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## **Institutional and Popular Interpretations of the Bible in Africa: Towards an Integration**

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*In this paper, I examine how the Bible is interpreted in Africa's theological institutions (including university Religious Studies Departments and Faculties of Theology), as well as Africa's churches, homes and open spaces, with the intention of finding out how the two can be best integrated for the sake of African Christian communities. I argue that we cannot venture a mutual relationship between the two ways of interpreting the Bible in Africa until we first establish the principles behind the explication of biblical texts in popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa. However, since we possess insufficient data on popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa to allow us to establish such principles, I propose that African biblical scholarship should undertake the task of collecting such data as an integral part of its scholarship.*

Keywords

*Bible in Africa, Institutional Interpretations, Popular Interpretations*

### **Introduction**

according to the study by Jenkins (2006: 9), 'there are about two billion Christians, of whom 530 million live in Europe, 510 million in Latin America, 390 million in Africa, and perhaps 300 million in Asia'. if this is the case, then the majority of Christians are in the southern hemisphere. And as Jenkins goes on to note: 'By 2025, Africa and Latin America

will vie for the title of the most Christian continent' (Jenkins 2006: 9). Given the spectacular growth of Christianity in Africa, African Christianity may well become the dominant form of Christianity whose numbers will contribute a visibly high proportion of Christians in the world. For reasons such as this, an increasing number of people in academia, and in churches and wider society in the North Atlantic world are

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developing an interest in Christianity in Africa and especially how the Bible is used there. This is rightly so, because the Bible is an integral part of the Christian faith.

Whereas a considerable number of short studies dealing with the usage of the Bible in Africa exist,<sup>1</sup> there are relatively few specifically dealing with the interpretation of the Bible in African Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In addition, those few are largely composed of either interpretations of the Bible, or parts of it, by African (biblical) scholars, or with what they have to say about Biblical interpretation in Africa. on account of this relative scarcity, it seems to me that more work is needed which looks at the way in which the Bible is used in African Christianity, but more specifically, in the ways that it is interpreted both by African biblical scholars and by men and women in the churches, in open spaces (i.e. in streets, markets, fields, etc.) and homes. therefore, i wish to look in a general way at the way the Bible is interpreted, in both theological institutions including universities' religious studies Departments and Faculties of theology (hence institutional interpretations), as well as in churches, homes, and open spaces (hence popular interpretations) in Africa. i will also consider the possibility of integrating the two via a mutual relationship which i

think would be for the benefit of African Christian communities.

***Institutional Interpretations of the Bible in Africa*** institutional interpretations of the Bible in African academic and theological institutions cannot be divorced from institutional interpretations from other parts of the world and especially from the North Atlantic. Such a statement should not come as a surprise in view of the fact that education systems which Africa inherited were from the North Atlantic.

As a result, just as in the academic interpretations of the Bible in the North Atlantic Universities and institutions of higher learning, the Bible in theological institutions in Africa is interpreted by means of historical criticism. By this i mean that the biblical texts are made sense of with reference to the texts' historical literary styles and to their ancient form of writing, and with reference to their writers, first audience, and world (*sensus literalis sive historicus*).<sup>3</sup> Ukpong's (1999) study<sup>4</sup> of institutional interpretation of the Bible in Africa is illustrative of this point. He made the observation that institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa from the 1930s has gone through three main phases: the comparative studies phase (1930–1970), the Africa-in-the-Bible studies

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<sup>1</sup> See schAAF (1994) together with the numerous articles in mbiti (1986 and 2004), Kinoti and Waliggo (1997), maluleke (2002) and *The Bible in Africa* (Dube and West 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See Getui *et al* (2001a and 2001b) and Ukpong *et al* (2002).

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<sup>3</sup> this is understood to objectify interpretations since explication of an historical text is arrived at by reference to

<sup>4</sup> See also Zinkuratire (2001) and holter (1998) for more on this.

phase (1970–1990), and the evaluative studies phase (from 1990s). The thrust of the comparative stage was to look at the Bible with the view of establishing some continuity between the world of the Bible and some African reality. The aim was usually to redeem African religion and culture from the negative ways it had been looked at by Western missionaries. In the Africa-in-the-Bible stage, Ukpong points out that the investigation of the presence of Africa and African people in the Bible predominated. The purpose of doing so was largely to ‘correct the tendency in Western scholarship to de-emphasize Africa’s presence and contribution to the biblical story’ (Ukpong 1999: 317). Lastly, in the evaluative phase, the focus was on the encounter between Africa and the Bible with the aim of facilitating ‘the communication of the biblical message within the Africa milieu, and to develop a new understanding of Christianity that would both be African and biblical’ (Ukpong 1999: 318). One thing is common to all these phases of biblical interpretations in African institutional interpretations: *the Bible for different but specific ends has been studied by means of historical criticism*. if we look at this history of biblical interpretation in African institutions more closely, we can deduce that although the Bible is interpreted through historical criticism, just as it is in the North Atlantic academic

institutions, the study, unlike in North Atlantic institutions, is usually for a particular purpose which has to do with an aspect of Africa’s context. In other words, the specific end mentioned above, to which historical critical studies of the Bible are put in African institutional interpretations of the Bible has to do with an African context. This is a hallmark of institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa and is indeed in operation today in the current (the third) phase enumerated above of institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, this third phase of institutional biblical interpretations in Africa not only characterizes the interpretations of the Bible in academic and theological institutions in Africa today, but is also deliberately pursued by these institutions. Three examples to illustrate this will here suffice:

1. Nairobi evangelical Graduate school of theology (NeGst) in Kenya has as a key objective of its master of Arts degree in Biblical studies: exhibiting ‘competence in the exegesis and exposition of the old and New testaments and relating that competence to African realities’ (NeGst 2006: 67)

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<sup>5</sup> Lemarquand’s (2000) survey of institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa is a helpful illustration of this; see also Rogers (1994).

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2. the Catholic University, also in Kenya, has, for its Faculty of theology, a chief objective that states: 'With special reference to African Cultures, the Catholic University provides a profound understanding of Christian

Revelation . . .' (in holter 1998: 455)

3. the biannual *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, which is published by the Nigerian

Association of Biblical studies, states that it aims to 'encourage biblical scholars to look

Critically ascertained (in the sense of reason for their occurrence accounted for) historical events or contexts.

A look at the papers published through the years in the *African Journal of Biblical Studies* attests to the aim in the third example. I take it that because the Nigerian Association of Biblical studies cannot be at odds with the theological institutions, including religious studies Departments, of universities in Nigeria where the Association's membership comes from, this aim is in keeping with the aims of the religious or Biblical studies Departments, or Faculties of Divinity of the concerned institutions in Nigeria.<sup>6</sup>

But there is more to institutional biblical interpretations in Africa worth pointing out. Although institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa are done through historical criticism and for

a specific end, individual books of the Bible are rarely interpreted in their entirety. Rather, they are interpreted in an *ad hoc* manner and in the service of the given end for which they are interpreted. As I have shown elsewhere (Nyende 2005: 513)<sup>7</sup> institutional biblical interpretations in Africa, unlike in the Anglo-American scene, tend not to stand on their own but, rather, portions of the Bible are studied circumstantially, to address a perceived pastoral, moral, even political problem. Consequently, studies attempting to understand different sections of the Bible on their own terms and for their own sake, as, say, a historical-critical reading of a select biblical text would attempt to do, are infrequent in institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We see this third phase advocated by African biblical scholars (e.g. Abogunrin 1986, Pobee 1986, and Ntshang 1990) who have written on how biblical studies ought to be conducted in African institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Maluleke (2002, 95ff).

<sup>8</sup> It is no wonder that there are very few commentaries written by African biblical scholars such as the one written by Abogunrin

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(1988) on 1 Corinthians, and two one-volume commentaries: one by some African 'protestant' scholars (Adeyemo 2006) and the other by Catholic scholars who are either Africans or working in Africa

So then, institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa are done historically but with the aim of relating the outcome of the interpretation to some African context or reality. As a result, we could say that what guides the study of the Bible in these institutions is the relevancy, applicability or usefulness of the text in Africa today.

***Popular Interpretations of the Bible in Africa***<sup>9</sup> the use of imperatives and exhortation in communicating via preaching popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa, as pointed out in mijoga's (2001: 49ff) study, belies their goal: they are conducted chiefly for the sake of their appropriation in the lives of Christians who participate in, or are the recipients of, those interpretations. In effect, then, they share a common aim with institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa, viz. relating the study of the Bible to African life. However, unlike institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa which relate Bible study to an aspect of Africa's context, the African life that the popular interpretations seek to relate their study of the Bible to is

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(Colocrai and Zinkurati 1999). see also mbiti (1986) and Ukpong's (1999) references to articles and books published by African biblical scholars which underscore this point.

<sup>9</sup> the basis for my analyses and consequent descriptions of popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa is my own data of such actual interpretations in Kenya and Uganda and mijoga's (2001) comprehensive data of popular interpretations of the Bible in Malawi. It should be noted that the context where these interpretations have been gathered is in preaching; this is invariable, since the predominant way in which the biblical interpretations are communicated in popular circles is oral.<sup>11</sup> see also Pobee's (1996) 'African emphases in Bible study' (171-76) and mijoga (2001: 91-137).

Bible in Africa study the Bible by means of historical criticism and then relate the study to an aspect of Africa's context. such an approach rarely happens in popular interpretations. We may ask then how popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa study

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one that is highly personal in nature. By this i mean that they often have to do with the individual Christian. this is the reason why, in his study of preaching in the churches of malawi, ross (1995) found out that the top six themes had to do with the individual and not the society. more precisely, the interpretations concerned themselves with the need for personal conversion, the duties of the Christian life, Christ's power to heal today, mission and evangelism, God's judgement and the life to come, all of which had to do with the individual at a very personal and emotional level.<sup>11</sup> the ends of popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa is the first aspect of popular interpretations. We turn now to a second significant aspect. We mentioned that institutional interpretations of the texts before subsequently applying them to African Christian life. In my analyses of actual popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa, i found that the Bible is studied and applied to Christian life through: 1. 'Figural' readings; 2. 'thematic' readings; and through what we may call 3. 'Plain' or 'literal' readings. We will look at them in turn. In figural readings, a portion of the Bible is read but understood and thus applied to the Christian life through figuralism.<sup>10</sup> Figuralism here should be understood as readings of the texts where persons, events, places and ideas in a text are understood to represent something else.

Allegory, symbolism, and typology are all, then, classified as figuralism. For example, when John 2:1–10 was interpreted by a preacher at a pre-wedding ceremony in a village home in central Kenya, the six stone jars (v. 6) that held water, which was eventually turned to wine, were taken to represent stones that build a home. those stones were given as: love, patience, forgiveness, dialogue and peace.<sup>11</sup> the husband and wife designate were exhorted to use those stones to build their future home and family. Another example of figural interpretation was in the interpretation of 1 samuel 15:13–25 at a church service on the outskirts of Nairobi. saul in this narrative was understood to represent Christians who do not obey God; while the bleating sheep and lowing oxen which saul was supposed to slaughter were taken to represent the sins that Christians are not putting away such as hypocrisy, bribes, lies, mistreating of house maids, etc. the preacher then warned those listening to him to be obedient to God by putting away sin. such figural interpretations are quite common in popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa.<sup>14</sup>

in thematic readings, a theme is picked out of a text of the Bible and is usually variously amplified and illustrated before being applied to the life of the Christian listener. this theme may be derived precisely from its immediate textual context

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this perspective on figuralism see Ziolkowski (1977).

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<sup>11</sup> the sixth 'stone' that builds a house was not mentioned. <sup>14</sup> For more examples, see mijoga (2001: 21–22, 32–34, 37–38, etc.).

and applied in the lives of Christians, or it may just be loosely tied to it.<sup>12</sup> So, for example, in an Anglican Church in eastern Uganda, the preacher picked out the theme of 'pleasing God' from Colossians 1:10. After amplifying it and illustrating this theme in terms which the Christians listening to him could easily understand, he exhorted them to live a life that is pleasing to God by giving, serving, having good manners, etc. and not to annoy him by drunkenness, committing adultery, being involved in witchcraft and the like. This theme is clearly derived from the textual context of this verse which has to do with Paul's prayer on the kind of life he wishes the Colossian Christians to live. An example of a thematic reading whose theme, though taken from the text, is loosely tied to it is from Luke 8:22–25 as interpreted and preached on in a village church in northern Uganda. The theme the preacher picked out of this text was 'power over everything' through faith. The Christians listening to him were exhorted to tap into this power which they have through faith in order to cast out demons, to pray for the sick and have them healed, to encounter any adverse power under the sun, etc. The textual context, it seems to me, has to do with who Jesus Christ is; the passage shows that the disciples had not yet truly recognized who Jesus was and for that reason they were astonished by his power to rebuke the winds and the raging sea. This

to me is the main point of the text. However, the passage also has to do with power and with faith, which the preacher focused on, and applied to, Christian life. Thematic readings of scripture are quite common in popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, in plain readings, a passage from the Bible is read literally<sup>14</sup> but by drawing on, in good measure, the interpreter's religious convictions, cultural sensibilities and common cultural assumptions.<sup>18</sup>

Between a theme or word from the Bible, and a theme from a contemporary situation. However, little attention is given to the textual context of the words or theme from the Bible with which the contemporary theme is connected. The result is that the message given by the interpreter is scarcely generated by a reading of the text. This is why we have concerns of, for example, Shorter (2001: 42–44), and Mosala (1996) as to whether biblical interpretation is taking place at all in such cases or arenas. I would have loved to pursue this topic but my paper is concerned with *interpretations* of the Bible in Africa, and not with the *use* of the Bible in Africa.

Subsequently, a direct application of this reading is made to the lives of the Christians listening to the interpretation.

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<sup>13</sup> For more examples, see Mijoga (2001: 26–29).

<sup>14</sup> By this I mean that the text is read and made sense of without much knowledge of its historical context. This is because the text makes sense to the interpreter on literary and other bases other than on the basis of its historical provenance.

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<sup>12</sup> I am careful to point this out because closely tied to this is a way in which the Bible is used in preaching in popular arenas. In this use, a verbal (or thematic) connection is made

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For example, at a church service in Kenya the preacher read Acts 2:42–47, recounted and elaborated on what a group of early Christians practiced as ‘devoting themselves to the apostle’s teachings’, ‘loving and caring for each other’, ‘worshipping together’, and ‘sharing the gospel with others’. He talked of these practices as the marks of the early Church. In his application, he exhorted the Christians listening to him to emulate these early Christians’ practices because the early Christians were their models of the Christian life. Here, there is no figuralism of any sort, nor the picking up of a theme within the text, but rather a straightforward literary reading of the text and its subsequent direct application in the lives of Christians. Another example comes from psalm 90:1–17, interpreted at a prison church service in Nairobi. The prayer of the psalmist was divided by the preacher into three parts (vv. 1–2, vv. 3–10, and vv. 11–17). He understood the first part to be about the permanency of God which he amplified at length in contemporary terms. The second he understood to be about the temporality of human beings of which, again, he amplified and illustrated in contemporary terms. He then exhorted those present first to pray to God to help them know who God is in the same way that the psalmist did; and second, as the psalmist, to pray to God to help them number their days in order to gain wisdom. Such

interpretations of the Bible are myriad in popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa.<sup>19</sup> In conclusion, we should note that the popular interpretations highlighted above are not arbitrary (as some may appear) but rather are informed mostly by the faith, ethos and practices, and the comprehension of the Christian community the interpreter belongs to.

***Towards an Integration*** how then are we to relate these two interpretations of the Bible? As we mentioned above, both kinds of interpretations are geared towards African life in to which their interpretations are supposed to be appropriated. However, whereas institutional interpretations are more concerned with the more public aspects of African life, popular interpretations are more concerned with the personal sphere. Consequently, one would naturally think that the relationship that exists between the two is a complementary one. But we should not rush to conclude thus for the question of the relationship between the two cannot be pinned down because of some vital information that hitherto is not available concerning popular interpretations of the Bible. For unlike institutional interpretations of the Bible, the norms and principles that apply in explicating texts in popular interpretations are yet to be articulated, let alone understood. And yet an exploration of the relationship between the two necessitates that we understand the norms



or principles they use for their explication of texts. This is the case because it is only in the light of such knowledge that we can, first, determine whether the two can be related – it is possible that the philosophies (others may call them theologies) guiding the two interpretations, being inimical to each other, or in tension, cannot allow for a complementary relationship. then secondly, assuming that the philosophies of the two interpretations allow for it, we can, in the

<sup>18</sup> The place of cultural sensibilities and assumptions could be quite strong in such readings in view of the convergence in many places of the world of the Bible (particularly the Old Testament) and the African world. This convergence makes some things, without further aid, readily comprehensible to African readers of the Bible. For more, see Isaac (1964) and Dickson (1984: 146ff).

<sup>19</sup> For more, see mijoga (2001: 23–25 and 27–30) who speaks of this phenomenon of direct applications as one marked, at least in Malawi, with the use of the word that is equivalent to ‘likewise’ or the words, ‘in the same way’ (16).

As you may have already deduced, the foregoing understanding of the principles of historical readings of the Bible enables us to evaluate the benefits and weaknesses of such interpretations. Without knowledge of these principles, we would not be able to make such an assessment. It is such an assessment i am arguing we cannot make of popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa

light of the said knowledge, assess their strengths, benefits and promises together with their weaknesses, dangers and limitations, and in consequence be able to determine in which ways the two interpretations could complement each other in their common ends of serving African Christian communities. For clarity, i will illustrate my point here.

We could take the principles in explicating

because we have established very little of their principles of explicating the Bible. What are the principles behind the figural readings which i looked at, for example? more precisely, what are the criteria that guide popular interpreters in determining what symbols should be assigned to the person, place, or event they read of in the Bible, since we cannot take it to be a free enterprise, left to the whims of interpreters? Indeed, the answer to such questions is important not only for the sake of exploring the relationship that could exist between institutional and popular interpretations but also for the sake of the Christian communities that both interpretations seek to serve. These ecclesiastical institutions have invariably a heavy responsibility to guide their members on biblical interpretations. As stated by Morgan, ‘it is hard to see how a religious institution can be serious about its claim to truth, however elusive it recognizes that truth to be, without some form of magisterium which articulates the mind of the church . . .’ (1996: 232). For this reason,

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some degree of external, corporate authority is needed in churches for issues of biblical interpretation. Indeed, it is to meet this need, *inter alia* that mainstream Christian communities seek to send their potential leaders to train at theological institutions in biblical interpretation. But unless popular interpretations of the Bible are understood, and thereby related to institutional interpretations, external, corporate authority will not be properly carried out, if at all.

i propose, therefore, that more extensive investigation, by way of gathering data, reflections and discussions, needs to be done on this aspect of popular interpretations of the Bible in Africa before we venture what kind of relationship that they should have with institutional interpretations of the Bible in Africa. I also propose that this kind of investigation should actually be a task of African biblical scholarship. This task should, in the first instance, focus on the documentation of data on actual popular interpretations. To the best of my knowledge, documentation on actual popular interpretations is scarce. so far, i am aware of only mijoga's (2001) documentation<sup>15</sup> and of biblical scholars from Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and south Africa who, in intending to relate institutional and popular readings of the

Bible, made some effort to record actual popular interpretations (though i am not sure what became of their efforts).<sup>16</sup>

i am convinced, then, that to undertake this task, African biblical scholarship should borrow a leaf from what African church historians are doing in documenting the past lives of African Christians in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*.<sup>17</sup> This dictionary is making known the lives of African Christians who made a significant contribution to Christianity in Africa in a way that hitherto was not available. The same could be done with popular interpretations of the Bible by Africans past and present. This documentation should subsequently be followed up by thorough analyses of the interpretations, which should also include interactions with popular interpreters themselves, where possible, in order to hear from them as to why they interpret the Bible in the ways that they do. This would then enable us to grasp adequately the principles of explicating texts behind these interpretations of the Bible. On this basis, we could then venture to expound what relationship they have with institutional interpretations of the Bible.

I surmise that besides helping relate the two kinds of interpretations of the Bible,

### Presuppositions and unarticulated

assumptions of churches and popular interpreters as if were as stones on a large ecclesial, theological, and historical edifice.

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<sup>16</sup> see riches (1996).

<sup>17</sup> this is available online at [www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org) (accessed July 2007).

Such an undertaking would result in a concrete engagement of popular interpreters by 'professional exegetes' (i.e. institutional interpreters) which could help popular interpreters' historical and textual sensitivity.<sup>18</sup> on the other hand, this undertaking would also mean that African biblical scholars' work would of necessity take into consideration what informs African Christians in their reading of the Bible with apparently little more than their faith (variously informed), and then subsequently, relating their scholarly work to these realities. A situation would then be created where institutional and popular interpretations of the Bible feed off and feed into each other's domain and insights. Such a situation would be to the health of African Christian communities, as alluded to above. As far as i know, only the institute for the study of the Bible in southern Africa<sup>19</sup> has sought to bring together institutional studies of the Bible (known in the institute as academic readings) and popular studies of the same (known as ordinary readings). For this reason, this institute may be well placed to pioneer such an undertaking as a special area within its programmes. But there is no reason why other theological institutions in Africa can not follow suit.

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<sup>18</sup> this should not be taken to mean simply, and only, that popular interpretations depends on historical critical studies as obeng (1997: 23) advocates. Despite helping foster a textual and historical sensitivity amongst popular interpreters, i envisage here a more complex interaction.

<sup>19</sup> For more, see West (1995: 216–38).

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