

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the study

1.1 Introduction

The biblical writers were persons of their own times. They wrote in particular settings and addressed their writings to specific problems and to a particular people who lived in a definite historical context. Their attitudes, outlooks and beliefs were those appropriate to people of their time (Cook 1983:47).

In the words of scripture we are offered great insights into the problems facing the people of God in Old and New Testament times and into the minds of the leaders responding to the issues of their day. There is a sense in which these words are time bound. Only through interpretation can these words have meaning for modern people. Since biblical writers wrote to address problems prevalent at the time, there is a need for modern interpreters to take cognisance of new situations, that is, the (African) Zulu context in which they seek to apply the message of the Bible. Recognition of the importance of the context of the people to which the message is being transmitted is a hermeneutical requirement. An important hermeneutical question is: Is it really possible to speak in general terms of an African context or perspective?

Pato (1997:54) is right in raising a question whether it makes scientific sense to speak of 'a perspective from the African culture and spirituality' when the African continent is so vast and diversified. While one can no longer speak

of 'Africans' in general, or of 'African tradition' in a pure state because of its evident diversity and complexity, and in the face of profound current mutations, black Africa does exhibit certain data and represents a more and more precise cultural and historical entity (Penoukou 1991:29).

Pato (1997:54) on the one hand contends that the African continent consists of such a variety of ethnic groups, each with its own customs, history and ways of life, that sweeping generalisations about things African are always risky. Only at the level of abstraction as Weber (1949) puts it, can one use generalisations to refer to African people. Zahan (1979:2) on the other hand argues rightly that the diversity of African ethnic groups should not be an obstacle to such an undertaking since the variation in religion has less to do with the ideas themselves than with their expression by means of dissimilar elements linked to the occupations and the flora and fauna of the area.

In the Bible we encounter a variety of cultural contexts within which texts were conceived. Therefore to say that biblical writers were people of their times, is to allude to the fact that they belonged to particular peoples and cultures; that it was within the treasury provided by their cultural context that they drew concepts and ideas which they used in addressing their audiences. Culture is the matrix within which human beings exist and in terms of which we (they) interact with each other and God (Kraft 1979:45).

Man (human beings) himself is a cultural being (Burki 1978:297). What this means is that culture is the field into which he is born, a field that plays a vital role in the socialisation of every person. Certain values and norms that act as guiding principles are developed within the cultural field. Kraft

(1979:47-48) argues that culture shapes both our acting and our thinking...it provides models of reality that govern our perceptions.

Mbiti (1978:273) dealing with the background to the Gospel emphasises the fact that it was revealed to the world, in the context and language of the culture of Palestine. It was within this cultural context that everything that is real, actual, probable and even improbable, as far as Christianity is concerned, was first conceptualised. This process of conceptualisation culminated in what is called 'the world-view', that is, 'the Christian world-view'. Kraft (1979:53) referring to the powerful influence of the world-view, says that it lies at the very heart of culture, touching, interacting with and strongly influencing every other aspect of the culture.

During the period of colonialism, African culture came under tremendous attack. Much of African culture in all its forms, was altered or supplanted by the more vigorous and technically advanced forms of colonising western culture, backed by the political power dominant at that time, in any particular area (Baffa 1978:294). Zulu culture could not in any way have escaped the same onslaught.

In this study, the focus of attention will be on the Zulu-speaking people of Empangeni. It is necessary to limit the field because there are so many local peculiarities in the African Traditional Religions (ATR) of South Africa that it would be impossible to discuss, within the compass of this study, the whole range of these peculiarities in some detail and with any degree of accuracy. Obviously constant mention of African culture in general will be made in order to verify the generality of what obtains within Zulu culture.

1.2 Motivation and background

When the missionaries and colonialists brought the Bible to Africa, it was part of ‘a package deal’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). By saying that it was part of ‘a package deal’, the implication is that the missionaries, who were responsible for the proclamation of the biblical message, were also instruments at the hands of colonisers. Takatso Mofokeng (1988:34) expresses succinctly the view held by many black Africans that when the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us ‘let us pray’. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible. This statement does not only express the dilemma that faces black South Africans in their relationship with the Bible (Mofokeng 1988:34) but embodies also the scepticism with which missionary enterprise is presently viewed.

Missionaries did not only bring with them various European and American cultural values but also identifiable ideologies characteristic of their age (Kalu 1979:17). Their endeavours at evangelisation were constantly hampered by their inadequate understanding of the dynamics of the local situation (Kalu 1979:17), so that second and third generation Christians are rebelling against the illegitimate and unchristian violence done to their traditional customs (Gatu 1979:525). It is against this background that missionaries are blamed for the apparent failure of black South Africans (including Zulu people) to embrace the gospel wholeheartedly.

Reasons for this failure are attributed to the fact that they neglected the traditional religions they found in place and condemned them as the work of Satan without any salvific value (Maimela 1985:64). Another reason lies in the cultural superiority and great condescension that they showed towards indigenous people (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:xiv). They saw themselves as agent sent to bring true faith to the heathens and to save their souls from darkness and eternal death (Maimela 1985:64). Most of them dismissed what they observed of the religious ideas and observances, with abhorrence and derision (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:xiv). In doing so they created the impression that people of other faiths were enemies of God while Christians, as the new Israel, were God's privileged people (Maimela 1979:65).

As children of their time, their reading of the scriptures was far from being neutral, they approached the Bible with presuppositions, shaped and informed by their culture and class (Maimela 1985:65). Bishop Colenso among early missionaries is one of a few exceptions. He refused to accept that every custom (of Zulu people) must be evil, just because it was their custom (Hinchliff 1968:65). However, the notion of the pre-eminence of what is Christian and European still lingers on (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:xiv).

Since the democratisation of South Africa in 1994, the complex religious and cultural scenarios that obtain within the South African context, have been brought to the fore. This has resulted in a spirit of openness and a willingness among Christian churches to engage in debates regarding the role and influence culture exerts on people. Calls for inculturation are growing all the time (Anglican Update, Nov 1994, Vol.1 No 10). References are made to liturgy, music, marriage, church law and clerical garments that

they should be adapted to local realities (Lapointe 1995:166). Inculturation implies not only borrowing a few symbols or some ways of doing things, but the penetration of the whole system of symbols and ways of relating to the world and to the transcendent, the assuming and the transformation of the human thought as a whole inherent in a culture (Lapointe 1995:166). This is much deeper than meets the eye.

The conference on Christianity, African culture and development held in 1996 also saw as urgent the integration of African culture and Christianity as an enriching possibility (Ecunews 1996:17). The process envisaged here is a much deeper and complex exercise. If Jesus Christ as the focal point of Christianity and culture is taken seriously then inculturation is not a matter of dealing with externals only (Lapointe 1995:166).

The researcher's own experience in working in a Zulu context has provoked his interest in an analytic investigation of the Zulu symbolic universe (See Berger and Luckmann 1966). This interest does only emanate from the literature he has read on the subject, but from statements made by Zulu people regarding the way their own world-view was radically replaced by the western ethno-centric world-view.

An abundance of literature exists dealing with Zulu cultural and religious realities. This include the following: G C Oosthuizen, who has conducted and written extensively on the Independent and Messianic churches among Zulus; (For further reference to Oosthuizen's research and collections, we refer you to the Nermic library in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Zululand); K C Fleming's article on 'The Gospel to the urban Zulu: three

cultures in conflict'; I Hexham, on 'Zulu traditional religion and belief in the sky god'. But as far as we have ascertained, no research exists which addresses and covers the topic this thesis deals with. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies in the fact that it is a novel attempt seeking to relate 1 John to the Zulu context using some insights gleaned from Berger and Luckmann's theory of the symbolic universe.

What the researcher finds striking is that though the sending of missionaries into Africa is almost a thing of the past, the Western approach of dismissing anything indigenous still lingers on. But a new danger has reared its head, that is, the danger of expecting Christianity to accept anything 'African' without critically examining it to see to it that it does not compromise the basic core of scripture (Mbiti 1979:279). The apparent failure of African theologians and preachers to come up with a viable alternative to the Western approach has exacerbated the situation.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Hermeneutics has its origin in a reading situation, that is, in dealing with text (Lategan 1984:2). The topic of this dissertation focuses on reading the first letter of John (hereafter 1 John) in a Zulu context, which activity is far from merely a passive acceptance of the message, but a very productive activity (Lategan 1984:4). The focus in hermeneutics has always been on the text but over the last few decades a paradigm shift has occurred. The focus has shifted from concentrating solely on the text onto the relationship between the text and the reader (West 1995:60).

The problem is that there is an apparent failure on the side of Zulu people to embrace the gospel fully. That there is a failure to embrace the gospel fully is evidenced by the fact that they revert to their original behaviour before they became Christians whenever they are overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering (Tempels 1969:17f). This study therefore seeks to investigate and locate the source of this failure as well as to discover what is involved in reading 1 John, a text, which arose from a specific context, into another context - particularly a Zulu context. This, we believe, entails an investigation of the social and cultural of the text of 1 John as well as the universe of Zulu people. This research attempts not only to identify some hermeneutical tensions and issues raised by this kind of reading but also factors that will enhance an effective reading and understanding of the text of 1 John in a Zulu context. A chapter will be provided later on, in this study, in which focus is on hermeneutical issues raised by this trans-cultural kind of reading.

The researcher presupposes that the reader is inextricably bound by the cultural context within which this reading has to take place and therefore contends that there is a need to investigate and discover the powerful influence symbolic universes have on readers in the process of understanding the text.

The researcher will also try and illustrate that there are similarities and differences between the symbolic universe of 1 John and that of the Zulu people; that he hopes to show that if some of the ideas and themes discussed in 1 John are introduced properly it would be possible to find common ground between the two universes. We will explore that possibility by

examining the following: God, Jesus, sin, forgiveness, sacrifice, love, eternal life, mediation and the influence these have on the creation of morality and societal behaviour.

The researcher will also show that the contours of the Zulu religious symbolic universe have not been thoroughly researched, and as a result Christian practitioners, as well as those concerned about morality in our nation, have not fully exploited even the obvious points of departure and contact to make the necessary connections. This has resulted in parallel and seemingly very divergent world-views that seem irreconcilable. We will take a closer look on this later on in our discussion.

1.4 The objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

- * To investigate the symbolic universes of 1 John and the Zulu people in order to relate them to each other.
- * To discover what present day Zulu people believe and how they perceive reality, including a religious perspective.
- * To identify similarities and differences in the symbolic universes of 1 John and the Zulu people with a view to establishing common ground for harmony and congruence in bringing together the two world-views.

- * To facilitate the interpretation and communication of 1 John's message in an effective, understandable and acceptable way to a Zulu person in today's context.

1.5 The Hypothesis

The following hypothesis will be tested: that there exists a measure of congruency between the worlds of 1 John and Zulu people, which if properly identified, investigated and exploited, could enhance a smooth construction of a hermeneutical bridge of understanding of the message of 1 John, leading to its heightened relevance and significance within the Zulu symbolic universe.

1.6 The significance of the study

The study will be significant in that it will provide a hermeneutical bridge that will make possible the mutual interaction and exchange of some aspects of 1 John's symbolic universe and the Zulu symbolic universe, leading to a better understanding of the message of 1 John in a Zulu context. The researcher believes this to be the first study of its kind, a study that seeks to locate the message of 1 John into a particularly Zulu context. It will therefore be a new contribution to the field of New Testament studies, in particular, the Johannine studies.

This study because of its emphasis on the importance of understanding a people's symbolic universe in order to enter their universe, will also enable

Christian practitioners to communicate 1 John's message in an effective, understandable and acceptable way to a Zulu person in today's context.

This study will serve to underscore the importance of linking biblical values and norms to a people's cultural heritage so as to establish a common base for moulding behaviour and reinforcing morality, which is the greatest concern of the South African society. This study, I believe will also create potential for more research in this field that has been lying dormant.

1.7 A synopsis of this study

Part of the task this study is to setting out to accomplish, is to discover how an ancient document could be read particularly in Zulu context. In order to accomplish this goal, it will be necessary at least to uncover the original cultural contexts within which 1 John was first conceived and conceptualised.

The first chapter, which is this one, is meant to be a general introduction to the study as a whole, serving not only to provide an outline of what will follow but also to justify the need for this particular study.

Chapter two sketches out briefly Berger and Luckmann's phenomenological theory, especially their conception of the symbolic universe. This theoretical framework will undergird this study. In this thesis we will seek to discover what is involved in reading an old text into a new situation. We will in particular with the help of Berger and Luckmann's theory of the symbolic universe, focus on reading the first letter of John in a Zulu context. Zulu people are a part of Africa, which is a continent with ancient cultures and art - comprising a host of ethnic and cultural varieties (Baffa 1978:293).

Cultural diversities preclude any generalisation regarding an African perspective.

The section on 1 John has been divided into two chapters—chapters three and four, which would basically be complementary. Before delving into the task of trying to reconstruct the original context, it is important to provide first a chapter in which a discourse analysis of 1 John is conducted, this will form chapter three of this study. A discourse analysis will be done with the view to identifying symbols and discovering some of the basic and underlying themes of 1 John. The method is an old one but suitable for our purpose in that it focuses on every detail as our study requires. For this analysis we are deeply indebted to J A du Rand for the work he has done in this area.

In chapter four, we will conduct a systematic discussion of some of the symbols identified in chapter three, using some of the insights gained from our reading of Berger and Luckmann's theory of the symbolic universe. In this thesis we contend that the first letter of John was first conceptualised within a particular cultural context, that the author's ideas were first formulated and crystallised within that context. This means that to a large degree, the author was able to relate to the world-view of the people he addressed. Any investigation into 1 John makes it incumbent upon the investigator to take a hermeneutical trip back to the context of both the author and his audience. A trip of this kind will enhance our understanding and enable us to identify the symbols he used and in our interpretation to find a relevant message for today.

The symbolic universe of 1 John is not something that is given in the text. In order to attempt a reconstruction of this universe we relied so much on the

symbolism of language within the text. A variety of symbols which the author employed as vehicles for explaining and conveying his understanding of reality as well as constructing a new reality will be examined. Our examination of those symbols, we believe, will give us a glimpse of something, which we think comes close to resembling the universe of the author and first readers.

The process of reconstructing a universe is not an easy venture. But we will begin this work with the assumption that the first readers like all readers were preconditioned by their socio-historical context; that it was within this context that the author sought to communicate his message. Second, we will focus on the symbols and metaphors that the author employed in his communication. These symbols will be subjected to a number of interrogative questions such as: why did the author use this symbol? What meaning did it carry for his readers? Did they understand the meaning of what the author was conveying to them? In cases where no explanation is supplied by the author of what the symbol means, we will ask, what background information is being assumed here? And where are these symbols derived from?

In the case of the New Testament genre of letters, the implied pragmatic effect was to respond to the needs of a particular individual or communities, and to persuade the readers to bring about changes (of attitude and behaviour) in their situations (Moulton 1994:361). We therefore think that as we continue the interrogation of the text, we will be able to show that some of the dynamics operative within symbolic universes as stated by Berger and Luckmann, were also at work when 1 John became concretised. We think we would be in a position to show how the author employed some of the

symbols either as agents of integration and construction or as agents of disintegration.

We will be able also to demonstrate that the metaphorical antithesis drawn between light and darkness, love and hate, children of God and children of the devil, are operative within this scheme. The author does this by clustering them on two opposing poles representing the positive and negative. Symbols on the negative pole serve to undermine the reality posited by the new emerging deviant group. The categorising of the deviant group as the Antichrist is thus a strategy for demonising and destroying the deviant viewpoint. This amounts to what is called 'witchcraft accusation' (Neyrey 1990 & Wilson 1980), which functions to denigrate rivals and to pull them down.

In chapter five, we will paint a broad outline the contours of what might be called the symbolic universe of Africa of which the Zulu is but a part, even though it may exhibit some variation to certain extent. This chapter is necessary also for providing a picture of how much research has been conducted in this area and why this particular research is necessary.

The situation of the present reader or receiver, which we consider in chapter six also needs to be taken seriously if any cross-cultural leap with 1 John's message to another culture will yield any fruit in the new context. This created the need to do empirical research in order to check how many of the old ideas are still prevalent today and whether one can still claim that the symbolic universe as conceived then has not been adapted to meet modern needs. Repetition cannot be avoided if we seek to verify some of the old perceptions to see whether they still hold their ground today. Sensitivity

such as this to modern readers is a hermeneutical requirement. Chapter six then aims at doing two things: 1. Explaining briefly the research method we have used in the acquisition of data, and 2. to discuss and synthesise the actual results of focus group discussion with various insights from preceding chapters, especially chapters four and five. Since reading involves interpretation and the text that will be read is a communication from the past, this will no doubt raise hermeneutical issues. It is our intention to highlight these issues in chapter seven.

For our research tool, a questionnaire has been constructed and translated into Zulu to facilitate understanding of what is being asked. Both the English and Zulu version will appear under annexure one and two. Particular themes have been followed in designing the research tool and these have also been divided accordingly for discussion by focus groups. Reasons for choosing focus group method for conducting interviews will also be supplied in the same chapter.

The philosophical basis upon which all this is based is the theory of communication. Every communication involves a sender, a message and a receiver, that is, author, text, and reader. In reader-response hermeneutics, increasing attention is being paid on the active role of the reader in creating meaning (Thiselton 1988:297). Since this study involves reading, an activity performed by a reader, the reader will receive special focus in chapter seven where hermeneutical issues raised by this kind of reading are considered.

In chapter eight, this whole study will be bound together in the form of a summary, conclusion and recommendations.