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FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION: AN AFRICAN WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The symposium on feminist biblical interpretation and the hermeneutics of liberation provided an opportunity to become acquainted with various frameworks and methodologies in these areas of endeavor from diverse parts of the world. It was quite challenging and fascinating to experience and learn the types of hermeneutics and exegesis that prevail in different contexts and in which ways they are liberating and for which type of women. It was quite obvious, however, that although there are major identifiable categories in current feminist biblical interpretation, there is no single method of a feminist biblical hermeneutics of liberation. As Barton rightly observes regarding mainstream biblical scholarship: 'the quest for a correct method is, not just in practice but inherently, incapable of succeeding' (Barton 1995: 5).

What seemed to emerge nevertheless may be summed up by Schüssler Fiorenza's assertion that

a feminist critical interpretation for liberation insists on the hermeneutical priority of feminist struggles in the process of interpretation... liberation theologies of all 'colors' take the experience and voices of the oppressed and marginalized, of those wo/men traditionally excluded from articulating theology and shaping communal life, as the starting point of hermeneutical reflection. (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998: 78)

Hence, the task of interpretation is not just to understand biblical texts and traditions but also to change the powers of oppression documented throughout history and their effects on the lives of Jews, women of all colors and creeds, homosexuals and peoples of other faith.

Depending on the context and issues at stake, feminist biblical hermeneutics of liberation should focus on the experience and voices of the

marginalized and have as its goal the transformation and realization of a vision of a new world with empowering inter-human relations.

In my reflection on the conference theme from the social-cultural background of Africa, I will focus on the question of methodology and the issue of the authority of the Bible as it relates to the lives and experiences of women in Church and society.

The Question of Method and Authority

Generations of African biblical scholars have been trained in the Western tradition; some have unquestioningly accepted the assumptions, biases and distortions of this scholarship, which has been tinged with Western social models and concerns. In essence, this scholarship was dominated by methodological questions relating to historical criticism, termed 'the scientific method'. More recently, however, the tradition has been challenged by the emergence of new approaches and methodological questions 'arising out of structural narrative, reader response, feminist, liberationist and post-structuralist or deconstructionist criticism' (Mojola 2001: 90). Since the emergence of feminism, gender-sensitive men and women biblical scholars have sought in a variety of ways to include the women's approach and perspective in biblical scholarship. The current quest for a critical feminist interpretation for liberation evolves around the paradigm shift caused by critical social theory, the theologies of liberation and post-colonial studies.

Critical feminist biblical interpretation in Africa employs a variety of methodologies that already exist in feminist biblical scholarship and are mainly grounded in liberation theology and post-colonial studies. Few women in Africa have been trained in biblical studies, hence, the methodology used in feminist biblical scholarship can only be deduced from a popular reading of the Bible and theological studies. African women theologians thus must double as biblical scholars except for the few that have been so trained. African women theologians have not yet coined a term for their interpretative efforts. They generally vacillate between the terms 'African women's theology' and 'African feminist theology', and they have given it their own particular content, for Africa is a vast continent with a variety of cultures, peoples, religions and problems. Teresa Okure rightly points out that 'African women do not as a cultural rule start with methodology. Their primary consciousness in doing theology is not method but life and life concerns, their own and those of their own people' (Okure 1993: 76).

Nevertheless, one can still talk of a distinctive method used by African women scholars of theology. It has been described as 'doing theology from women's perspective' (Okure 1993: 76; Phiri 1997: 54). This approach is inclusive. It encompasses men and women, scholars and non-scholars, rich and poor, and utilizes ordinary, popular methods of reading the Scriptures as well as the 'scientific' and the critical. The articulation of women's perspective in African women's 'feminist biblical studies' has been done particularly within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the women's commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Though EATWOT invites men to indulge in feminist biblical scholarship and theology, the number of men engaging in it is negligible despite their call for an inclusive Ecclesia. Mercy Oduyoye laments this situation when she charges that: 'African men theologians are beginning to own up the reality that African women have unveiled (injustice). Few will however admit to their privileged position derived from their being men, and few seem to be reading what African women theologians write' (Oduyoye 1995: 20).

She further observes that most of Africa's progressive theologians, 'inculturationist, liberationist, translationist and reconstructionist are nothing but "smokescreens" from under which Western Christian patriarchy and African Christian patriarchy engage in a combined offensive against African women' (cited in Maluleke 2000b: 7). Male-stream African theology has marginalized women or women's issues despite its emphasis on contextualization of the Christian theology into the African culture. It is erroneous, it has been realized, to assume that African women's experiences—that is, their interaction with God, oneself, community and the way they interpret and appropriate the biblical message—are the same as those of men. The Circle was thus formed to bridge this anomaly. Furthermore, as Musimbi Kanyoro rightly argues, African culture is not liberating for all as African male-stream theology assumes. It is, in fact, a 'double-edged sword' and the arena of women's oppression. To her, culture is to African women's liberation theology what race relations are to African American womanist theologians (Kanyoro 1997b: 368). In both private and public spheres, the roles and images of African women are socially and culturally defined. African culture is full of cultural practices that dehumanize women, ranging from taboos regarding food and relationships, widowhood rites, child betrothals and early marriages, domestic and cultural violence, female genital mutilation and lack of access to and control of family and sometimes national resources. Culture has thus silenced women in Africa and made them unable to experience the liberating promises of God.

Although there are aspects of African culture that may be liberating to women, others diminish them and they are embraced by both men and most women without considering their harmful nature. Furthermore, scriptural texts and misogynist Christian traditions have reinforced some negative aspects of our cultures and legitimized them.

African women theologians and feminist biblical scholars are calling for a 'cultural hermeneutics' as an important first step to biblical hermeneutics in Africa. According to Musimbi Kanyoro,

the culture of the reader in Africa has more influence on the way the biblical text is understood and used in communities than the historical facts about the text. Not knowing the nuances of the culture of modern readers of the Bible has more far reaching repercussions on biblical hermeneutics than normally acknowledged. (Kanyoro 1997b: 364)

African women theologians like Mercy Oduyoye (1986; 1995; also Oduyoye and Kanyoro [ed.] 1992), Elizabeth Amoah (1987), Teresa Hinga (1992), Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (1995) and others¹ have demonstrated the importance not only of reading the Bible from a women's perspective, but also of the specific African Cultural experiences grounded in African life and religious practices. They examine cultural practices already mentioned, rites of passage, priesthood and Church ministry as they relate to women and society in general as well as by bringing African culture and the Bible into conversation. There is also the recognition that the culture in which the Bible was written has a close affinity to African culture. Hence it is approached both critically and creatively.

African feminist theologians and biblical scholars also recognize other factors that impinge on their reading of Scripture such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, patriarchy and the global experience of imperialism past and present and their implications on politics, economics, language, the environment and other issues. The postcolonial feminist biblical perspective that Musa W. Dube effectively applies in her critique of biblical texts not only addresses gender oppression and affirms the agency of women, but it also deals with wider concerns such as how to read the Bible given its role 'in the subjugation and exploitation of one's nation and context' (Dube 1996: 122). This is reading for decolonization. She, too, calls for cultivation of a feminist, cultural studies hermeneutics of the Bible. This is a recognition that the Bible as a colonizer's tool for power has interacted with other religious traditions and cultures under 'friendly or non-friendly

1. Cf. the bibliography at the end of this contribution.

conditions'. Such studies, without being judgmental, can show how culture shapes human thinking and experience of the world (Dube 2000: 13). This approach in biblical hermeneutics, which has been labeled as 'social-scientific', has been in operation since biblical scholars began to recognize the role that the social sciences can play in the reconstruction and understanding of biblical phenomena (Gottwald 1992: 79).

With the above in mind one may therefore ask: How do African feminist theologians read the Bible and what does a liberating hermeneutics mean to them? African women theologians approach the Bible from two angles. They recognize that although the Bible is the Word of God, it has explicit patriarchal bias and is colored by subtle androcentricity in the worldview of its authors. Having been written in a patriarchal culture, male theologians who interpret it tend to make women invisible and present them negatively. At the same time, the Bible provides to most African women Church-goers a reason for being. It is affirming, offering them liberation from social and cultural stigmatization and oppression through a relationship with Jesus, whose liberating message they find in the Bible. In the words of Phiri, 'the same Bible read from a woman's perspective is used to urge for the liberation of both women and men in the church' (Phiri 1997: 55).

In order to appropriate the liberating message, several methods have been employed. One method has been to separate biblical culture, which is historically conditioned and therefore limited in application to a particular period in history, from the gospel, which is universally true, though always in relation to particular cultures. The argument used here is that it is the gospel that leads to salvation. There is also the recognition that the Bible contains what Phyllis Trible calls *Texts of Terror* (Trible 1984). Are these also to be taken as the inspired Word of God and therefore authoritative and for all time? How are women and men to relate to them? Do they have universally acknowledged principles? What purpose do they serve in a context where women are abused overtly and covertly? Kanyoro argues that for women to find justice and peace through the texts of the Bible, they have first to try and recover the women participants as well as their possible participation in the text. Second, women need to read the Scriptures side by side with the study of cultures and learn to recognize the boundaries between the two. African women theologians, like other feminist biblical scholars, particularly in the Two-Thirds World, use their context as the springboard for reading the Bible. They call attention to how the Bible has been used to subjugate them and go beyond the text to reconstruct and re-imagine it, to seek its relevance and transforming power

for the current generation (see Tamez 1994). As Renita Weems asserts, 'People...have power, not texts'.²

Besides the scholarly approach to biblical interpretation by African women theologians, there is the popular reading of scriptural texts that goes on in Bible study groups, African Instituted Churches (AICs),³ Neopentecostal Churches and within fellowship groups in the Churches. In most of these contexts the Bible is taken literally as the Word of God. In the AICs, for example, it is accorded a mystical value. Its interpretation is also mystified and the approach becomes what Mosala calls 'hermeneutics of mystification' (Mosala 1996: 55). It is used as an instrument of deciphering anomalies in one's life and relationship with God and the rest of the community. It is also a tool for healing, for it is the physical contact between it and the sick person that is believed to hasten healing. The Bible is not only appropriated in terms of what it says, but in terms of what it stands for: a canonical authority. It has authority, but there are other sources of equal authority—the Holy Spirit, in particular, who calls the prophet-healers, both men and women, and breaks barriers of race, class, gender ethnicity or creed. We agree with Maluleke when he observes that African Christians 'view the Bible as part of a larger package of resources and legacies which include stories, preaching, language mannerisms, catechism manuals and a range of rituals and rites' (Maluleke 2000a: 95). These other resources emanate from their culture and are also important to their spirituality.

Musa W. Dube, in a study of Botswana AIC women's reading of Mt. 15.21-25, discovered that a variety of methodologies were used, particularly during a sermon on the passage. There was communal interpretation where others, in addition to the minister, could engage with the text from their context. There was also participatory interpretation through use of songs, dramatized narrative and repetition. She identifies (1996: 125-26) a complex and desirable hermeneutics which has four tenets:

1. The Semoya framework—a mode of reading that resists discrimination and articulates healing.
2. A creative integration of the different cultures faiths and experiences in the 'reading' of 'texts'.
2. Cf. Renita J. Weems' 'Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible' in this volume (quote from p. 26).
3. African Instituted Churches emerged out of the interaction between Western Christianity and culture and African culture and religion. They were started under African initiative in a quest for African spirituality. They are highly indigenized.

3. A 'feminist' model of reading by women 'tutored by the spirit'.
4. The use and understanding of healing 'as an articulation of political resistance and survival'.

This mode of reading is evident in AICs as elsewhere. These African Christians have mainly an oral disposition, acquiring textual information through socialization in Churches by way of songs, sermons, drama and narrative. Hence they appropriate only scant knowledge of the texts. However, there is evidence that the personal experience of the readers or hearers is the starting point of their engaging with scriptural material. These ordinary readers 'read' themselves into the text. They see their experiences of poverty, deprivation, illness and suffering captured and reflected in the text. They see themselves as those who went to Jesus for healing and teaching. Therefore, discussing a text in this context means discussing the lives of the people without making a distinction between method and content. As Kanyoro says, 'reality and biblical text merge and become one, each casting light on the other and competing for attention' (Kanyoro 1997b: 364). Okure underscores this fact when she states that 'experience is the primary context for doing theology and reading the Bible' and that before the text was written 'there was the life' (Okure 2000: 202-203). Hence life is the central hermeneutical key of understanding the scriptures for African women and men. This type of 'reading' is liberating for it gives meaning to people's lives today. It is also a way of reformulating the principal of biblical authority.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that for African women theologians and feminist biblical scholars a liberating feminist biblical interpretation is one that is grounded in life. African women see the Bible as a community book whose message is addressed to both men and women in their context of struggle against dehumanizing conditions such as poverty, disease, ignorance and the impact of globalization at macro and micro levels. They are also aware of the patriarchal context of the biblical text and message and have developed a methodology that enables them to distinguish between oppressive cultures and the gospel of life. This approach is to be found written both from the academic perspective and the people's readings in the Churches and lives. The methodology of feminist biblical interpretation and the hermeneutics of liberation adopt the traditional procedures as well as liberating ones that go beyond the text, and as Cardoso asserts,

'reading the text against itself, looking for underlying rhetorical possibilities, visualizing dissident experiences'.⁴

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