that tries to reconstruct the Biblical truth in light of the questions of today. Mugambi writes further: 'This approach takes biblical hermeneutics seriously, discerning the meaning intended by canonical texts and relating that meaning to specific cultural contexts. The message takes precedence over the medium of its transmission.'²⁰

We have just identified five features that characterize African ways of reading the Bible and doing theology: (1) the integration of real life, which leads to (2) the integration of non-academics, (3) less strict or extreme theology, (4) the integration of the theologian personally and (5) dialogue between culture and the Bible. We shall now show how these five features are applied to the interpretation of biblical texts and used in theological discussions. To do so, we

will refer to the *Africana Bible* and the *Africa Bible Commentary*.

II. The *Africana Bible* and the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*: The Application of African Specialties

The *Africana Bible* is a project initiated by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Scholars from Africa and the African diaspora came together to present a broad view on what could be called 'African views on the Hebrew Bible'. The different authors were, as the editors write in their preface, asked 'to demonstrate how *Africana* traditions, lore, and lived experience can be creatively deployed in reading, probing, conversing with, challenging, (at times) ignoring, extending, and creating meaning from and in partnership with the First Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha'.²¹

The second book to which I refer is the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*. This commentary on the whole Bible was initiated by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) and produced together with the mission organization Serving in Mission. It is aimed at pastors and lay people in churches in Africa. Its preface states, 'The *ABC* should be African in terms of its authorship and its content, which must reflect its African context. While remaining true to the biblical text, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities.'²² All au-

¹⁹ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, 'Theology of Reconstruction', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 144.

²⁰ Mugambi, 'Theology of Reconstruction', 144.

²¹ Hugh R. Page and Randall C. Bailey, *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), xxvii.

²² Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Com-*

thors of the *ABC* are seminary or university professors living and working in Africa. They were encouraged to 'use African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent'.²³

The *ABC* contains more than 1,600 pages. For this article I reviewed its commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Ruth, Job, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel and Malachi, as well as all 78 additional articles on special theological questions. I sought to determine how the abovementioned specialties of African theology were appropriated in these books or, in other words, how theory revealed itself in practice.

In discussing the findings, we shall see some differences between the two books. Some of these differences are due to the different ideas behind the books; others arise from the fact that the *ABC* is intentionally an evangelical work.

1. Integrating real life and theology

The integration of real life and theology dominates both the *Africana Bible* and the *ABC* from the beginning. The preface to the former starts with the sentence, 'Culture and life circumstances affect the way people read sacred literature.'²⁴ As already cited, the *ABC* states its task as applying biblical teachings and truths to African realities. Both books therefore strive to integrate the real life of African people today into theology.

Both books make extensive use of African proverbs, songs, adages and metaphors. While this may be more or less normal for African readers, it is not in the Western context. There are numerous examples in both books. An article on 'African and African Diasporan Hermeneutics' starts with the adage, 'The grass is always greener on the other side.'²⁵ 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible' from Madipoane Masenya starts with a Zulu song from South Africa: 'What have we done? Our sin is our blackness—Whites are dogs.'²⁶ The same author opens her article on Jeremiah with a Northern Sotho proverb: 'A child who refused to listen [to advice] landed in "initiation schools" and claimed that the schools were his extended family.'²⁷ This proverb then serves as a kind of *leitmotif* throughout the rest of the article. It summarizes the message of the book of Jeremiah, as this result was especially true for Judah in Jeremiah's time.

The same connection between theology and real life is also found in the *ABC*. There are numerous examples, but the case can be made clearly by looking at the commentary on Ruth by Isabel Apawo Phiri, who was born in Malawi but now works at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The commentary takes up only six pages, but it cites nine proverbs from the Chewa

mentary, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), ix.

23 Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, ix.

24 Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, xxv.

25 Randall C. Bailey, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., 'African and African Diasporan Hermeneutics', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 19.

26 Madipoane Masenya, 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 33.

27 Madipoane Masenya, 'Jeremiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 147.

in Malawi.

Another way to integrate real life and theology is to link theological truth to examples of everyday life. These examples could either be stories of true people or legends that reflect on situations from everyday life. Following are a few examples from both books, starting with the *Africana Bible*.

In her article on 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible', Masenya tells the story of Bathepa Maja, a retired nurse, who engaged herself in establishing a community home-based care center in her rural village in Limpopo. She then uses this story as 'a hermeneutical lens through which one can get a small glimpse of Africana women's realities in relation to the Bible'.²⁸

Davidson, Ukpogon and Yorke, in their article on 'The Bible and Africana Life', use 'two popular African stories' to show the difficult relationship between the Bible and Africans:

One story relates that when white missionaries first came to Africa, they presented Africans with the Bible and asked them to close their eyes for prayer. On opening their eyes, Africans discovered that the whites had taken away their land and left them with the Bible. ... The other story tells of an African woman who carried the Bible with her wherever she went. When asked why she did that, she responded that it was because the Bible was the only book that could read her.²⁹

We find the same connection to

everyday life also in the *ABC*. In his article on 'Leadership', the Nigerian theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo starts with an African legend: 'Many traditional African ideas about leadership are embedded in the Kikuyu legend about the despotic king Gikuyu who was overthrown because of his tyrannical rule and replaced by a council of elders, chosen from the older men of the community who had previously been warriors'.³⁰

This example is very interesting because it shows that the content of the legend itself is not as important. One could easily replace this story with the general statement that throughout history, tyrannical rulers were overthrown and replaced by people from the military. What is the effect of citing an old legend? Does it give credibility to the statement itself? It seems that the effect is just to link the theological truth to experiences of everyday life, which are somehow preserved in this legend.

2. Integration of non-academics

In his article on 'The Bible in Twenty-First-Century Africa' in the *Africana Bible*, David Tuesday Adamo, a theologian from Nigeria, cites these words from Justin Ukpogon: 'The ordinary people's approach to the Bible is informing scholarly reading practices; critical reading masses are being nurtured at the grassroots, and the hitherto muted voices of the ordinary people are coming alive in academic biblical discourse.' According to Adamo, this is part of the 'distinctive African tradition of interpretation', which began to emerge during the twentieth

²⁸ Masenya, 'Women', 34.

²⁹ Steet Vernyl Davidson, Justin Ukpogon, and Gosnell Yorke, 'The Bible and Africana Life', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 40–41.

³⁰ Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'Leadership', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 546.

century. Adams refers to Ukpong and West as the pioneers of this methodology and adds, 'I believe very strongly that this type of African reading should be classified alongside other academic approaches to the Bible.'³¹

Masenya writes of her experiences with the laywoman Bethhepa Maja, introduced above:

I am intrigued by her hermeneutics. It does not require a background in Bible studies or biblical language proficiency. ... This is a refreshing break from those approaches to hermeneutics and theology that most of us have been trained to employ, particularly during the apartheid era: individualistic, detached, spiritual, and futuristic.³²

There were no clear examples of the integration of non-academics into the theological debate in the *ABC*, likely due to this book's character as a commentary.

3. A less strict and extreme theology

The relevance of this point can only be shown indirectly, since there is, unsurprisingly, no intentional reflection on it. Nevertheless, it can still be seen very clearly in the overall attitude of both books. The *Africana Bible* makes this point very clearly from the beginning:

[This book] uses various methodologies, some more traditional and others decidedly experimental. Contributors to *The Africana Bi-*

ble have been encouraged to 'step outside' of established disciplinary and genre boundaries and to employ African and African Diaspora stories, poetry, art, and music as actual dialogue partners in the interpretive process. ... Readers should leave this volume with an appreciation of the remarkable diversity, scope, and tone that characterize modern Africana encounters with the First Testament.³³

Thus, from the beginning, the *Africana Bible* seeks intentionally to be colourful, diverse and multi-faceted.

The *ABC* has a somewhat more restricted basis for its theological thinking, because contributors were 'expected to accept the AEA Statement of Faith as a guideline for their work'. However, there is still a great diversity at work. As Adeyemo indicated in defining the project, 'The contributors to the *ABC* should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The theological editors will respect this diversity, within the bounds set by the AEA Statement of Faith.'³⁴

To make clear the differences that are possible within the *ABC*, let us look at one example. In his article on 'The Role of the Ancestors', the Nigerian theologian Yusuf Turaki speaks about the place of ancestors in traditional African thinking. He then discusses whether it is possible to present Jesus as an African ancestor. He sees some advantages in this approach but also some problems. He concludes:

The best approach may be modelled on the one taken in the book

³¹ David Tuesday Adamo, 'The Bible in Twenty-first-century Africa', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 28–30.

³² Masenya, 'Women', 37.

³³ Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, xxvii.

³⁴ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, ix.

of Hebrews. ... Taking this approach, it can be said that Jesus has become the mediator between God and African society. Consequently, African veneration, worship and respect for the ancestors should now properly be addressed to Jesus as the mediator. ... And just as he fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the Jewish religious system, so he has fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the ancestral cult and traditional religions of Africa.³⁵

This approach to African religions and cults seems relatively moderate. Instead of bluntly rejecting the idea of the role of ancestors, Turaki tries to modify this idea so that it fits with Christian truth.

In his article on 'Idolatry', Emeka Nwankpa, also from Nigeria, takes a rather different position. Nwankpa writes:

Unlike Paul, some African theologians have called for accommodation of African traditional religions, claiming that the High God worshipped in those religions is the same as the God of the Judeo-Christian religion. Some even refer to Jesus as 'a paramount ancestor'. By doing this, they validate traditional religious beliefs and worship that the Bible condemns.³⁶

4. Integrating the theologian personally

There are many examples of the integration of the theologian with his or

her personal history in both books. In the *Africana Bible*, one example stands out. In her article on the book of Job, Masenya introduces her approach by saying, 'In the story that follows, the narrator [Masenya herself], a contemporary Job, picks up on some of the issues raised by the character of Job in the Hebrew Bible in her own struggle to wrestle with God amid suffering.'³⁷

Masenya then tells about the tragic loss of her son in a car accident and her questions about this tragedy. 'Why did my son die?' she asks. Masenya opens her heart and pours out her questions, her doubts and her accusations, just as Job did. At the end she writes:

So huge and sovereign is this Sacred Other, who has become and continues to be the object of our yelling, anger, criticism, and frustrations, that God remains patient with all those who wrestle with God in the midst of unjust suffering. If these sufferers persist in their steadfastness with God, they, like the biblical Job, will eventually say: 'I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you' (Job 42:5).³⁸

There are other examples of the integration of the theologian's life into theology in the *Africana Bible*, but none as impressive as this one.

We also find examples in the *ABC*. In the commentary on Genesis, the Beninese theologian Barnabe Assohoto, one of its two authors, writes as follows:

It is very encouraging to have the

35 Yusuf Turaki, 'The Role of the Ancestors', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 480.

36 Emeka Nwankpa, 'Idolatry', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 866.

37 Madipoane Masenya, 'Job', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 237–38.

38 Masenya, 'Job', 239–40.

Most High as one's defence. I (Dr Assohoto) can testify that there was a time in my own life when those who loved me felt that others were seeking evil power to destroy me. From two different sources I received plaques engraved with the words of Isaiah 54:17: 'No weapon forged against you will prevail.' Whenever my eyes caught these words, I felt a sense of assurance that I was well guarded.³⁹

In her commentary on the book of Ruth, Isabel Apawo Phiri tells of one of her sisters, who was named Manzunzo (suffering) because she was born two months after the death of their father.⁴⁰ Tewoldemedhin Habtu from Eritrea, in his commentary on Job, tells about a habit in his own culture, which shows similarities to the story of Job:

In my culture, when a person dies the bereaved family sit in mourning for seven days, with community members constantly coming to console them. With the pressure of modern life, these days of mourning have now been reduced to three.⁴¹

To African readers, these examples may not be recognized as something special. However, in the Western context, they are unusual. Authors typically do not reflect on their own personal life experience in their biblical commentaries. In African culture, it seems to be perfectly normal.

³⁹ Barnabe Assohoto, 'Genesis', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 33.

⁴⁰ Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'Ruth', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 319.

⁴¹ Tewoldemedhin Habtu, 'Job', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 574.

5. Dialogue between culture and Bible

The last and most important aspect of African Bible interpretation is its dialogue between culture and the Bible. It is not possible to show the abundance of examples on this point. The few mentioned here simply scratch the surface.

There are at least two ways to understand this dialogue. Both of them could be found in both books, but with different accentuations. The first way is to understand African culture as the receiver in this dialogue. Maybe it would be better to speak of it as a monologue since the culture is not really active. The goal is to make biblical truth understandable and conceivable in the African culture. The second way is to see this relationship of Bible and culture more as a kind of dialogue between equals, with the goal of furthering an inter-relationship between Bible and culture. In *The Africana Bible*, the second way is prominent, whereas in the *ABC* the first one plays the biggest role.

a) The Bible speaking into African culture

Elelwani Farisani, recently chair of the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at UNISA, writes in his article on the book of Obadiah in the *Africana Bible*, 'Ethnic tension described by Obadiah between the Israelites and the Edomites may have relevance in Africa today, especially in the context of recent xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa.'⁴²

⁴² Elelwani Farisani, 'Obadiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 181.

In his article on Micah, Farisani writes: 'Micah's meticulous relevance for Africa intensifies as poverty, corruption, HIV/AIDS, and moral decay plague the African continent. Accordingly, there is a need for socioeconomic, political, and moral renewal in Africa.' He further argues, 'The most important way to reflect on the eighth-century prophet Micah is to use him as a new paradigm in a quest for an African theology of renewal, transformation, reconciliation, and reconstruction.'⁴³

The examples of this way of letting the Bible speak into the African culture in the *ABC* are numerous. Instead of piling up examples, I will turn now to an article on this specific question, written by the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako and entitled 'Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition'. It starts by declaring, 'The *Africa Bible Commentary* attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and in so doing to seek ways in which the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures.' Bediako continues, 'We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense of who we are in our cultures and traditions.'⁴⁴

Bediako states that our task is more than simply 'extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture. Rather, he contends:

The application of Scripture to our cultures is a gradual process of coming together, of life touching

life. ... To look for a once and for all biblical 'answer' to a particular cultural problem is to misunderstand the process whereby a community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and come to participate in that community.⁴⁵

b) Bible and culture as partners in dialogue

We can find many examples of mutual dialogue between African culture and the Bible in *The Africana Bible*. First, the Bible and African culture are brought into dialogue by way of analogy, such as in the article by Makhosazana K. Nzimande from the University of Zululand on Isaiah. Nzimande writes, 'Ancient Israelite and Judean struggles under the Babylonian empire that Isaiah sought to address are analogous to black people's struggles in post-apartheid South Africa.'⁴⁶ She adds a few pages later:

Evidently, Europe and America have emerged as the 'Babylonian empire' of our time. Within this economically suicidal postapartheid context, the prophet's anti-Babylonian political stance in Isaiah is deeply needed in levelling a sharp theological critique against the capitalist exploitation of globalization and the subsequent suffering it inflicts on South African blacks.⁴⁷

Another example of this way of analogy can be found in Madipoane Masenya's article on Jeremiah:

⁴³ Elelwani Farisani, 'Micah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 190–92.

⁴⁴ Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as Interpreter of Culture and Tradition', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3.

⁴⁵ Bediako, 'Scripture as Interpreter', 4.

⁴⁶ Makhosazana K. Nzimande, 'Isaiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 139.

⁴⁷ Nzimande, 'Isaiah', 142.

The 587 B.C.E./1994 C.E. catastrophes in Judah and white South Africa, respectively, show that no human leader is indispensable. Thus human leaders need to remain humble and vigilant even as they serve fellow human beings who have equally been created in the image of the divine leader.⁴⁸

Examples of this kind of dialogue are rarer in the *ABC*, but still they can be identified. In his article on 'Christians and Politics', the Nigerian theologian James B. Kantiok writes:

Jesus, too, did not separate religion and politics. In his mission statement in Luke 4:18–19 he declared that his ministry was to those suffering various forms of bondage and oppression, including economic oppression (poverty), physical oppression (diseases and disabilities), political oppression (injustice and oppressive rule) and demonic oppression (various forms of occult practices). These same evils plague Africa today.⁴⁹

George Kinoti, a theologian from Kenya, writes in his article on 'Christians and the Environment':

If we are to be obedient to God and look after his creation, we must not ignore what is happening. Like Noah, we must work to rescue all creatures in danger of extinction—whether the danger comes from pollution, habitat change, overfishing, poaching or any other cause.⁵⁰

III. Conclusions

What can Western theologians learn from African theology? The answer to this question is not easy, keeping in mind that there is neither *the* Western theologian nor *the* African theologian. However, noting the differences between Western and African ways of doing theology can stimulate and eventually even change our ways of theologizing.

Knut Holter identified one of the most important things to learn from African theology as 'the question of relevance. ... African scholars', he stated, 'are, generally speaking, far more eager than their Western colleagues in emphasising that OT scholarship should serve church and society.' Holter warns that 'without listening to these concerns, I fear that the guild of Western OT scholarship might ultimately face the danger of being of interest to nobody but itself'.⁵¹

To really learn from African scholars presupposes an open-minded dialogue. The point of such a dialogue 'is not to copy each other's interpretative experiences and concerns, but to challenge each other's more fundamental biblical interpretation'.⁵²

If we as theologians want to be relevant to our society, we have to take the context of our readers and our churches more seriously in the process of exegesis. It is not enough to do appropriation *after* exegesis, but we should learn to understand context

48 Masenya, 'Jeremiah', 151.

49 James B. Kantiok, 'Christians and Politics', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1027.

50 George Kinoti, 'Christians and the Environment', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 618.

51 Holter, 'It's Not Only a Question', 248.

52 Knut Holter, 'Does a Dialogue between Africa and Europe Make Sense?' in Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (eds.), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 75.

as something that accompanies the whole process of understanding biblical texts. As Snoek stresses, there was a 'long discussion held in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the relation between exegesis and actualisation. For a multitude of reasons ... exegesis and actualisation have become increasingly distant from each other within academia.'⁵³

It is our task to overcome that distance and make theology relevant for our culture and society. This calls for more wholeness or unity of theology and life, academia and church. The task before us cannot be simply to copy methods or contents of African

theology. However, we can learn from each other. For example, the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu stress the need for an African theology:

Let us develop our insights about the corporateness of human existence in the face of excessive Western individualism, about the wholeness of the person when others are concerned for Hellenistic dichotomies of soul and body, about the reality of the spiritual when others are made desolate with the poverty of the material. Let African theology enthuse about the awesomeness of the transcendent when others are embarrassed to speak about the King, high and lifted up, whose train fills the temple.⁵⁴

May Western theology join in this enthusiasm!

53 Hans Snoek, 'Key Concepts in the Dialogue between African and European Biblical Scholars', in Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (eds.), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 92–93.

54 Tutu, 'Black Theology', 44.