

Siblings or Antagonists?

The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from the North Atlantic and African Worlds

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In the latter half of the twentieth century a new situation has emerged in the history of biblical scholarship. The existence of scholarly communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America has made possible a truly international discussion. This paper will provide a brief overview to the ethos of biblical scholarship in both the North Atlantic and African contexts and then examine a proposal of one African biblical scholar, Justin Ukpong, whose advocacy of "Inculturation Hermeneutics" provides useful avenues of discussion between scholars from differing contexts.

I. North Atlantic¹ Biblical scholarship

A characteristic common throughout the North Atlantic post-Enlightenment scholarly community, in all of its various disciplines, has been the desire or attempt to learn, describe or study the truth or reality as we experience it in a manner free from subjective bias. Such study was to be done in a way that one independent observer could verify the findings or conclusions of another scholar based upon his or her own observations. The reliability of a scholarly observation or conclusion was judged according to the reproducibility of the findings or evidence upon which the scholarly conclusion was based. Thus evidence-based, reproducible observations and assertions became the standard of North Atlantic scholarship. This was most clearly seen in the empirical method of scientific research,² in which this distancing from subjectivity was seen as a move towards gaining clear, objective and reliable insight into the object of study.

Concurrent with this general tendency within the North Atlantic scholarly world, biblical scholarship underwent a shift away from the individual and communal "knowing" of the Bible as the word of God within the context of the church. In the 18th, 19th and into the 20th centuries, the scholarly biblical guild became more and more distant from ecclesiastical constraints. Study and critique were seen to have little to do with sacrament, worship, or prayer.

As North Atlantic biblical scholars came to see their task as separate from that of speaking for the churches, they have come to see their scholarly activity as related more to the secular academy.³ The purpose of most of their writing is to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion of the ancient texts in the Bible or other texts and artifacts related to the "biblical world." Less attention is given to the more "theological" task of clarifying "the meaning of the word of God in scripture" or to the "pastoral" task of "encouraging the faithful."

These North Atlantic university and college-based biblical scholars have opted for a mode of "knowing" the Bible primarily through the power of reason.⁴ Biblical exegesis sought to adhere to a methodology that was neutral. Bias became synonymous with error. A shift from theocentric to anthropocentric dialogue and study became the inevitable correlate. For some this was simply a limitation of what it meant to know and study the truth, for some a liberation from the constraints of the church as an organization imposing its own objectives and its possibly "superstitious" embellishments, and for others "the inevitable march of progress."⁵ Modernity as the study of the objective world by a neutral observer became a guiding principle of research in the North Atlantic context.

One of the clearest expositions of this secular basis of biblical exegesis comes from the nineteenth-century German scholar William Wrede (1859-1906) for whom "history" is the discipline which rules over the study of the "New Testament."

I do not intend to dwell on this question of principle for long, but I must state from the outset that my comments presuppose the strictly historical character of New Testament theology. The old doctrine of inspiration is recognized by academic theology, including very largely the conservative wing, to be untenable. For logical thinking there can be no middle position between inspired writings and historical documents...How the systematic theologian gets on with ... [the] results [of

Biblical theology] and deals with them – that is his own affair. Like every other real science, New Testament theology has its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology. What could dogmatics offer it? Could dogmatics teach New Testament theology to see the facts correctly? At most it could colour them. Could it correct the facts that were found? To correct facts is absurd. Could it legitimize them? Facts need no legitimation.⁶

Wrede goes on to argue that the language of “New Testament theology” itself is highly problematic: the New Testament documents are simply one collection of some early Christian writings. The idea that they would be canonical, that is, normative in some sense, is anachronistic. The idea that they are any more “apostolic” than other early Christian writings is untenable. According to Wrede, the serious researcher, that is the scholar who is interested in the history of early Christian texts, will recognize that there is no one unified New Testament theology, but rather a variety of theologies (or, actually, “religions”). Rather than find a New Testament theology, the researcher will describe the history of early Christian religions and religious ideas, an essentially anthropocentric task.

For many in the North Atlantic world, the position articulated by Wrede won the day. In the secular world of biblical exegesis, faith, dogma and church tradition had no power over the interpreter. Biblical interpretation became historical-critical investigation as this was pursued by autonomous, reasonable, individual (usually male) scholars of European universities. Interpretation of texts that was not based on the canons of historical-critical research was often denigrated as “pre-critical” and “unscientific”: more in the realm of speculation, devotion and the history of dogma than of textual study.⁷

In effect, the biblical guild edited out how other interests could be involved in the task of interpreting the Bible. Its view of history necessarily became narrowed. Historical study came to mean only the history of the text in its ancient setting as this was understood according to the canons of modern critical research. The scholarly task became confined to uncovering the past. It became enough for scholars to attempt to describe the meaning of the text to its assumed original authors and readers. Historical research came to be considered an objective description of past events and ideas.

It is now more widely acknowledged that the reader of a text will bring his or her own social location to the interpretative task. For many North Atlantic scholars one’s social location has been a cause of concern only in so far as it is acknowledged that everyone who reads will necessarily have a bias. This bias is usually considered a problematic reality and so many North Atlantic scholars will, therefore, counsel that caution be taken not to read one’s own bias into the text. It will usually be argued that the best way to avoid a biased reading is to pay careful attention to the proper use of critical tools in exegesis. This is certainly to be considered sage advice. However, the use of critical tools in historical research is not a complete answer. First of all, the critical tools must still be employed by a particular reader who comes from a particular location. Tools do not necessarily guarantee objectivity. But secondly, and of more importance for our purposes, is the question of whether the discovery of an objective reading is a sufficient goal of biblical research. Often excluded in the traditional historical-critical paradigm is an analysis of the continuing history of the text in the lives of its varied contemporary readers. Readings which purport to be purely historical analyses often bracket the pragmatic implications of historical research. These implications are always present, of course, but they are often considered to be outside of the realm of the biblical scholar.

There are signs, however, that any broadly held consensus about historical-critical exegesis appears to be breaking down. There is presently a growing suspicion that the approach of scholars like Wrede was not entirely value-free, objective, and scientific. Wrede believed in the rather optimistic view that “facts” are directly accessible if the serious scholar uses the right tools and approaches the text unencumbered by theological concerns. But according to some historical-critical exegesis of the type advocated by Wrede has resulted in a contraction of exegesis. Walter Wink points out that in contrast to the authors of biblical texts “bore witness to events which led them to faith,” biblical critics have fostered an attitude of “detached neutrality [which] in matters of faith is not neutrality at all, but already a decision against responding.”⁸ The scholar who believes in “the myth of detached neutrality,” which Wink refers to as “objectivism,” can only pretend to be neutral since “the scholar, like everyone else, has racial, sexual, and class interests to which he is largely blind and which are unconsciously reflected in his work.”⁹

In its struggle to be free of theological and ecclesial constraints, historical biblical criticism has in fact cut itself off "from any community for whose life its results might be significant," by which Wink appears to mean the church and its members.¹⁰ Clearly, Wink wants the biblical text and its interpretation to make a practical difference in peoples' lives.¹¹

For many like Wink, although certainly not for all, the historical-critical approach which has characterized much of the history of North Atlantic historical-critical exegesis has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The recognition that what a text is allowed to mean has been restricted by the methods employed in its investigation, has opened the doors to the present situation in biblical studies in which a bewildering variety of methodological approaches to biblical texts is practiced. For example, in recent years the investigation of the Bible as literature has received widespread attention. As Robert Alter and Frank Kermode wrote in 1987, "Over the past couple of decades...there has been a revival of interest in the literary qualities of these texts, in the virtues by which they continue to live as something other than archaeology."¹² The revival in "interest in the literary qualities" of biblical texts has been followed quickly by the emergence of canonical criticism, rhetorical criticism, and sociological and anthropological criticisms.

Even the meetings of academic biblical guilds show signs that questions of theology, of ideology and of culture are now issues that deserve to be (re)considered. No longer are meetings dominated exclusively by historical concerns. Discussions of the present meaning of texts are a regular part of every programme, for example, of the Society of Biblical Literature. The 1998 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting Program listed (in addition to more traditional program units such as "Aramaic Studies," "Biblical Lexicography," "Greco-Roman Religions," and "Pauline Epistles") units that reflect in their very name a broadening of scholarly interest beyond philological and historical concerns: "Bible and Cultural Studies," "Ideological Criticism," "Women in the Biblical World," "African-American Theology and Biblical Interpretation," "Christian Theology and the Bible," "Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation" and the "Bible in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean."¹³ Although historical-critical study is still the dominant mode of biblical interpretation in the North Atlantic biblical guild, signs are beginning to emerge that point to the growing importance of questions other than the traditional historical-critical ones. Indeed, even within any group of scholars interested in the historical study of "Q" or "Paul" there will be a wide variety of interests, approaches and commitments. A cursory investigation of a sample of the plethora of recent studies of the "historical Jesus," for example, will uncover not only a variety of historical assessments, but also a wide difference in the political, theological and ideological commitments underlying the different academic investigations.

In other words, the multiplicity of methods being used by scholars may point to some dissatisfaction with the constraints of the dominant paradigm. For many this appears to have opened fresh questions related to epistemology and hermeneutics. What does it mean to say that we understand a text? What does "knowing" a text mean? Is knowledge simply a matter of having power over a text? That is, is knowledge a matter of mastery, a matter of conquering a passage, so that we can now say that we have subdued it and now have dominion over it?¹⁴ Or is knowing a text also a matter of gaining wisdom for life, a matter of being fed and strengthened by a text. After centuries in which religious hierarchies claimed exclusive rights to the interpretation of the Bible, and after the modern period in which the historical critic was the authority, the issue of whose text this is has come to the surface. It has become clear that biblical scholars have a variety of commitments which they bring to the text. The postmodern situation denies that there is any neutral, god's-eye view from which a scholar can have a clear perspective on the true meaning of a text. As the centrality of historical-critical scholarship has been questioned, a variety of new "voices" have emerged seeking to bring their own perspectives to the text and claiming that their ways of "knowing" deserve a hearing. The guild is beginning to listen to the voices of those who speak of the text from perspectives that deeply question what had been the modernist consensus in biblical scholarship. The voices of feminist readers, North Atlantic racial minority readers and liberationist readers, especially from Latin America, are already well known in the North Atlantic scholarly world.

Readers from sub-Saharan Africa, however, are less well known in the North Atlantic world. Although the voices of African scholars have not as yet received much attention outside of Africa, their contributions

have the potential to contribute to the emerging global scholarly discussion by putting the question of the practical relevance of biblical interpretation squarely on the table. For African scholars investigation of an ancient biblical text must make a difference in peoples' lives; the text must be read with a view to its implications for living.

II. African Biblical Scholarship

Current academic African exegesis¹⁵ has emerged in contexts in which the questions of North Atlantic culture, questions of modernity and postmodernity, are discussed not by those who consider themselves to have benefited from the modern world but by those who perceive themselves to be modernity's victims. Modernity, seen from the vantage point of one of its most noted landmarks, the "discovery" of the Americas by Columbus in 1492, has for Africa, as for the rest of the "third world,"¹⁶ not been a time of discovering and conquering, but a time of being conquered and dominated.¹⁷ For Africa in particular, the emergence of a well-defined North Atlantic worldview known as "modernity" coincided with its invasion by slavers,¹⁸ explorers and colonizers,¹⁹ and missionaries.²⁰ Africa was dragged into a modern age which was not of its own making and which appears to have been little to its benefit. In most parts of the continent the postcolonial aftermath of Africa's complicated modern history has been a perceived loss of African identity, almost constant political upheaval, continuous economic chaos, wars, political assassinations, widespread malnutrition, lack of education and woefully inadequate health care. According to John Pobee, a New Testament scholar from Ghana,

Of course there are pockets of poverty in the so-called affluent Northern hemisphere. But poverty in Africa is pervasive and acute. Although there is a small rich elite in every African country, the general run of the people are poor. Everywhere there are signs of the unfulfilled if exaggerated aspirations of the people at independence vis-à-vis decent living standards and security for the future. Large-scale poverty, suffering and degradation mark the continent.

...These indices of poverty are as much the result of Africa being assimilated to the North, being treated as the "backyard" of the nations of the North, as self-inflicted through bad planning and ruthless power-drunk African leaders who have no qualms in "raping" their own people. Abuses of human dignity are much in evidence everywhere in Africa. Poverty and marginalization then are experienced at the gut level.²¹

The emergence of postcolonial African states has not meant the emergence of African peoples who feel at home with modernity. Even if they do not always function well, African nations do have many of the trappings of the modern North Atlantic world, modern modes of transportation and communication, political, military and legal systems, schools, newspapers and hospitals. Africa has benefited (and suffered) from some of the products of the modern world. Although there have been many changes in Africa in the past century, not all of them could be considered "progress." And in many ways Africa has resisted modernity - especially in its religious sensibilities. The North Atlantic perception of the world has little room for God. This is not so in Africa. For most Africans, religion was and still is central to life in all of its dimensions. The universe is not a system closed to the supernatural or the sacred, but is a well-populated place in which ancestors, divinities, and spirits play important roles in day to day living.

The recent history of Africa includes a thriving Christianity.²² Mission-founded churches, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox are found in virtually every city, town and village south of the Sahara. Even more prolific has been the growth of African instituted churches.²³ Some of these churches are groups that have broken away from or have been expelled from mission-founded churches. Many have grown up entirely independent of any other denomination, often called into being by a prophetic leader. These groups are attractive because they are perceived as more authentically African, especially as they incorporate or allow such elements into church life as African music and dancing and tolerance of African forms of family life, and encourage religious practices such as exorcism, healing rituals, divination, prophecy and vision. After many years of discouraging such practices, the mission-founded churches have now begun to learn from African instituted churches and to include some of these same emphases in their own life.

As we saw above in our discussion of the North Atlantic context of exegesis, biblical exegesis does not take place in a vacuum. The social, political, religious and cultural location of the scholar will inevitably have an impact on the shape of the scholarship produced. In particular, the life of the African churches has a strong pull on the African biblical scholar.

But the African scholar is pulled in more than one direction. On the one hand, biblical exegetes in Africa feel the compulsion to interpret the biblical text in the light of the present realities of the African situation. On the other hand, most professional scholarly African biblical interpreters received much of their graduate training in the North Atlantic world, training which focused on the methods and concerns of North Atlantic historical-critical scholarship. Most African exegetes are grateful for their training in the North Atlantic historical critical tradition. Emmanuel Obeng has even argued that if African scholars are to be taken seriously at home and across the world they will need to pay more attention to the precise use of critical tools.²⁴

This does not mean, however, that Africans are willing simply to mimic the academic traditions of the North. In the preface to her doctoral thesis, Teresa Okure makes clear reference to the North Atlantic world's lack of openness to new methods of reading biblical texts.²⁵ In particular the tendency of the North Atlantic tradition to treat the Bible more as a book rooted in the past than as a book which speaks to the present comes under scrutiny from most African scholars.

Samuel Abogunrin's assessment of the North Atlantic critical scholarship in which he was trained is that it lacks power. "Genuine biblical criticism helps us to appreciate the works of the Bible writers better," he says.²⁶ He argues, however, that there is a danger that the modern views of North Atlantic scholarship may blur the vision of African scholars. African scholars need something that the North Atlantic world could not provide.

The [African] Biblical scholar requires a spiritual perception that will allow him to translate the Bible in such a way that the Word will become incarnate once again in the language and life of the peoples of Africa. O. Imasogie correctly remarks that by the time Christianity was introduced into Black Africa, the worldview of Western Christian theologians only retained a veneer of Biblical worldview. The missionary worldview had by then become what he called quasiscientific. Consequently, although the missionaries still talked about God, heaven, angels, Satan, Holy Spirit and evil forces, they were no more than cultural crutches that lacked the existential dynamism they once had before and during the medieval period. Under this type of influence, the theologian thinks it necessary to re-interpret Biblical references to angels, demon possession and spiritual forces. As a result, Christian missionaries emphasized the power of Jesus to save from the power of sin but Christ's power which destroys the power of the devil was not enthusiastically preached.²⁷

African biblical scholars must not repeat the mistakes of the West, he says, in emptying Jesus of his power.

There are some North Atlantic scholars who have shown an interest in what Africa can contribute to the scholarly investigation of the Bible. Knut Holter, for example, notes that "In contact with African Old Testament scholars and scholarship I have met new and intriguing questions and approaches to the Old Testament, questions and approaches that have enriched my own understanding of the Old Testament as such, but also of what Old Testament scholarship is all about."²⁸ Speaking of the Old Testament in particular, Holter notes that the translation of the Bible into African languages has "coincided with what we would call the aspect of recognition. African readers have in the poetry, laws, and narratives of the Old Testament, recognized aspects of their own tradition and situation."²⁹ This dimension of African research – that African perspectives may open North Atlantic scholars to aspects of the Bible that have been missed - could prove fruitful. Of more importance perhaps is that African readings point to practical implications of the biblical text that North Atlantic scholars often bracket out.

According to Gerald West, the readings of "ordinary" Africans, by which he means readers who are not biblical scholars and, in particular, readers who are from poor and marginalized communities, can be of

help to scholars. “Ordinary” readers, he says, “read for purposes other than the production of academic papers – they read for survival, liberation, and life.”³⁰ Speaking largely to a North Atlantic audience, West says that scholarship should learn from this kind of reading and develop an ethos of reading which is open to the problems of those who suffer. This has not always or often been central to the scholarly pursuits of academic biblical exegetes.

Usually the connection between our work as scholars and our life commitments is covert, and if our work is to be used by others we want to remain in control. But clearly the interface [of scholars and readers from poor and marginalized communities] ...demands an overt connection between our biblical research and our social commitments. This requires something of a conversion “from below.” Biblical scholars must be born “from below.”³¹

African scholars themselves have had to experience this kind of rebirth. Justin Ukpong sums up the situation well.

Trained as they have been in the tradition of western biblical scholarship, [African biblical scholars] read the Bible through an interpretive grid developed in the western culture, and then seek to apply the result in their own contexts. One outcome of this has been a visible gap between this academic reading of the Bible and the needs of ordinary African Christians. Another outcome has been the fact that in many ways African social and cultural concerns are not reflected in such reading. All this has happened in spite of the fact that African scholars do bring their own cultural perspectives to bear on the text. The fact is that so long as the grid through which they read the text is foreign, their own cultural input is bound to have a highly limited impact. Not a few African biblical scholars, in recent times, have been exercised by this situation. Many indeed have begun to view critically, against their own background and life experience of African people, the tradition of biblical scholarship in which they were trained. This has resulted in a call for a new mode of reading the Bible that would engage the African social and cultural contexts in the process.³²

West argues that the resources are already present for African scholars to take up the task of a contextualized reading of the Bible that will be of relevance to Africa. Unfortunately some in Africa have relied too exclusively on North Atlantic traditions and methods.

How can we “drink from our own wells” when we denigrate them or deny their very existence and rely on imported, bottled water (or worse Coca Cola)? Perhaps ordinary African “readers” can help us to recover readings of the Bible that our training blinds us to.³³

The conditions in which most African scholars must work are frustrating and demanding.³⁴ It is a great temptation for many of these scholars to move to Europe or North America where their scholarly contributions are welcomed as interesting and exotic, and where they are able to find more time, more money, and more resources for producing their scholarly work. For the many scholars who remain in Africa, the production of scholarly work has been concomitant with an unwillingness to bracket out the suffering that is a daily part of their own lives and the lives of those around them. Scholarly work must maintain a pragmatic dimension.

III. Inculturation Hermeneutics

An excellent example of an approach to interpretation which attempts to integrate historical insights into African contexts is laid out by Justin Ukpong³⁵ in his 1995 article entitled “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics.” According to Ukpong, this method of reading the Bible “is not a return to a literal reading of the Bible, but a reading that ...[is] critical in its own paying attention to the African socio-cultural context and the questions that arise therefrom.”³⁶ Ukpong argues that this method does not need to be a specifically “African” method: “any socio-cultural context can become the *subject* of interpretation.”³⁷ Indeed, the contemporary discourse of African exegesis, of which Ukpong will serve as our example, has never been entirely separate from the North Atlantic conversation. However, it can be argued that the African conception of life as a unity actually enables African scholars to hold together the

various dimensions of interpretation – historical, theological, and practical – in a way that is distinct from the North Atlantic view of life as compartmentalized and scholarship as specialized.

Ukpong's method contains five distinct features: "an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*."³⁸ We will examine each of these features in turn.

The first element of Ukpong's "inculturation hermeneutic" is the *interpreter*. In focusing on the reader, Ukpong agrees that his way of reading has much in common with that group of reading theories which is not only concerned about the literary qualities of the text itself, or the history behind the text (the historical event recorded, the author's intentions), but also about the reader of the text as a dynamic part of the reading process.³⁹ According to Ukpong, however, the interpreter should not be understood as an isolated reader, but as a "reader-in-context," that is as someone who is or has become an insider to the culture for whom the interpretation is being given.⁴⁰ This insider reader should be both sympathetic to the culture and able to be critical of it at the same time. The insider knowledge of the culture that the reader possesses should give rise to certain "biases in the interpreter's mind as he/she approaches the biblical text." These biases are acknowledged and capable of being used positively.⁴¹

Ukpong's view of the interpreter's role in the hermeneutical process is reminiscent of Michael Polanyi's idea of "personal knowledge." In his critique of scientific detachment as an ideal, Polanyi argues that the subject is always involved in the process of knowing, even in a scientific context.⁴² Speaking of Einstein's theory of relativity Polanyi notes,

We cannot truly account for our acceptance of such theories without endorsing our acknowledgement of a beauty that exhilarates and a profundity that entrances us. Yet the prevailing conception of science, based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, seeks – and must seek at all costs – to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play. For modern man has set up as the ideal of knowledge the conception of natural science as a set of statements which is "objective" in the sense that its substance is entirely determined by observation, even while its presentation may be shaped by convention.⁴³

This detached "modern" view of knowledge assumes that all truth is observable, which is, ironically, a non-observable assumption. Contrary to this, Polanyi speaks of knowledge as "personal knowledge." All factual knowledge, he says, is "shaped" by the knower: "the act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal co-efficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity."⁴⁴ Tools, which are an aid to scientific investigation, do not negate the subject who uses the tools, since tools are simply an extension of the investigator. "While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as external objects...We pour ourselves into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence."⁴⁵

By implication, then, biblical scholars cannot simply detach themselves from their investigation any more than the scientist can. The tools of biblical critical methodology do not provide the scholar with an objectivity that gives him or her an uncommitted detachment. The scholar is still personally responsible for the exegetical decisions made using those tools. The tools of biblical criticism are, rather, an extension of the critic. Nor are the tools themselves above criticism. A scientist or a biblical scholar may engage in a perfectly legitimate task, but come to an erroneous decision by using the wrong tool.⁴⁶

For Ukpong, the interpreter is a participant in the process of interpretation. There is no neutral detachment. Personal and social factors such as the reader's race, gender, status in society, all give an interpreter an angle of vision that can be used in the process of understanding a biblical text.

The second feature of Ukpong's theory highlights another facet of African exegesis: the *context*. By "context" Ukpong here refers to the context of the reader, rather than the original context of the text being read. In using the term "context," Ukpong is pointing to the reality of the African reader as part of a

community. Indeed, African personal identity is often described in specifically communitarian terms. For example, the expression, coined by John Mbiti, I am because we are,⁴⁷ stands in contradistinction to the post-Enlightenment (Cartesian) individualistic worldview. A specifically African understanding of personal identity in terms of community identifies the reader of the text as the community. The North Atlantic reader tends to be identified as an individual. For Ukpong, context “refers to an existing human community (a country, local church, ethnic group) designated as the subject of the interpretation” which is informed by “the people’s worldview, and historical, social, economic, political and religious life experiences.”⁴⁸ As human communities “perceive reality from particular, not from universal perspectives,”⁴⁹ the inculturation hermeneutic is always contextual in that it is always “consciously done from the perspective of a particular context.”⁵⁰ Ukpong appeals to David Tracy who says “There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text.”⁵¹ The interpreter can only be honest, therefore, if the concerns of his or her context are consciously brought into the hermeneutical dialogue.

This means that one aspect of the scholarly task is to ask how a particular text or a particular reading of a text interacts with, responds to, and is reflective of the lives of those who read or hear that text. African biblical exegetes must ask “so what?” The question of the practical meaning of a piece of research for the community from which the interpreter comes cannot ultimately be avoided. Contemporary concerns of many North Atlantic scholars are often left unstated, inchoate, and may sometimes be unknown even to the scholar herself or himself. Some scholars, no doubt, are hesitant to state their concerns because the explicit revelation of personal commitment to a particular community may appear to relativize the objective appearance of the academic project. And so this aspect of exegesis, the contextual dimension of research, is often neglected or suppressed in North Atlantic scholarship. This does not mean that the contextual dimensions of a particular reading of a text are not present. But they may be unrecognized. They do, however, constitute the substructure on which the exegetical edifice is built. According to Ukpong, scholars cannot and should not avoid the contextual implications of exegesis.

The third feature of Ukpong’s method is *text*. This text has at least three dimensions: it is an ancient text, it is a literary text, and it is a transformative text.

The Bible is a book of the past. “Because the Bible as an ancient document, attention to the historical context of the text being interpreted is demanded of the exegete. This requires the use of historical critical tools.”⁵² An ancient text arose from a particular socio-cultural context. Therefore, any analysis must include a historical investigation in order to determine “the specific orientation of the text...without which it is not possible to make a clear assessment of the biblical “world” that made the text meaningful in the first instance.”⁵³

As well as the historical axis, the African exegete must also be aware of the literary context of a passage. The structures, rhetoric, narrative features and inner logic are necessary components in understanding a text.

The Bible is also a text which has the potential to transform the lives of its readers. Therefore, as well as elucidating the meaning of the text in its original setting, the scholar must also discuss the text’s contemporary meaning. In other words, whereas most North Atlantic scholars consider the historical task to be primary, African and other third world scholars engage in history as a means to an end. They use the study of the past as a tool for the transformation of the present. The Bible is not of interest only because it is an ancient document, but because this ancient document is perceived to have the potential to transform the world for the better.⁵⁴

For Ukpong, who is a Roman Catholic Christian, the contemporary relevance of the biblical text is found precisely in its theological meaning. “[B]ecause it is the theological meaning of the text that is sought and not its historical context, historical critical tools are used precisely as servant and not as master.”⁵⁵ The goal of the interpretation of a text is to discover what Ukpong calls the “gospel message.” By “gospel message” Ukpong means that particular word from God for the community of readers, as it emerges in the dialogue between the reader, his or her context and the particular text under discussion. As this message emerges, it may serve as a critique of the culture or the culture may throw light on the text.⁵⁶ According to Ukpong, this is not something which can or should be done only by Africans. African

scholars who engage in this task, however, will find the “gospel message” to be of relevance to Africa because that message emerges from a dialogue between the text and the (African) reader. For Ukpong, then, the practical implications of a particular passage of the Bible only emerge for the scholar who is in relationship – in relationship with the community which needs to hear the message, and in relationship with the God of the community who is also the God who speaks through the Bible.⁵⁷

In Africa, practical issues and the personal involvement of the scholar in the production of meaning cannot be bracketed out of the exegetical process. Exegesis produced in situations which are often desperate consider the cultivation of an ethos of detached objectivity to be a luxury. Already in 1976, at the first meeting of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America joined in speaking against a form of theological (including biblical) scholarship that did not take seriously the realities of life in the Third World:

[Theologies from Europe and North America] must be understood to have arisen out of situations related to those countries, and therefore must not be uncritically adopted without our raising the question of their relevance in the context of our countries. Indeed, we must, in order to be faithful to the gospel and to our peoples, reflect on the realities of our own situations and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. We reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action. We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World.⁵⁸

In Africa, the scholar considers himself or herself to be engaged not only with the text, but also with the people who, in their struggle to attain justice, peace, prosperity, and health, see biblical insight as a necessary component in their transformation. As in the biblical story of the people of Israel at Mt. Horeb, the “word of God” is not addressed to their ancestors only, but to them directly (Deut 5:1-4). As we shall see, one reason that the pragmatics of interpretation will not be buried is that African exegesis must be seen to serve immediate needs. African biblical scholarship is not neutral. It has as its goal the emergence and enhancement of “survival, liberation and life.”⁵⁹ According to Ukpong, African scholars neither can nor should avoid the contextual implications of exegesis, because the purpose of investigating a text is to allow the “gospel message” “to transform and forge history.”⁶⁰

The fourth feature of Ukpong’s “inculturation hermeneutic” is what he calls the *exegetical conceptual framework*. The exegetical framework, says Ukpong, is that “mental construct within which exegetes are trained. It is basically an orientation in biblical interpretation geared towards certain areas of concern about the biblical text.”⁶¹ Ukpong gives historical criticism, literary criticism and liberation hermeneutics as examples of possible conceptual frameworks. According to Ukpong, current frameworks have not proved satisfactory in Africa. Alluding to Thomas S. Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts in science⁶², Ukpong argues that Africa needed a conceptual framework different from those usually practiced in the North Atlantic world, because of “questions and issues arising from the African Christian experience with the Bible which our current exegetical frameworks are unable to satisfactorily handle.”⁶³ Ukpong himself argues that the historical critical method is found wanting in an African context because this method, is “derived from the basic assumptions of a particular culture.”⁶⁴

Thus, for example, one cannot think of the emergence of the historical critical method without thinking of Deism, Rationalism and the Enlightenment as its cultural (intellectual culture) context, and the History of Religions movement as its methodological mentor. Nor can one think of the allegorical framework of biblical interpretation of the early church Fathers without reference to the ancient Greek literary culture of the times in which these Fathers were trained.⁶⁵

Ukpong does not condemn either historical criticism or allegory. His linking of these methods with their cultural contexts, however, does relativize any method. Ukpong thus finds historical criticism, as the dominant mode of exegesis in this era, problematic because the assumptions which underlie this method are not commonly received assumptions in Africa. An African inculturation hermeneutic, therefore, must be aware of the basic assumptions of African peoples. This leads Ukpong to attempt a brief enumeration of African assumptions.

This is no simple task. Ukpong is aware that any description of “Africa” will be defective. Africa contains a “multiplicity” of cultures and worldviews. Ukpong does think it possible, however, to name certain features which appear to be common across the board in Africa and to argue that these common features point to the “root paradigm” of African cultures.⁶⁶ Ukpong names four aspects of African life that he believes belong to the root paradigm of African cultures.

The first aspect has to do with the nature of the world, the question of “where are we?” Ukpong says that Africans do not make a distinction between matter and spirit, secular and religious. Rather, life is viewed as a unity. There is a distinction, however, between the visible world and the invisible world. Every person has a visible and an invisible dimension. The dead do not cease to be, they have moved into a different sphere of existence whence they impact our visible dimension of reality. Spirits, both good and evil, also interact with the visible world.

The second feature of African life is that this two-dimensional universe has a divine origin. God is the Creator of the world and God continues to be involved in the creation. Because there is a network of relationships between God, humanity and the rest of the cosmos, human actions are not isolated events. Rather, every human action is a social event, affecting relationships not only with one another, but with God and with the rest of nature.

Related to this is the third feature: the African answer to the question “who are we?” The answer is, “we are a community.” Since the creation is a network of interrelations, “African authors see the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I exist) replaced in the African thought system by *cognato ergo sum* (I am related by blood/I belong to a family, therefore I exist.)” This communal view of humanity has a multitude of implications. There is no such thing as a “private” matter in Africa.

Problems and issues in the community are seen and treated not as a function of the actions of and dispositions of the individuals concerned, but primarily as a function of the relationships within the community. Thus, for example, a person is not considered rich through his/her ingenuity and industry alone but through sharing in the blessings of the community. Death and illness are explained not in terms of natural causes but in terms of negative forces, like witchcraft, in the community.⁶⁷

The final African assumption noted by Ukpong is that Africa has an emphasis “on the concrete rather than the abstract, on the practical rather than theoretical.”⁶⁸ Although Ukpong leaves this point without explanation, this pragmatic dimension of African life has obvious implications for African exegesis: the relevance of scholarship must be made obvious for the task to be considered worthwhile.

Having elucidated what he takes to be the basic cultural assumptions of Africa, Ukpong moves on to explain how these assumptions will operate in his understanding of the process of inculturation hermeneutics. His explanation appears to focus especially on two interrelated issues: the tension between the Bible as an ancient book and the need to find a present meaning; and the tension between historical critical tools and the Bible as a sacred religious book. For Ukpong the goal of exegesis is “to actualize the theological meaning of the text in a contemporary context.”⁶⁹ Since the Bible is an ancient text, historical tools must be used. However, the task is not completed when the historical meaning is discovered. Since the goal is finding the contemporary theological meaning, the historical tools must always be seen “as servant not as master.”⁷⁰ The present meaning of the text will emerge in the interaction between the ancient text and the contemporary context. This discovery of the present meaning, however, must be done from a perspective of faith. “Inculturation hermeneutics sees the Bible as a document of faith and therefore demands entry into and sharing the faith of the biblical community expressed in the text.” Part of the “faith of the biblical community” appears to be that the presence in the text “of the supernatural and the miraculous is taken for granted.”⁷¹

Ukpong acknowledges that the text is “plivalent”. This does not mean, however, that the text can mean whatever the reader wishes it to mean. Two limits are put on “plivalentcy.” The first is the canon: “any meaning must be judged in the light of the meaning of the entire Bible.” The second is something like the rule of faith: “the theology of any text must be judged against the basic biblical affirmations and principles”

such as “the existence of God as creator and sustainer of the universe, love of God and neighbour, etc.”⁷² Ukpong’s language seems to imply that the reading of a particular text is to be judged by its conformity to, or tension with the overall thrust of the biblical message seen as an entirety. Just as an African individual is known in relation to his community, so a biblical passage is only truly “known” in relation to the whole “book.” Ukpong further attempts to define “basic biblical affirmations” by which to judge a particular reading in a manner similar to Jesus’ use of Torah in his critique of the Pharisees in Matthew’s gospel. In Mt 23:23-24, Jesus judges the Pharisees’ reading of scripture by appealing to the spirit of the whole of the Torah, as opposed to an atomistic exegesis which neglects the “weightier matters” of Torah.

It is not entirely clear how the limits of “canon” and “rule of faith” function for Ukpong. In Ukpong’s use of these two limits as a “standard” by which the validity of a particular reading of the text can be judged, it is not clear, at times, whether it is the interpretation or the text itself which is being judged. What is clear is that Ukpong believes that there are theological limits to exegesis.

The fifth and final element of Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics is his procedure. According to Ukpong there must be “a preliminary condition and a series of four steps of analysis.”⁷³ The preliminary condition is commitment to the Christian faith and to the process of “actualizing the Christian message with the context” of people’s lives, in this case, in Africa. In other words, who does the exegesis is as important as the steps of analysis that the exegete will use. For Ukpong, inculturation hermeneutics is not a neutral enterprise. Inculturation hermeneutics excludes those who are not engaged with the faith of the church and committed to the task of incarnating that faith in a particular place. Ukpong does not make class, gender or racial exclusions here.⁷⁴ These distinctions are not critical. Commitment, however, is critical.

The first step in the actual exegetical process is to identify a dynamic correspondence between the reader’s current context and the historical context of a biblical passage.⁷⁵ This, of course, implies that the exegete has some knowledge both of the contemporary context and of the text. Given this, the scholar engaging in inculturation hermeneutics must seek to find the common ground between the two. In a study of Lk 16:1-13, for example, Ukpong finds that Luke’s gospel speaks of the “rich” in largely negative terms. In Ukpong’s reading, the rich man in this parable has no doubt become rich because of an exploitative economic system which gave him the advantages he needed to acquire wealth. Seeing a similar disparity of wealth in the exploitative economic system at work in Africa, he brings the text and the context together.

The cultural context informing this biblical interpretation is primarily that of exploited peasant farmers of West Africa as well as the concerns of the international debt burden of the Two-Thirds World. While most interpretations have read the parable from the perspective of the rich man’s economic system, this article reads the story from the perspective of the peasant farmers in the story.⁷⁶

Ukpong does not limit his work to the socio-economic, however. Any text whose historical context appears analogous to an African idea or situation would be considered appropriate material for the inculturation hermeneutics project.⁷⁷

Step two in Ukpong’s procedure is analysis of the context of interpretation. The (contemporary) background against which the text will be read must be analyzed from as many different perspectives as necessary: socio-anthropologically, historically, socially and religiously. For a reading of Lk 16:1-13, for example, the African exegete must acquire some knowledge of peasant conditions in West Africa. To do an African reading of Leviticus, one should undertake an investigation of African sacrificial rituals and ideas and so on.

The third step is an historical analysis of the biblical text. Ukpong does not often differ from the majority of North Atlantic scholars in his use of specific historical-critical tools. The difference is that many North Atlantic scholars would consider exegesis complete after just this one step – an end in and of itself. For Ukpong historical analysis is important, but in his method it is relativized by being only a part of a larger process.

Ukpong's fourth step is "analysis of the text in the light of the already analyzed contemporary context."⁷⁸ If the goal of exegesis is "to actualize the theological meaning of the text in a contemporary context" then this step moves the reader toward that goal by putting questions to the text "arising from insights gained from the analysis of the context of interpretation in order to gain insight into the nature of the text in relation to the context."⁷⁹ For example, if Nigeria's ecological system is threatened by an inefficient political system which allows an oil pipe line to leak unchecked, one of the things the biblical scholar must do is bring the question of the care of the creation to the biblical text to see if there is insight to be gained for that current Nigerian situation.⁸⁰

The final step of the procedure is not only to draw together the fruits of this analysis in a coherent fashion, but also to express "a commitment to actualizing the message of the text in concrete life situation."⁸¹ In other words, engagement with the text alone is insufficient. The scholar must also be engaged with the community. Because "the Bible is life-oriented" exegesis must lead to the transformation of the scholar into an activist and to the transformation of the community in the light of scripture.⁸²

Ukpong is not doctrinaire about the order of his procedures and steps. However, his method clearly exemplifies the African demand that biblical scholarship intrude into areas of research that, in the North Atlantic world, are often left to scholars of other fields. For Ukpong, however, the integrity of the discipline of biblical studies demands more than the single focus of a narrow specialization. The scholar must become involved in whatever area is demanded by the material of the text, precisely because the material he or she studies is "life-oriented." Neither the text nor the context leaves the scholar with the option of delegation, compartmentalization or narrow specialization. This would be an abdication of responsibility.

For many years the dominant model of biblical scholarship in the North Atlantic world has been historical-critical. In this model the text is studied as one part of the evidence to be used in the reconstruction of a world of the past. The emergence of African biblical studies with its much more pragmatic concern for the present world appears to be at odds with North Atlantic scholarship. Justin Ukpong's "inculturation hermeneutic" provides a model that may help North Atlantic and African scholars to begin a conversation about ways the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world.

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Footnotes

¹ For the purposes of this essay "North Atlantic" refers to Europe and North America, that part of the world which produced and experienced the intellectual impact of the Enlightenment, and which was transformed by the Industrial Revolution. Because they tend to approach research in the same way as Europe and North America, Australia, New Zealand and to some extent Japan, may be added to this group. In many works this world is referred to as the "West." Designations such as "Western" or "North Atlantic" are, of course, inaccurate generalizations.

² See, for example, the opinion of John Dewey (*Reconstruction in Philosophy* [New York: Henry Holt, 1929], 48): "there is a growing belief in the power of individual minds, guided by methods of observation, experience and reflection, to attain the truths needed for the guidance of life."

³ The churches themselves have also undergone a shift in focus. From at least the time of Schleiermacher, theology itself has moved towards the anthropocentric: theological study has become a discipline which investigates the religious experience of believers rather than the self-revelation of God. The shift to a more anthropocentric emphasis within the churches is related to the fact that much North Atlantic training of clergy now takes place in academic institutions in one way or another related to the secular university.

⁴ See, for example, the essays in Hans Dieter Betz, ed. *The Bible as a Document of the University* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁵ Dewey (*Reconstruction*, 49): “The patient and experimental study of nature, bearing fruit in inventions which control nature and subdue her forces to social use, is the method by which progress is made.”

⁶ Quoted from William Wrede, “The Task and Methods of New Testament Theology” in Robert Morgan, ed. and trans. *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter* SBT (second series), 25 (London: SCM, 1973), 69.

⁷ This is the reason most histories of interpretation focus almost exclusively on the modern period. See, for example, William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee, trans. (Nashville / New York: Abingdon Press, 1970); Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); John K. Riches, *A Century of New Testament Study* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).

⁸ Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

⁹ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

¹¹ Whether Wink’s particular interest in Jungian interpretation is helpful is not our primary concern here.

¹² “General Introduction” pp.1-35 in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 1-2.

¹³ For a discussion of the first four years of this group (1990-1993, then known as “Bible in Africa, Asia, and Latin America Group”), see Phyllis Bird, “Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Texts” *Neotestamentica* 28/2 (1994): 323-37; recent papers presented at the SBL group have been published in R.S. Sugirtharaja, ed. *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

¹⁴ “Knowledge is power” was the famous axiom expressed by Francis Bacon, the formulator of the “scientific method” of inductive experimentation still used in research today. René Descartes wrote in 1637 (*Discourse on Method*, chapter 6, in *Essential Works of Descartes*, trans. Lowell Bair [New York: Bantam, 1961], p.37) of the need for a “practical” philosophy as opposed to the merely speculative, enabling humanity to become “the masters and possessors of nature.” This view of the relationship between knowledge and praxis was and is widespread in the post-Enlightenment, scientific and philosophical communities. Knowledge was translated into action and action was oriented to control and dominion. The post-Enlightenment world has applied this understanding of knowledge to every area of life – including viewing knowledge of texts as having a “mastery” over them.

¹⁵ There was, of course, a long and influential tradition of biblical interpretation on the continent of Africa dating back to ancient times. Exegetes like Origen and Augustine continue to influence the world’s churches even today. This work will focus on biblical interpretation as it has emerged in sub-Saharan Africa in the modern, largely postcolonial, period.

¹⁶ There are no satisfactory designations for that large part of the world, mostly in the Southern Hemisphere, that is characterized as the “third world.” The term arose during the so-called “Cold War” in which “newly independent countries refused to line up behind the communist East or the capitalist West. In 1955 representatives from twenty-nine of these countries met at the famous Bandung Conference, the first of many conferences of ‘nonaligned’ nations. It was there that the term ‘Third World’ was born, as a description of this newly politically independent section of the world.” (William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 12-13). In spite of this history it is still difficult for many to hear the term “third world” without hearing connotations of “third rate.” The term “developing world” may be even worse, assuming that the North Atlantic context sets the pattern towards

which all other nations should aspire. In recent years some “third world” scholars have begun using the term “Two-Thirds World,” and defining that term as that region of the world which is characterized largely by “poverty, powerlessness and religious pluralism.” (See Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds. *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World: Evangelical Christologies from the contexts of poverty, powerlessness and religious pluralism. The Papers of the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians from the Two Thirds World*. Bangkok, Thailand, March 22-25, 1982 [Bangalore: Partners in Mission-Asia, 1983]).

¹⁷ Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995) 9-10.

¹⁸ See William Phillips Jr., *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: Fontana, 1993). For a first hand account, see Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell, eds., *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754* (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

¹⁹ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

²⁰ C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa 4 vols.* (London: Lutterworth, 1948-58); Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

²¹ *Who are the Poor? The Beatitudes as a Call to Community* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987).

²² For statistics on the growth of Christianity in Africa, see Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford, 1986) and David Barrett, et al, eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world* (second ed.; Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford, 2001).

²³ The bibliography on these churches is now quite immense. For an overview, see especially F.B. Welbourne and B.A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966); David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968); M.L. Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to the Study of African Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987); David Barrett and John Padwick, *Rise and Walk! Conciliarism and the African Independent Churches, 1815-1987* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁴ “The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting the Scriptures in Africa” in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo, eds., *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1997), 8-24.

²⁵ *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988).

²⁶ “Biblical Research in Africa: The Task Ahead” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 1/1 (1986): 11.

²⁷ Ibid, 14. Cf. Osadolor Imasogie: “[W]e conclude that by the time Christianity was introduced into Black Africa in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the world view of the Christian theologian retained only a veneer of the biblical world view... [T]he theologian found it necessary to reinterpret [spiritual forces] at best as symbols without ontic content or, at worst, as figments of the imagination of a primitive age under the influence of an ancient world view. By virtue of such a reinterpretation of the Bible, Christians could talk of Christ’s power to save from sin but not enthusiastically of his power to destroy the works of the Devil and to save, to the utmost, those who are committed to him.” (*Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* [Ibadan: University Press, 1986], 52.)

²⁸ “Editorial: not another journal?!” *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* 1 (1996): 1 [now renamed *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*].

²⁹ *Tropical Africa and the Old Testament*, 12.

³⁰ *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible. Interventions*, 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 114.

³¹ *Ibid*, 55. In addition to West's "social commitments" I would add "religious and theological commitments."

³² "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 4.

³³ West, *The Academy of the Poor*, 93.

³⁴ African scholars do not often have the same kind of resources that are found in Europe and North America. Many biblical scholars in Africa have at least the same kinds of administrative and teaching loads as their counterparts in the North Atlantic world. But their workload does not end here. Faculty members at the Lutheran Theological College in Makumira, Tanzania need to spend several hours a day working in the garden in order to help to feed their families. In 1998 only one African member of the faculty of St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya, had a computer, and he did not have Internet access. Teachers at the Nile Theological College in Khartoum, Sudan, cannot display any public sign for fear that the government will bulldoze their facility. Bishop Gwynne College, an Anglican theological college in Juba, Sudan, rarely has enough food to feed the students, faculty and their families more than one meal a day. The Religious Studies Department at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, a department with a long and illustrious history, has had frequent interruptions to its operations because of military coups and student strikes. Bishop Tucker Theological College in Uganda (now Uganda Christian University) has gone through many years of having no electricity after sunset. Needless to say, the libraries in Africa are rarely well stocked with the latest books. Few colleges or even universities have much access to the World Wide Web. On a recent visit to the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, it was discovered that communications within the country were so difficult that the library and most of the faculty there were unaware of many of the theological journals published in other parts of their own country. Producing scholarly works in such an environment has meant that Africans have been unwilling to bracket out the suffering that is a daily part of their own lives and the lives of those around them. Scholarly work must maintain a pragmatic dimension.

³⁵ Justin Ukpogong was educated in Nigeria, Canada and Rome. He is a Roman Catholic priest and he teaches New Testament at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. For full bibliography of Ukpogong's biblical studies publications up to the year 2000 see the relevant sections of Grant LeMarquand "A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa." in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 633-800.

³⁶ Ukpogong, "Rereading the Bible," 4.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 5. [*italics his*]

³⁸ *Ibid*. [*italics his*]

³⁹ See John Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984): 19-35.

⁴⁰ Ukpogong, "Rereading the Bible," 5.

⁴¹ A similar positive use of the idea of bias as an aid to biblical interpretation has been articulated by Daniel L. Smith-Christopher in "Gandhi on Daniel 6: Some Thoughts on a 'Cultural Exegesis' of the Bible" (*Biblical Interpretation* 1/3 [1993]: 321-39).

⁴² *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴³ Ibid, 15-16.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁶ Morna D. Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75/629 (1972): 570-81.

⁴⁷ *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Ibadan, London: Heinemann, 1969), 108.

⁴⁸ Ukpong, "Reading the Bible," 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 79.

⁵² Ibid, 9.

⁵³ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁴ For third world scholars "interpretation is undertaken not primarily to solve intellectual queries: the paramount concern of hermeneutics is to transform society." (R.S. Sugirtharajah "Postscript: Achievements and Items for a Future Agenda," *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* 1st ed. (London: SPCK, 1991), 438.)

⁵⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁷ For Ukpong, then the Bible is in some sense the book of the Church, although he understands the "Church" as the people of God rather than as an institution. The case could certainly be made that, in Latin American liberation theology and in "popular" theology from so-called Christian Base Communities, the Bible is not so much the book of the Church as the book of the people, although most of the people involved with the Bible are in some sense members of the Christian community. But the Bible is not seen as the property of the Church as an institution that has the final authoritative word on the meaning of the text. See Leif Vaage, ed. *Subversive Scriptures: Revolutionary Readings of the Christian Bible in Latin America* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) for examples of Latin American scholarship done "as a part of a particular people's ongoing effort to have as satisfying a life together as possible." (p. viii). Cf. Carlos Mesters who says that in Latin America, "The Bible was taken out of the people's hands. Now they are taking it back. They are expropriating the expropriators: 'It is our book! It was written for us...' The Bible has moved to the side of the poor. One could almost say it has changed its class status." ["The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People," 119-33 in Norman Gottwald, ed. *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983). In Africa it is true that scholars generally read the Bible within a confessional or ecclesial context. However, popular reading of the Bible is sometimes more broadly "religious" than specifically "Christian." Some Africans who may or may not profess to be Christians nevertheless have a profound respect for the Bible as religious literature or as a religious object. Ukpong has documented how the Bible is often used as an amulet, placed under a pillow before sleep, carried in a purse to ward off evil, verses written on the sides of buses for protection. See "Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic: Reading the Bible with African Eyes," (unpublished paper presented to the Bible in Africa Project Consultation held in Glasgow, Scotland 13th-17th August 1994). Cf. Wynnand Amewowo, "Experiences and Discoveries with the Bible in West Africa," *Mission Studies* 3/1 (1986): 12-24; S.A. Adewale, "The Magical Use of the Bible Among the Yoruba Christians of

Nigeria," *Biblical-Pastoral Bulletin* 1[sic] (1989): 48-55; David Tuesday Adamo, "Distinctive Use of Psalms in Africa," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9/2 (1993): 94-111.

⁵⁸ Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, eds. *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 269.

⁵⁹ West, *The Academy of the Poor*, 114 and passim.

⁶⁰ Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 7.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1962]).

⁶³ Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 7-8.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ According to Victor Turner a root paradigm is a pattern of assumptions about the fundamental nature of the universe. These assumptions are usually unconscious but become visible especially in times of crisis. (*Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Actions in Human Society* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974], 34-44; cited in Ukpong "Rereading the Bible," 8).

⁶⁷ Ibid, 9. The citing of witchcraft as an example is a good illustration of the importance and place given to the interaction of the "spiritual realm" with the physical realm in African thought. A myriad of illustrations could elucidate this point. Concerning illness it is readily accepted by African people that malaria is caused by an infection passed by mosquitoes. This does not answer the question which for them is more basic: "who sent the mosquito?" On the question of "riches," an African Anglican bishop was recently giving a presentation to a North American funding agency, an agency associated with the church. He was asked, "Why should we give you our money?" The bishop expressed surprise at the question and said that he had been under the impression that God as the Creator was the owner of all things. It was not "their money."

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 10.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ One might have thought that only Africans should undertake a specifically African inculturation hermeneutic. Ukpong does not say this. He does add that anyone engaged in this task must have made a "critical review of his/her own conditioning and biases for the purposes of utilizing them critically and creatively." (Ibid, 10). It is noteworthy that Ukpong has included female and even white scholars in the task of African hermeneutics in his editorial work. See Justin Ukpong, ed. *Gospel Parables in African Context* (Port Harcourt: CIWA Press, 1988).

⁷⁵ Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible through African Eyes," 10.

⁷⁶ Justin Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 189.

⁷⁷ Among his many works, Ukpong has written on biblical texts dealing with sacrifice, prayer, Christology, mission, cultural pluralism, all from the perspective of an African context.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Justin Ukpong, "Christian Mission and the Recreation of the Earth in Power and Faith: A Biblical-Christological Perspective," *Mission Studies* 9/2 (1992): 134-47.

⁸¹ Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible through African Eyes," 12.

⁸² Ibid, 13.

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