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AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS ON THE THRESHOLD? APPRAISAL AND WAYFORWARD

ABSTRACT

What appears to be African Biblical Hermeneutics often refers to the geographical location of the authors rather than the content. There always appears to be something new on the horizon, but the colonial umbilical cord prevents a crossing of the threshold. This article contends that, in order for it to cross the threshold, African Biblical Hermeneutics has to go beyond the geographical location of the reader/interpreter to the development of a framework that is essentially African, while not compromising the catholicity of the church. A celebration of life is proposed as the closest interpretative framework to both the Bible and the multiple African cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION: LAYING THE QUESTION TO REST

The aim of this article is to make a diagnostic contribution to the discourse concerning African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH) by conducting a critical appraisal of the African readings/interpretations of the Bible, followed by an outline of what I propose as its essence. Two questions introduce the subject. First, an evaluative question: “How ‘african’¹ are the African readings/interpretations of the Bible?” Secondly, the issue of identity is introduced with the question: “What essentially are African readings of the Bible?”

My argument in this paper unfolds along the lines of African cultural identity and hermeneutical

1 “African” with lower case is used as an adjective in this context.

framework which are important in any attempt to find answers. A concerted effort in this regard would lay to rest the evaluative question pertaining to the “africanness” of African readings which I have pursued for over a decade. In order to be able to find a way forward, the purpose of the exercise has to be sharply defined and a clear distinction made between the various emphases that are loosely defined as ABH (see, e.g., Adamo, Ukpong), while harmony with the current cultural location of Africans has to be made. It may or may never be possible to recover a purely African hermeneutical framework.

This paper is structured as follows: an outline of scholarly views on hermeneutics, ending with a summary of an African perspective; an outline of an anthropological model, *liminality*; a reflection on whether ABH is on a threshold or in a *cul-de-sac*, and an outline of the proposed essence of “africanness”. A brief conclusion brings the paper to a close.

2. HERMENEUTICS AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

There are various views on the meaning of the term “hermeneutics”. However, many agree that it is about how to understand a written or spoken text. As Thiselton (2009:1) puts it, hermeneutics

explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in another context of life from our own.

However, Thiselton, like many others, acknowledges that this field is more complex than it appears, for it involves a number of academic disciplines ranging from philosophy to theology, linguistics, sociology, etc. (Thiselton 2009:1). More importantly, he realises the fact that above all these layers is the location of the interpreter in relation to meaning. Is the reader the one who gives meaning or is meaning given by the author through the text? (Thiselton 2009:1-2).

This takes the previously held definition, imparted to us by Terry (1974) who defined hermeneutics as the “science of interpretation” (Terry 1974:17), beyond the narrow confines of science. Science, as it is understood in Terry’s modernistic context, is a positivistic approach to reality which requires that everything be subjected to a “test tube” kind of scrutiny, purportedly, in pursuit of objectivity. In other words, it leaves out the baggage of the reader(s), while it focuses on the Bible as the “source” of meaning, containing “objective” truths. This is in contrast to Gadamer’s thinking, popularised in modern history by Croatto (1987), that interpretation is a “fusion of horizons”, that is, the horizon of the text’s author and that of

the text's reader. When the reader's perspective is ignored, this denies the influence of the reader's baggage on the text. Barthes (1968) emphasises that the text is a self-contained system (Thiselton 2009:25). Whatever he means by it, his essay on the "death of the author", became influential for a long time among textual critics who, spurred by the so-called independence of the text, began to apply other literary devices such as point of view, communication components such as sender of the message, receiver of the message, and psychological insights.

We are indeed dealing with the paradox of a simple entity with a complex DNA. However, the preferred aspect of the DNA to pursue is the reader's prerogative, informed by the concerns of the reader's context. In other words, the text will still have meaning in a given context, even if only selected aspects thereof are highlighted. While the canon is the norm,² there is also a recognition of the fact that revelation goes beyond the text, working through history and the spirit. The text is only a starting-point, serving as mediator of meaning, not its repository (Dockery 1992:168). Citing Gadamer (1985), Dockery (1992:169) argues that the reader's task (across contexts) is *not to determine* (my emphasis) the author's meaning but *to discern* (my emphasis) what the text is saying to the present reader. The result is a polyvalence of meanings, in other words, inexhaustible meaning, communicated through language (Dockery 1992:169).

A number of hermeneutists have debated the question of where the meaning lies. Therefore, I shall not pursue the issue in detail in this section. However, the question of canonicity, that is authority,³ which is inevitable in any discussion of ABH, remains unaddressed. Can there be an African hermeneutics that is true to the "Biblical message"? Will the postmodernism argument, as outlined below, hold water? (Wilder 1991:161f.). Adam (1995:1) notes that there are many varieties of postmodernism, as it is in the nature of postmodernism to strike out against any notions of identity and unity in one form or another. Interestingly, Adam defines postmodernism as a "movement of resistance" because of its origins in opposition to modernity (Adam 1995:1). If postmodernism takes us past the scientism of modernity in respect of understanding the Biblical text, thereby bridging the gap between us and the text, then it is of huge value (cf. Adam 1995:4). In this regard, Adam (1995:5) quotes Cornel West who asserts that postmodernism is "antifoundational, anti-totalizing, and demystifying". Thus, it refuses to

2 See also the discussion of canon in Childs (1979:49-50).

3 See Childs' (1970:105-107) view on the authority of the canonical Scriptures. His strong views about the authority of the scriptures as the rule of faith borders on infallibility and inspiration. Both notions are being contested strongly by both contemporary generations of Christians and Biblical scholars.

posit any one premise as “the privileged and unassailable starting-point” for establishing claims to truth; it militates against any theory that claims to account for everything, and it is quick to identify and point out ideological projections (Adam 1995:5). Everyone, therefore, has a story to tell because they “think, therefore, they are”. Lyotard (2001) states the same more explicitly by alluding to postmodernism’s aversion to “metanarratives” as these promote coercion while the space to question shrinks.

Postmodernism as an epistemological framework has, in recent years, had huge advantages for those who are historically regarded as “the other”.⁴ These, in Levinas’s thinking, include any person who is marginalised by the powerful or the “significant others”, like the dying Jews in the concentration camp who looked up to him for assistance. In our present world, we may think of individuals and groups such as gays and lesbians, women, the poor, uneducated, etc. who are continually marginalised by sections of society. In her book *Can the subaltern speak?*, the feminist, Spivak (1988) questions the disempowering relationship of even the most revered European thinkers and academics with the cultures of the Third World they research, and refers to the people of the latter as the “subaltern”. Her point in raising the question “Can the subaltern speak?” is that “[W]hite males” are talking to other [W]hite males” about Third-World nations and their cultures as if they have no voice of their own. She based her study on the model of the position of women in some of the Indian communities in India. We may, however, specifically think of the African nation in relation to their colonial masters and the subservient position they have since occupied among the nations of the world. This “other” has been silent or silenced for too long and, in a sense, complicit to its own suppression. West (1999:79) draws attention to a fraction of this group. He identifies them as the ordinary African “readers” of the Bible from poor and marginalised communities in South Africa. While he is subject to criticism for the narrowness of his definition, cognisance has to be taken of the caveat he builds into it, namely that the “shifting boundaries that constitute this ‘other’... reconstitute who this ‘other’ is from day to day” (West 1999:97). However, our “other” in this article is the African in the entire continent. It is this voice that is missing in the discourse, because it has been silenced or acquiesced to that silence by the “significant others” who have assumed the role of representation. Examples of Biblical scholars such as Banana (1993), whom West cites, make extreme, but desperate attempts to break through the silence, while others such as Ukpong, who are subjects of this article, have also consistently drawn attention to the African dilemma, though with little progress. I am only concerned with Biblical scholars in

4 Cf. Levinas (1987) for a discussion of what he calls “the other”.

this article, not African theologians, in general. In the absence of a decisive African voice, the White European male continues to dominate (cf. Village 2007:20-28).

I have thus far covered questions pertaining to the definition of hermeneutics, its relationship to the canon of scriptures, the dominant voices and subservient others as well as the voices that represent Africa in the debate. It is clear that the African voice is subservient to that of Euro-western voices or that the Africans have only recently begun to make their voices heard, but that, apart from protesting that they are “human too” with legitimate voices, there is no product to put on the table. The discussion on the meaning of hermeneutics has shown that there is no contradiction in espousing a Biblical message within an African hermeneutics framework. Do we have that yet?

3. AFRICANS IN A LIMINAL SPACE

Part of the answer to the last question above is to investigate where Africans are at present. The delay of African Biblical scholars in producing a hermeneutical approach that is essentially African in its uniqueness since the launch of African theology in the aftermath of the independence of the first African state (Ghana 1957), and despite attempts of various degrees, including the call for a “rewriting of the Bible”, speaks to the procrastination of Africans. Why would a people that is self-governing, with an opportunity to fashion its own destiny, find itself in a *cul-de-sac* when called upon to provide direction in a key area of self-definition? Without implying that culture is static or unidirectional, I propose to reflect on the question through the grid of Van Gennep’s (1908) rites-of-passage model, as permutated by Turner (1967, 1974). There appears to be a *prima facie* case that Africans might be in a *liminal* space – a space which Turner (1974) calls “betwixt and between”.⁵

The model consists of three stages: the separation or detachment from the stabilised environment; the margin which is equal to an ambiguous state of the subject, and aggregation, which is the final stage or state of completeness. At this stage, the subject has crossed the threshold into a new fixed and stabilised state. Transitions play an important role in this theory from one group to another. Groups may be classified according to age, gender, or social relationships (Willet & Deegan 2001:137). The

5 The term “*liminality*” is based on a Latin phrase, “*en limine*”, which means “threshold”. It was appropriated by the anthropologist, Van Gennep in the 1900s in his study of the rites of passage among some North African tribes.

important stage is the *liminal* stage where the individual is displaced and can be made or broken. This makes it imperative that reintegration takes place at the end of the process, failing which the individual remains in a permanent *liminal* state (Willet & Deegan 2001:138).

In the 1960s, Turner (1967:73), making use of the insights of anthropologists such as Mary Douglas (1966) and others, argued that society is a structure of positions where the *liminal* stage marks the transition between two socially viable positions. In other words, *liminality is*, according to his later publication, a “movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling” (Turner 1974:274).

While Turner utilised Van Gennep’s model, he opted to make it slightly simpler than it was in its original form. He worked with Van Gennep’s three stages, focusing on the rites of passage which involved initiations. For him, these were akin to “becomingness”. He saw *liminality* as the “realm of primitive hypotheses, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence” (Turner 1967:106). During this stage, the *liminar*⁶ is characterised by a series of contradictions (Turner 1967:95). For example, he is “no longer classified, and not yet classified”. In other words, he is neither one thing nor the other (Turner 1967:96-97). This is what Turner (1967:97) refers to as “betwixt and between”.

In my application of Van Gennep’s model, I characterise the first stage as the “comfort zone”, the second as the “self-emptying (or kenotic) stage”, and the third as the “rebirth stage”. The starting-point towards achieving the status of the third stage is the commitment to metaphorically move from point A to point C via point B and a willingness to go through the kenotic process of point B. In another publication (Speckman 2007), I refer to advancement, as understood by Africans, as the point at which an individual has assented to cultural values. In other words, it need not be a “quantum jump” from traditional to modern, but adaptability. Subjects tend to “resist” the kenotic process, therefore, remaining *en limine* for a long time, if not permanently. It is the willingness to be emptied that takes one over the threshold. Taking a shortcut to point C in order to avoid the discomfort of point B also has its pitfalls. Subjects miss the opportunity to absorb society’s values, norms, and relationships that are prerequisites for the new status, that is, beyond the threshold.

All three stages apply to Africa and its Biblical scholars. There is stability in point A, which is the pre-liminal stage, in this instance, the stage following the acceptance of the faith and, perhaps, the training of theologians, which,

6 This term will be used interchangeably with “subject”. It refers to the initiate.

in some instances, took place overseas (Ukpong 2000:4). However, the greatest challenge followed the 1966 summit in Ibadan, Nigeria (cf. Mbiti 1986:73), instilling ideas of self-discovery. In this instance, Africans seem to be in the middle of the woods, caught between Africa and Europe.⁷ They are not fully European, although, in some ways, European-oriented. Yet, they no longer possess what it takes to qualify as authentic traditional Africans. They talk African culture, but are always on the back-foot, justifying its “vestiges” (cf. Mosala 1989; Anum 2001). The truth is that what might have been known as African culture in one era, has been drastically altered. There is a great deal of traffic between city and village, the DSTV dish has overtaken the radio, which hitherto rationed people with the kind of programmes they needed to have in both city and village. Colonisation was initially responsible, but currently, this may be ascribed to cultural imperialism, which has continued beyond colonialism. Africans voluntarily purchase it through technology nowadays. In short, there is no area where African culture is not contaminated, though not fully eroded. This, on its own, is a “betwixt and between” phenomenon.

Dube (2010), however, seems to suggest that pursuing the issue of an African identity is a futile exercise, because she espouses an essentialist view of being African. Having traced the origin of the African dilemma back to the balkanisation of Africa since the 1880s at the Berlin conference (1884-1885), which was convened by colonial masters with the view to ending their own internecine conflicts over African territories under their control, Dube (2010) concludes that the conference was akin to a “gang-rape” of Africa. There was no African where Africa was the subject of discussion. The scramble for Africa was turned into a “biblical scramble for Africa”, as the Bible became one of the instruments used to make Africans accept colonisation without much blood being spilt. Two things could be read out of Dube’s analogy without going into detail. First, Africa is shattered, a major consequence of “gang-rape”. Secondly, the emphasis among Africans of regional pseudo-differences at the expense of their unity⁸ is also a consequence of the “gang-rape”. This is a very strong, if not desperate, imagery that is used to portray the effect of the process of colonisation. The implication of the metaphor is that Africa will never be the same after the conference, just as the rape victim can never be the same

7 Kuse caricatures this as “spread out legs” with one foot in the “spear civilisation” and the other in the “gunpowder civilisation”. For him, it is not a question of being undecided, but that of wanting to have both because of the false securities offered by each (Presentation at the Christianity and African Culture workshop in Umtata, University of the Transkei, 1995).

8 There are Anglophone, Francophone, Portuguese, etc. regions in Africa, thus reflecting the outcome of the Berlin conference.

after the shattering ordeal.⁹ If we were to ask what Africa was prior to the Berlin conference, the answer would only be a matter of speculation.

4. IS AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS ON A THRESHOLD OR IN A CUL-DE-SAC?

It is, in fact, a misnomer to talk of an ABH threshold. Africans are in and out of the *liminal* space for the reasons outlined earlier. There was a time (1970s to 1990s) when a rigorous search for “things African” promised to put Africa on the map as a centre of attraction. However, things seem to have since slowed down to a point that a *cul-de-sac* was quickly reached. The intercultural approach adopted by the late Justin Ukpong and his disciples is not essentially African and must, therefore, not be regarded as an apogee of ABH, but a dead end. Intercultural hermeneutics seems to be a conflation of “contextual” and African theologies. This approach, proposed by Ukpong (1994), is gaining support from a number of “loyal African Biblical scholars” (Adamo, Anum, Loba-Mkole and, recently, West). My contention in this article is that it is not uniquely African and that it is nevertheless not a solution to the problem at hand.

Ukpong has found support in his companion Adamo (2001a & 2001b) and his protégé Anum (2001). A later supporter is Loba-Mkole (2008) who joins the other two New Testament voices, Ukpong and Anum. Ukpong first presented an elementary version of his ABH during the African and European Biblical scholars’ consultation in Glasgow in 1994.¹⁰ He published a final version in 1996. However, there were not as many references to “ordinary readers” of the Bible as there are in his later publications.

In their respective publications, Ukpong (2000) and Adamo (2006) first point to the phases through which the development of ABH has gone. Adamo (2006:7-30) starts off with what he calls “biblical times” and proceeds to the “present times”, which, according to him, stretch from the 1990s to the present. This period is divided into five parts, with a great deal of scholarly activity in-between. These entail the following: the Biblical period, based

9 This prompted Dube (2002) a little more than a decade ago to raise the question as to whether the term “Africa” only referred to a geographical location, because she found it to be devoid of content. (presentation at a Unisa seminar). Mosala (1989) had bolstered his point about African culture as a prerequisite for the success of Marxism by arguing that there are vestiges of pure African culture in some communities, a debatable averment.

10 Anum refers to this consultation in his 1999 PhD thesis. I also attended this consultation.

on the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible; the post-Biblical, based on the work of the Early Church Fathers; the 1930s to 1960s, reflecting on colonial and missionary work; the 1970s to 1980s, characterised as the real emergence of African Biblical Studies by the author, and the 1990s to the present, considered by the author as the period of boom in African Biblical Studies. In doing this, Adamo (2001a:iii) ostensibly intends to go beyond the three phases identified by his friend and colleague, the late Justin Ukpong. The latter alluded to “reactive and apologetic”, “reactive-proactive” and “proactive” periods (Ukpong 2000:11-28). A different view is further expressed by an honorary African, Knut Holter (2001), who makes reference to “thematic and institutional perspectives” in his examination of Old Testament scholarship in Africa at the turn of the century.

It is tempting to offer a comment on each of the identified periods, although Adamo’s (2006:7) focus is on the modern period that stretches from the 1930s. These are not passing phases as in a linear manner; there is some overlap. The Biblical period has, for instance, bequeathed to subsequent generations a number of theological insights, which continue to influence our thinking and approaches to this day. However, it is one thing for the Church Fathers to have come from Africa and quite another to have espoused an African brand of Biblical interpretation. Some of them are known to have been pioneers with particular approaches (e.g., Origen, Tertulian);¹¹ however, their interpretative framework was determined more by orthodoxy¹² than by the African origins and context. If that had not been the case, the shape of ABH would be different nowadays. An approach that promotes the contribution of post-Biblical African interpreters should, therefore, not only end with a description of “who did what”, but should go deeper to interrogate what their frame of reference and underlying philosophies were. Interpretation is about meaning and meaning relates to words, human language, and social contexts (Donfried 2006:15).

The diverse nature of African people and the size of the continent are specifically mentioned by Adamo (2006:7) as a challenge in the project of establishing an ABH. However, my view is different. Beyond the size and diversity, I view the lack of a centre or point of convergence and procrastination as the major challenges. The number of African scholars from the 1970s and 1980s who are mentioned by Adamo talk “African hermeneutics”, but employ different hermeneutic keys, some of which are not necessarily African, although they may purport to be contextual. Incidentally, Adamo (2001a) himself is an example of one who advocates a hermeneutic cycle, which approaches Scripture as the Word of God

11 See Reventlow (2009).

12 See Nolan’s (1997) definition of orthodoxy.

whose authority must neither be questioned nor disrespected. Although he admits that this is the approach of the African Indigenous Churches, he still promotes it as the “African Biblical Hermeneutic”, as if it reflects a collective approach. This, once more, begs the question: “What does African mean?”, raised by Dube nearly two decades ago. Is it a mere association with the geographical area, or is it the essence or content? Adamo (2001:8-9) coined a definition of African cultural hermeneutics:

African cultural hermeneutics in biblical studies is an approach to biblical interpretation that makes social cultural context a subject of interpretation. Specifically it means that analysis of the text is done from the perspective of an African world-view. African Cultural hermeneutics is rereading the scripture from premeditated Africentric (*sic*) perspective.

Reference to culture and worldview creates an endless road that opens up possibilities that are not part of the daily lives of the majority of Africans. Some of these reinforce practices, which Africa should be leaving behind, as it accelerates its development.¹³ An example of this is the manner in which the psalms are used in ABH and a justification thereof by invoking the African “worldview” (cf., for example, Adamo 2001a; Ademiluka 2006).

A final example which is based on the works of Adamo and Ukpong and which they count among the latest approaches is “reading with the ordinary readers” (Adamo 2006:22). Adamo ascribes this to Ukpong and West, while, in South Africa, this is known to have been used by West at least since 1990.¹⁴ Our understanding of his work in South Africa is that he is listening to the non-academic readers of the Bible so that he could identify the empowering moment of the text, which he reflects back to them as well as processes it as part of his ongoing search for a hermeneutical approach that makes the scriptures come alive in a given context. He has consciously opted to work with poor and oppressed communities. In this sense, his is a contextual approach that plays itself out on the African soil, but that can be relevant anywhere in the world where poor and oppressed readers are found. I would, therefore, argue that the approach is misplaced

13 Samora Machel advises that “the tribe has to die in order for a nation to be born” (n.d.), something which Africans seem unwilling to allow.

14 West has experimented with this approach since the early 1990s. The more he interacted with the grassroots communities, the better he understood their methods of reading/interpreting and the more refined his approach was. He eventually came up with a more intelligible definition of who the ordinary readers are. I prefer to use the term “interpreters”, because, as West himself is aware, some of the ordinary people he has in mind cannot read, but can recite every verse in the Bible.

by both Adamo and Ukpong, while West himself is clear about what he is doing.

The hype about African Theology seems to have come and gone without leaving a legacy that both defines and instills a methodological outline of ABH. Perhaps the current shift to decolonisation¹⁵ should have preceded both postcolonial and African approaches chronologically. It appears that a clean break should have been made with the colonial heritage before an African beginning could be made. Biblical hermeneutics, which found a niche within the epistemological framework of independence and nationalism, appears to have been conceived in an already contaminated environment. Hence, it now appears to be in a *cul-de-sac* rather than admitting that African hermeneutics must define and be defined by where Africans are at present.

5. THE ESSENCE OF BEING AFRICAN

As indicated earlier, it is not possible to evaluate African readings or interpretations of the Bible, unless a baseline has first been established. Given the foregoing discussion, the baseline cannot be any of the current and proposed approaches, owing to their limitations. The “essence” of being African nowadays has to be found, and this will provide a framework for an evaluation of the African readings of the Bible. For the sake of clarity, suggestions made recently as alternatives will be discussed under the subheading “Alternatives and critique”, while my proposal is discussed under the subheading “A celebration of life framework”.

5.1 Alternatives and critique

A number of African scholars have suggested that the “African worldview” should be the plumbline for an ABH (Adamo, Ukpong, Anum, Mbiti), despite the challenges hinted at earlier. Ogbonnaya (1993:117) describes the feature of the African worldview as the

sense of community, the fact that the life of the individual human person finds meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community.

This provides a better definition than the one offered by Adamo. It resonates with my proposal which follows below. Others refer to African culture, while they might simultaneously be referring to the African

15 There is a move towards ridding the continent of the neo-colonial legacy that is re-emerging in some parts of the continent.

worldview, the difference being that one is particular and the other is more universal. A viable solution is that which reflects a broad framework on which Africa's multiple cultures feed. This is not the same as a metanarrative, for within the framework each interpreter is free to see what "the text allows them to see" (Croatto 1987). In other words, they raise questions within that framework, but must be open to the possibility of not finding the answers they might be looking for.

The model of *liminality* has helped us observe that Africans (at least, in South Africa) are living in two worlds, namely parts of the African past and parts of the Euro-Western past.¹⁶ Whatever is referred to, therefore, is likely to be contaminated.¹⁷ It would seem that it is this contamination that forced Ukpong and Adamo to turn to contextual¹⁸ theologies as ABH. This, in my view, could raise more questions than provide answers. Is the definition centred on a geographical location? Are we referring to the content? If so, what does it entail?

It must be noted that a concern about the "African dilemma" is not a monopoly of Biblical scholars, but has also been debated in other fields and disciplines. Gathogo (2008), for example, puts forward two philosophical schools that have concerned themselves with the "African dilemma", or the essence of being African, as argued in this article. He refers to "ethno-philosophy" and "professional philosophy". The two seem to agree on two solutions to the problem at hand. First, there is some consensus that "hospitality" is an outstanding feature of African philosophy. This is not only written about and highlighted by African scholars. It is also common in African behaviour and practice throughout the continent. Secondly, there seems to be overwhelming agreement on the question of *Ubuntu*, which purportedly defines all that an African is about: from relationships with others to making pronouncements on such vices as corruption, tribalism and selfishness (Gathogo 2008). It is indeed regarded as a solution to the problem of the identity of a divided postcolonial Africa.

I do not entirely agree with the latter notion for the following reasons:

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- 16 The Euro-Western world is very dynamic. It has been adapting to the changing material conditions, whereas the African world seems to be working backwards in search of the lost past. Africans seem to be clinging to the worldview of the Euro-Westerners, which came as a garment for Christianity.
- 17 Asaju (2006) makes the point that the missionaries started their campaigns against African culture by first targeting the chiefs, the natural custodians of African culture.
- 18 I am aware that all theology is supposed to be contextual. However, in this instance, "contextual" is used as defined above and is distinguished by its methodology.

- The *Ubuntu* concept has been abused and distorted in many ways by both Africans and Euro-Westerners. In the end, it is difficult to tell what it actually is. This is not to discount the efforts of “African apologists” such as Tutu, Mbiti and others who have tried to explain it in intelligible terms. They themselves have based their conclusions on what they think should be in reaction to what is.
- Many will agree that *Ubuntu* as a concept is shared by humanity beyond Africa, save that it is known by different names and differs in its manifestations in different contexts. In fact, even in Africa, the constant appeal to Africans to return to *Ubuntu* ways should force Africans to reflect on whether it is not already being manifested in different ways, as dictated by the socio-economic conditions, hence what appears to be a whisper to the deaf. The same could be said of African hospitality. Anecdotes about it seem to be referring to a ‘golden age’ when African households and villages had plenty. In the present age of economic hardships, it manifests in different ways, mostly restricted to an individual’s means and, to some extent, influenced by critical questions raised about the ability of others.
- *Ubuntu* may be a limited concept in that it might be restricted to certain areas of life that focus on community-building. If what Gathogo has gathered about the related aspects of *Ubuntu* and its shortcomings is all there is, my view is confirmed.

Adamo’s initial expatiation on what he refers to as African cultural hermeneutics also raises a number of questions that cannot be pursued in this article. He argues that African cultural hermeneutics is contextual, because it is always done in context (Adamo 2001a:44). He goes on to explain that this means that the analysis of the text is always done from the perspective of an “African worldview”. Conditions of African cultural hermeneutics in his scheme (Adamo 2001a:46; cf. Wambudta 1980) include the following: the interpreter must be an insider, meaning, African; be immersed in the content of the Bible, i.e. believe stories and events in the Bible as life of faith; understand African indigenous culture, because it is part and parcel of African cultural hermeneutics; have faith in God as being all powerful. He does, undoes, makes miracles, etc., and it is not necessary to be a scholar of the Bible. Some are illiterate.

A major concern about the above is that Adamo seems to be oblivious to the fact that this pertains to the stream of indigenous churches with whom he worked, not a universal context.

I shall now proceed to briefly outline an alternative suggestion, which I hope to develop further in another article.

5.2 A celebration of life framework

It was not my intention, in the preceding discussion, to deconstruct other views. Nor do I intend to reinvent the wheel. On the contrary, I attempted to show why it would not be possible for me to make use of the current and proposed approaches. Contextual is not essentially African, unless the hermeneutic key used is African. What we currently have are general western democracy principles and anti-capitalist ideologies applied in situations of poverty, oppression and/or marginalisation. Intercultural hermeneutics is not a solution either. Its shortcomings include, *inter alia*,

- Lack of clarity on its end-goal.
- Is it Christian solidarity or is it methodological?
- Intercultural implies that cultures meet each other on an equal footing with the view to mutual enrichment. If so, what would a uniquely African contribution consist of if Africa relies on the same western worldview?
- Is intercultural hermeneutics satisfying an African need or is it in response to fears by some European theologians (as noted in De Wit's argument) of a fragmentation?

The timing of Ukpong's proposal, which coincided with the Africa-Europe summit organised by John Riches in Glasgow (1994), hints at the latter. I propose a "celebration of life" as the alternative. This is capable of accommodating different emphases within the catholic faith, while it promotes a uniquely African worldview.

A celebration of life is, in my view, an apposite response to the effect of the shattering experience of colonialism and the balkanisation of Africa. It is a better alternative to what at times appears to be a celebration of victimhood and a nostalgia for a world whose outlook is not recorded anywhere (save reconstructions that are not always reliable),¹⁹ while its real nature is not fully known. At the close of the 1950s, Tempels (1959), a missionary in Africa, observed that life was a "supreme value" among the Bantu. He referred to it as "force to live strongly" or "vital force" (in Nkurunziza 1989:31).²⁰ This to me captures the chain of events that start at birth, accompanied by some rituals, and continue to the grave and beyond, to a communion with the departed. In other words, it refers to an unending chain that is life. Apart from the Nguni rituals of *ukukhapa* (accompanying) and *ukubuyisa* (bringing back) in the South, there are also

19 Much of the past we have about Africa has come via Africans in the diaspora, especially African Americans. At times, it becomes difficult to distinguish between objectivity and a 'by all means' promotion of the African cause.

20 An English copy is not available. I rely on Nkurunziza's translation as a correct one.

confirmations of the view of life as a never-ending chain in North Africa. Mbamalu (2011) has captured this well in her thesis on abundant life in John 10:10 and the Yoruba in Nigeria. She may not agree with what she refers to as the “prosperity gospel”, but that is an academic issue that should be left to theologians.

It is in the above sense that Nkurunziza (1989:33) finds the terms “vital existence” and “vital dynamism” more appropriate than Tempels’ “vital force”.²¹ He argues that these also capture the origin of life – God, which, in turn, creates the ground for unity and oneness in the Bantu concept of the universe (Nkurunziza 1989:34). However, he quickly dispels any notion of uniformity by adding that this oneness is “not a univocal oneness but a oneness based on participation, solidarity and vital relationship of creatures in the universe” (Nkurunziza 1989:34).

The framework that results from this regulates both vertical and horizontal relations between life and death. Affiliates are expected to work towards a life that is worth celebrating such as, for example, the establishment of value systems for the preservation of each community, harmony among people, prosperity to ensure livelihood, and the ability to identify and correct threats to a life worth celebrating.²² What happens in this world should reflect what happens in the invisible realm. Based on the teaching of indigenous churches and the emphases of traditional (*amaqaba*) people on peace among people, it may be assumed that harmonious co-existence appeases the spirits (ancestors or gods), while discord leads to a withdrawal of prosperity by the spirits and the resultant dullness of life. Horizontal relations refer not only to individuals, but also to inter- and intra-group relations. Thus, it may also have a political dimension. For example, if structures perpetuate discord among groups and individuals, they militate against a celebration of life, thus courting indignation. The vertical dimension represents the realm from which life comes. Displeasure at this realm leads to a withdrawal of life by the Life-giver. Life thus represents more than the oxygen that goes into our lungs, but, more importantly, the interaction, health, relationships, etc. that are manifestations of the abundance of that oxygen in and among us.

21 I am aware of Nkurunziza’s (1989:33) critique of Temple’s focus on vital force, which, in his view, excludes symbolism and participation. I would have thought that the concept “vital force” is all-inclusive. In fact, a further comment by him supports my view. He argues that ‘vital existence’ should replace ‘vital force’ as this exudes “vital dynamism” in the universe.

22 This, in a sense, is similar to Paul’s view of salvation, which has both horizontal and vertical implications.

Symbolism is used to represent the above – whether in the form of rituals during burial or in rituals meant to commemorate the dead. What is being celebrated is not the body that is waiting for its decaying moment, but the life that continues in an invisible realm and whose presence manifests in signs and symbols. The Xhosa of the Eastern Cape use clan and individual names among the vehicles to facilitate this. A clan name, according to Lujabe (2013), keeps identity memory, that is, memory of those who prepared the way for you. They keep the memory of ancestors alive and serve as link within the entire tribe or nation.

A Biblical scholar should be able to perceive connections between this and Paul's teaching. If that is the case, what then makes it uniquely African? With tongue in cheek, it could be said that, for Africans, this represents a worldview, while, for westerners, it is a tiny aspect of their world with which they may comply as part of their spiritual discipline. Since the Christian faith is not an obligation, some of its aspects such as, for example, the importance of relationships and the role of the departed tend to be ignored. Hence, in Western culture, the latter are a select few recorded in the "book of saints". Belief in the source of life is, for some Westerners, a matter of which side of the modernity one stands, so that a judgement may be passed as to whether one is backward or modern, in other words, scientific or traditional.

If each family is, through its ancestors, a source of one's life, why force people to be one instead of celebrating life as it proceeds from its different family sources? The same question could be asked of "races", as they represent different families. Should this not be celebrated rather than used to destroy communities or to strengthen fragmentation? This is where a celebration of life as a hermeneutic key can play a role in missionary endeavours.

There is no culture that does not, in one way or another, plug into this framework. The difference lies in the details of how local cultures celebrate it. Some focus on current practices that transcend ethnical and religious boundaries. Others adhere to what was transmitted to them orally and in practice, going as far back as they can remember. However, in all instances, Western technology is heavily relied on – whether it is in relation to the regalia used, or the food being eaten, or the drinks consumed for the occasion, or the utensils used. Already, this displays not only common symbolism, but also a blending of the cultures. How long should the dichotomy between what is advocated by "radical" African theologians and their practice be perpetuated? Conversely, how long should Africa remain in a *liminal* state? The longer it is perpetuated, the greater the

contradictions and tensions among Africans from different regions. Viability should be the keyword in establishing a new ABH model.

A framework based on the celebration of life echoes the following aspects: harmony, referring to fellow human beings and nature; social prosperity, referring to the well-being of the nation; economic prosperity, relating to wealth and employment; social organisation, pertaining to politics; other worldly life, referring to ancestors; religion, referring to guidance and healing, and identification and response to contradictions. Any ABH that deserves recognition as such has to address one or more of the above aspects. They may have contextual, protest and resistance, existential/survival, inculturation or extremist thrusts. The test of their africaness depends on their location and motive.

One of the advantages of the above framework is that it assists with the formulation of the questions with which the text is approached. The other is that it helps the hermeneutist to locate him-/herself. Life being celebrated is primarily between the points of birth and death and, secondarily, that of the "living departed". Africans believe that the departed have "gone to rest in peace with their forefathers". Hence, they do not only occasionally have ceremonies in their honour, but also ensure that they live in peace and harmony with each other as a reflection of the life beyond this world. Political arrangements, economic situations, and value systems are drivers of the quality of life that ensures peace and harmony among the kinsfolk.

6. CONCLUSION

I set out to conduct an appraisal of the current approaches to African readings of the Bible or Biblical Hermeneutics, with a view to assessing their "africaness". This was not possible without credible criteria for the evaluation. A definition of hermeneutics was provided with the view to locating the African debate within the broader framework of the subfield of Hermeneutics. However, given the tentativeness of the African cultural space, since Africans seem to live in a permanent state of *liminality*, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ground lost due to historical reasons cannot be regained and that an alternative, based on the present, should be found. To this end, a proposal was made pertaining to a possible framework. It is not new, but it is put in perspective in this context. If African Americans (in the diaspora) chose liberation as their hermeneutic framework (Adamo), those in the mother continent could do with a celebration of life. Liberation would also fit into this theme.

As a build-up to the celebration-of-life approach, I explored the reason why African theologians, with a commitment to self-definition and a pursuit of own destiny (cf Maluleke 1997:3), have not, over the years, succeeded in producing a model of ABH. I concluded that Africans have for long been going through a liminal phase as a result of historical cultural ties and that they were consequently unable to cross the threshold. Hence, recent proposals for a Biblical Hermeneutics model appear to reflect a *cul-de-sac*. While the celebration-of-life approach can be shared by various cultures, it has a uniquely African dimension in that it is not a compliance with any religious prescript, but an appropriation of an African worldview. I am of the view that the above discussion justifies the conclusion reached in this article pertaining to the liminal state of ABH.

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