

## CHAPTER 1

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Reading and interpreting the Bible, whether as an “ordinary” or “critical” reader, has always been strongly influenced and shaped by a person’s unique character and life-story (Kitzberger 1999:Preface).

The nature of the theological enterprise is hermeneutical, by which is meant that theology is based upon a search for understanding and therefore in need of interpretation (Lombard 1995:104).

#### 1.1 Introduction

In recent times biblical scholarship and hermeneutics in Africa have been dominated by what is called contextual theology. Holter (1999:1) observes that:

“In Africa – as everywhere else – the interpretation of the Bible takes place in various different contexts; different, of course, with regard to theological and ecclesiastical tradition, but different also with regard to educational level and sociological setting.”

This implies doing theology in which one takes into account, the spirit and message of the Bible and the gospel, the culture of the people and the social

changes in that culture (Bevans 1992:1). Ukpong (1999:1) calls this approach “inculturation hermeneutics”.

“The focus of inculturation hermeneutic is on the reader/interpreter and his/her context in relation to the text and its context. In inculturation hermeneutics it is required that the reader be an “insider” in the culture that is the subject of interpretation. This means that someone who has acquired knowledge, experience and insights of the culture and is capable of viewing it critically”.

Mbiti (1977:28) calls the Western and Northern American interpretation of the Bible in Africa, cultural imperialism. At the same time he calls for its termination:

“Cultural imperialism must terminate first, in order to allow the indigenous culture to relate more effectively to the Gospel, on its own terms and without pressure from outside. With humility and gratitude let us borrow and learn from other cultures, but let us not become their cultural slaves.”

Mosothoane (1973:86ff), the only Black African professor in the Old Testament in South Africa, maintains that the excessive use of Euro-centric biblical scientific methodologies stifles initiative in Africa. Emphasis placed upon form criticism, source theories, redaction criticism, etc. are not relevant to African students – who are far more concerned with real-life contexts in which the various Old Testament Scriptures arose. It should however be

noted that Mosothoane is here referring to Old Testament Studies as a theological discipline, both in South Africa and internationally. It is important to note that he is not saying that African theologians reject the findings of or conclusions of current Old Testament scholarship, but that the methodology employed and scientific emphasis evident have a negative effect on African students.

Kalu (1999:1) calls this enterprise, interpreting the Bible with African lenses:

“An image for preservation depends much on the type of lens used in capturing it. And this is true concerning African lenses, which can portray Africa differently depending on whether one is wearing the pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial or post-independence lenses. Why African traditional lenses? These give the correct indigenous reading concerning what before the advent of Western, Islamic or other external influences came into Africa.”

Mugambi (1999:1f), rather than the term “contextualisation”, prefers the concept “encounter” because he says that the gospel encounters an African in his/her own total culture. The acceptance or rejection of the gospel is shaped by his/her own culture and his/her understanding of the gospel is within the parameters of the African knowledge and experience. Thus, there is nothing to be contextualised, because there is a two-way flow between the gospel encounter and the respondent.

In this study, the researcher takes as a point of departure this scenario in African biblical scholarship and hermeneutics. From the above analysis, there are two major methodological streams of biblical interpretation today in Africa. One can be identified as the intellectualist stream, which follows the pattern of Western biblical scholarship. It combines the search for truth with a professed commitment to scientific objectivity, and seeks to discover the objective meaning of the biblical text for the purpose of drawing general principles to be applied to reality. The other is the contextual stream, as already explained above.

In his assessment of the two streams, Obeng (1999:7) maintains that the emphasis of the context of the modern reader by African scholars has led to the demise of due attention to the text itself. In other words African scholars today are more inclined to interpret the text taking into consideration the context of the reader. Obeng calls upon the African biblical scholarship towards an appropriation of the text, thus making its meaning available to today's reader and interpreter of the Bible.

This research identifies the family as a paradigm, which can enable the interpreter in Africa and elsewhere to take into consideration the context of the reader without losing sight of the meaning of the text. This research, therefore is an attempt to employ the family as a hermeneutical procedure to interpret the New Testament text and message. This is because the mounting and upsurge of the bibliography in the area of the family in biblical criticism, is indicative of the need of research in this regard. I find the observation of Joubert and Van Henten (1996:121) appropriate:

“Judging from the large number of recent publications on the family and related matters in antiquity, it is clear that historians and biblical scholars nowadays share a renewed interest in the make-up, functions and general characteristics of families in the ancient Mediterranean world” (see also Van der Horst 1993).

Rawson (1991:7) maintains that the:

“Study of “the family” in modern and pre-modern societies continues to engage the interest of historians, demographers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and lawyers (amongst others). This is not only a recognition of the central role which the family has played in most societies but also a response to the complexity and variety of that role and indeed to the challenge of defining “the family”.”

Spelling out the importance of family in biblical criticism, Van der Watt (1997b:1) says that:

“The family imagery is the major way in which the relationship between God, Jesus and the believers are described...”

Lassen (1997:103) contends that the family has played a significant role in the shaping of the Christian faith:

“The family metaphors played an important role in the formation of early Christianity. The Christian theology was

centred upon filiation: God was the Father, Jesus the Son, the converts were the brothers and sisters of Christ and the true heirs of Abraham.”

Garnsey and Saller (1991:151f) maintain that:

“The family was a central institution of the Mediterranean society of the first century. Through the family, the wealth of the social status was transmitted in the family, the individual found support, solidarity and the protection...”

Malina, Joubert and Van der Watt (1996:10) maintain that the family was the nucleus of the ancient world. They say that as in other social structures in the Mediterranean world, everything and everyone within the family were viewed according to their gender roles. Moxnes (1997:1) also acknowledges the importance of family in the Bible particularly in the New Testament. He, however, observes that it is strange that, even if "family" is such an important topic in Christianity:

"There have been few comprehensive studies of family in early Christianity, there has been interest in certain aspects in particular in ethical issues concerning marriage or the so-called household codes but much less on the social behaviour and forms of family as a social institution among early Christians."

Neyrey (1995:156ff) also indicates the need for further studies of fictive kinship, i.e. the ways in which the first Christians regarded and treated each other as "family" (see also Osiek 1997 and Lampe 1992).

Underscoring this need (Moxnes 1997:30) says that:

“There is good reason therefore, to look at early Christian texts with a view also to what they say about relations between husband and wife and between parents and children, that is in terms of the family that was established through marriage” (see also Malina 1993:117ff).

## **1.2 What is family?**

The meaning of what family is may differ from one person to another and from one culture to another. Moxnes (1997:13) narrates how he normally responds to the question posed in casual conversation with "relative strangers" or colleagues at conferences, "do you have a family?":

“Yes, my parents are alive, and I have two brothers and a sister who are married and who have children...my grandparents live with my uncle, an aunt and their children live in separate households in a large farmhouse. Each summer the house is filled with several cousins, with uncles and aunts and even great-uncles and great-aunts and second cousins were occasional visitors. We all make up a larger extended family.”

The supposed bewilderment of the enquirers [including myself when I posed the same question to him during the Context Group congress in Oregon - Portland in 1996] is indicative of the fact that they did not receive the answer to the question they answered. By family they meant, the family of procreation. In other words; "are you married?", "how many children do you have?", "what is your wife doing?" etc.

Such questions about the family are usually posed in the family context in Europe and North America, i.e. the restricted nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children. Mbiti's (1990:104f) answer to such question/s would not differ much from that given by Moxnes, because he maintains that in Africa, the family has a wider circle of members - children, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and the other immediate relatives and also the departed ones.

### **1.3 The Problem**

Biblical criticism, particularly the Euro-centric scholarship and its historical and literary approaches to the Bible, has been perceived by some as a guild of practitioners existing in an ivory tower. These critics, generally contends that the nature of any theological enterprise should be hermeneutical. In other words, theology is based upon a search for understanding and therefore the need for interpretation. However, throughout the history of biblical criticism, several sections of the world community such as women, the poor, the oppressed, the ordinary Bible reader, etc. were not taken seriously.



A feminist, Zikmund (1985:21f) contends that up to the nineteenth century, theology was conducted from a pre-feminist perspective. Researchers, theologians and authors were not consciously aware that an understanding of women's experience was essential for intellectual work. Feminist scholars from third world countries went even further to articulate what they called "a trilogy of oppression". William (1990:24) wonders:

"...which of the many oppressions in my femaleness and in my Blackness weigh the heaviest on me? Which of my liberations do I thirst for most? Do I thirst for most of all to be liberated from my colour, from my class, my ignorance of my tradition, from economic domination? Or is it the liberation from all male domination that women all over the world are struggling for today?"

It was thus the women themselves who established (and still are continuing) feminist biblical hermeneutics. Gradually they came to believe that their experience as women was ignored. They began to agitate for change. They started the quest for the reinterpretation of some of the texts, which were not negative to women. They started to portray these texts in a favourable light (see Masenya 1994:120; Sakenfeld 1985:57). The Bible, Christianity and the gospel and how they applied to women became the centre of attraction (see West 1991:85).

The voices that the traditional historical and literary critical methods were becoming redundant have been increasing. The criticism of these paradigms is not only coming from contextual, liberation, Black, feminists or African

theologians. For instance, Elliott (1993:13), a North American New Testament scholar says that:

“It has gradually become apparent to a growing number of scholars across the globe that historical criticism has proved inadequate to the task of a comprehensive Bible and the biblical world. Many biblical interpreters agree that a more sophisticated method is required for examining and understanding the biblical writings as proclaimed of and responses to their social and cultural environments.”

In the light of the above, a paradigm, which accommodates a scholar and an ordinary reader of the Bible in whatever culture, is suggested. The focus in this research is the assessment of the family during the Graeco-Roman era and also as it is portrayed in the Gospels. It is not possible to study the family in the New Testament without encountering the familial language, God as the Father, the church as the family of God, Christians as brothers and sisters, the Christians bound by love, Christians as children of God, the church as the bride, etc. – in other words the family as imagery (see Howard 1950:2ff; Hammerton-Kelly 1979:82ff; Meeks 1983:85f; Lee 1995:140; Spencer 1996:433ff; Van de Watt 1997c:557). This therefore, means that the New Testament is encoded in familial language and imagery. This method and approach of reading the text represents a shift from the notion that we read the text to the end and then step back and comment on the final outcome of the reading. It engages the reader with the text. The reading experience of the modern reader is thus enhanced by such an approach. The sources for such an endeavour will primarily be the texts themselves.

Furthermore the larger context of the first century Mediterranean world will be taken into consideration. The data accumulated by historians, theologians, sociologists, social anthropologists on the subject of the family in antiquity will be deciphered. Thus, the socio-economic and the historical cultural aspect of the Mediterranean world are important. Be it as it may, the New Testament does not treat the institution of family in a systematic manner. Some of the values were presupposed as will become clear in chapter 4 (see Goodey 1983:6ff; Lenski and Lenski 1987:176ff Saller and Kertzer 1991:8ff;).

#### **1.4 The programme of research**

This study focuses on family in the New Testament as reality and imagery. The four major perspectives in the New Testament, the synoptic gospels and John will be investigated. Although the gospels will be the major focus in this study, the other New Testament texts will also and when necessary be referred to. **Chapter two** focuses on the approach to be followed in this study as my basic point of departure, I shall focus on the Context Group. These scholars, interpret the New Testament from the vantage point of social-scientific criticism. Although in their quests they still use the procedures of the historico-critical approaches, they have distinguished themselves from the former hermeneutical procedures. They analyse the New Testament, using findings of history, archaeology, ancient literature, sociology, etc. Their major focus is that the New Testament text is both a reflection of and a response to the social and cultural setting in which the text was produced. Therefore, meanings explicit and implicit in the text are

determined by the social and cultural systems inhabited by both authors and intended readers. This study could not ignore such an immense contribution.

The contributions of the Context Group, in terms of their analyses of the values and social institutions of the first century Mediterranean world, will be combined with research by African scholars in terms of typical African views on cosmology, personality, family, etc. In terms of a basic approach to the New Testament, this combination of social scientific analyses and African analyses of biblical material, will provide us with a helpful tool to describe and interpret New Testament material from the perspective of the family. Various theoretical aspects of this so-called “African socio-descriptive approach” will be discussed in chapter 2. The researcher is an African, living in South Africa and reading the Bible in an African context. Chapter 2, therefore, looks at how the concept and experience of family in “traditional” Africa can harness a reading and understanding of the New Testament. This approach is part of an ongoing discussion of the importance of biblical studies within the broader scope of African Christian theology (Mbiti 1978:72ff; De Villiers 1993:23; Punt 1997:124;).

It is indicated in **Chapter 3** that any study must take the context of the interpreter seriously. Any study of the New Testament takes place within a specific context. Up until the present most approaches to the New Testament were undertaken by Western scholars. This research endeavours to read the New Testament from an African perspective. Therefore it is imperative to spell out the context within which the author finds himself specifically, African views on family forms the framework from which the author proceeds to understand the New Testament. Therefore chapter 3

offers a social description on relatively high level of abstraction on the African family in terms of its nature, customs, values, etc.

**Chapter 4** investigates the family as reality and imagery in the New Testament world, from which the Gospels were written. Since the New Testament views in this regard were not formed in isolation from the surrounding context, one should take cognisance of typical views on the family in the “Umwelt”. This entails a brief investigation of the family in the Roman and Jewish world. Firstly the Roman family in the Graeco-Roman world is assessed. The family formed the nucleus of the Roman pagan society. Despite the economic, social and political changes taking place, the family institution remained largely intact. Different aspects of family life are identified - the nature of the Roman family, the “paterfamilias” and his “potestas”, women, children and slaves in society and marriage. The Roman family and how it was experienced, saliently underlies Christianity and the New Testament. This means that in its inception the Christian faith was inter alia shaped by the values, institutions and ideologies in the Graeco-Roman world. The second part of chapter 4 looks at the patriarchal and androcentric nature of the Jewish family during the Graeco-Roman period. Literature from the inter-testamental period and the Old Testament are utilised in this regard. Like the Roman family, the Jewish family set-up also impacted Christianity and the New Testament. Jesus and the early church drew heavily from the Jewish traditions, most importantly from their family experience.

In **chapter 5** the researcher endeavours to indicate that the Gospel writers employ many analogies and images to describe the nature of Christian

fellowship. One of the most common analogies, permeating the New Testament, is that of the family. The Christian groups conceived of themselves as the family of God. The author to the Galatians says:

“Ἄρα οὖν ὡς καιρὸν ἔχομεν, ἐργαζώμεθα τὸ ἀγαθὸν πρὸς πάντας, μάλιστα δὲ πρὸς τοὺς οἰκείους τῆς πίστεως”  
(Gal 6:10).

The “ekklesia”, regarded itself as God’s family consisting of those who have responded in faith and obeyed the invitation of God. The New Testament corpus leaves us, thus, with this tension, i.e., the egalitarian structures emerged within a patriarchal household. It is hardly possible to describe a lifestyle in early Christianity which is brotherly/sisterly and not household-like, fellowship of believers, as a family consisting of brothers and sisters articulating and incarnating in conversation with the traditional cultural forces of a patriarchal society.

In the concluding **Chapter 6** the researcher attempts to answer some pertinent questions in the African hermeneutical scenario. Can the New Testament be appropriated in Africa? What is the relationship if any, between Africa and the biblical text? The researcher endeavours to show how African family values can make a meaningful contribution in the interpretation of the New Testament. It is furthermore contended that the African concept and experience of family is more closer to the narratological symbolic world of the New Testament than that of the Western world. The world, which shaped the New Testament, has many affinities with Africa. Therefore, the New Testament message is proclaimed in a language and

cultural milieu already experienced in Africa. The researcher contends and argues that the family as reality, imagery and its language as experienced by the first century Mediterranean authors and readers and also by the modern reader of the New Testament in every culture, is a paradigm for understanding the New Testament and the Christian message. Even if to a larger extent the first Christians denounced Roman paganism as well as their patriarchal Jewish past (family) in favour of their own (the household of God), they drew from the rich resources (structure and language) from the Graeco-Roman family. The same holds true for the Jewish even for the African families. The thesis closes with a submission to those reading the Bible in an African context. The family (as reality and imagery) is another way of interpreting the Bible in Africa.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

#### 2.1 Introduction

The current chapter is an excursion on the family (as reality and metaphor) as a hermeneutical procedure for interpreting the New Testament from the social-scientific vantagepoint. Some remarks about the nature of the paradigm itself will be helpful. When this approach was still in its infancy, some scholars cautioned that it was too soon to predict the influence, which it will have in biblical criticism:

“The usefulness of social – scientific data in biblical studies is now at its infancy, and it is still too soon to predict the influence that this sort of comparative approach may have”  
(Wilson 1984:81)

Mosala (1989:57f), an African philosopher and scholar also casted some doubts as to the success of the social – scientific approach:

“It moves us one step forward to the extent that it focuses our attention on the social nature of our texts, but it pulls us two steps backward in that it not only reintroduces the old ideological hunches inherent in the historical-critical methods, but it hides them under the cloak of a more systematic



approach. Thus it blunts the edge of a possible new social and political biblical hermeneutics that could liberate the Bible itself to become a more liberating tool.”

Masuetto (1983:7) adds to a list of criticisms when he states that the social - scientific criticism does not actually represent a theoretical break with historical-criticism, but rather it amounts to no more than the sociological potentialities of liberal biblical criticism along interpretative sociological or structural functionalist lines.

Criticism, such as the examples cited above, represents a partial comprehension of the procedure itself. For instance the remarks by Mosala and Masuetto give an impression that social-scientific exegetes’ endeavour is to break with the historical-critical approaches. The contrary is true. Elliott (1993:7) adequately dispels this misrepresentation:

“..social-scientific criticism is a sub-discipline of exegesis and is inseparably related to the other operations of the exegetical enterprise: textual criticism, literary criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, form criticism. Social-scientific criticism complements these other modes of critical analysis, all of which are designed to analyse specific features of the biblical text.”

The strides and successes made by the social-scientific exegetes further invalidate unfair criticism of the paradigm. Mentioning some of its successes, Osiek (1979:88) maintains that:

“The current popularity of the encounter between the social sciences and biblical study needs no demonstration, the mounting bibliography in this area is indicative of its increasing popularity.”

Writing less than a decade ago, Garrett (1990:382) also negates the doubts cast on the success of the social-scientific method:

“In the few decades, theologians and biblical scholars have turned in ever - increasing numbers to an appropriation of the models, concepts and methods of the social sciences, especially sociology to guide their research enterprises. Indeed, this trend has become so pronounced that it may well signal a methodological revolution of similar proportion to the higher criticism ... The utilisation of social scientific constructs can appreciably add to the stock of knowledge available to biblical researchers, but only if those constructs are handled with discernment and sophistication in their application to textual interpretation.”

As stated above, the focus in this chapter is on the appropriation of the social-scientific paradigm, i.e. the use of models from the social sciences to interpret the New Testament text. Most, if not all of the social-scientific exegetes who will be used and quoted throughout in this enterprise are those doing theology in the West and North America. The researcher, being an African, living in South Africa and reading the Bible in an African context endeavours to go beyond Western orientated social-scientific criticism. The

necessity of such an approach has been chronicled by several scholars in Africa:

Punt (1997:124) maintains that in reading the Bible in Africa, the strategies of ownership should be explored:

“In post-colonial Africa as in post-apartheid South Africa there is an ever-increasing emphasis on theology as perceived and done in Africa: also as far as the academic study of the Bible is concerned. There is no doubt that the discovery of the contribution Africa can make to biblical studies, although belated, is a very rightful and necessary perception. However, as in all attempts to make the Bible address contemporary settings and concerns, many dangers accompany these efforts to relate the bible to African culture – and in particular its corollary: the attempt to show up Africa as the most (only) appropriate setting or context for understanding the Bible.”

Bediako (1997:32) submits that such a contextualisation and reading the Bible in Africa is unavoidable:

“We live in Africa and the best way to serve God effectively and productively is through the expression of our unique identity. God is our father, not a stranger. We must serve Him the way we know Him and understand Him. We should not be carbon copies of other people’s experiments and styles. We

should be ourselves and create our own forms of worship from our own perspective”

Mugambi (1989:9) contends that this endeavour has to do with being African:

“In post – colonial Africa both the orthodox and unorthodox initiatives in the Africanisation of Christianity have continued with varying degrees of success from country to country and from denomination to denomination. Nevertheless, the initiatives are there. Beneath the veneer of imported ecclesiastical institutions African Christians remain African. In spite of translated hymns and prayer books, foreign ecclesiastical vestments and architecture, theological training in a foreign language – in spite of all these, Africans in the imported denominations remain Africans and Christians at the same time.”

Anum (1999:2) calls this process biblical hermeneutics in African theology:

“Similarly, African theologians in post-colonial and post-missionary times are trying to reconstruct African theology in their own context. Contextual theology has a certain agenda that is related to its own tradition. Thus the agenda for African scholarly readers is to develop forms of African theology which is located in its cultural history as well as the political and

economic realities that Africans are facing up to in their various contexts.”

Theron (1996:18) says that contextualisation in Africa means developing an own indigenous theology. In the process of theologising, cultural, socio-economic as well as the political contexts should be taken into consideration. Schoonhoven (1989:13) maintains that, “...the Bible itself is an interpreting text.” This means that the Bible, and in particular the New Testament is about the interpretation of the early believers’ faith. Therefore the need for reinterpretation or contextualisation finds its origin in the continuing context of situations people find themselves in. An African interpretation of the Bible, for instance has to be considered not only legitimate but necessary (cf Roberts 1964:83; Hastings 1976:37; Mbiti 1977:26; 1986:47; Pobee 1979; 15f; Fage 1986:454; Schoonhoven 1989:13).

The current trend in African biblical scholarship is therefore going beyond the Euro-centric biblical criticism. In recent times, within the circles of Black or African theology, the expression "contextualisation" has been the buzzword. It implies the contextualisation of theology as a means of developing an own indigenous theology. In the process of theologising, cultural, socio-economic as well as the political contexts should be taken into consideration. In the light of this, the researcher will endeavour to apply what he calls “African social-descriptive criticism”, i.e. the understanding and also the appropriation of the African value system as a means of interpreting the New Testament texts.

## 2.2 The social-scientific paradigm

Many social-scientific critics share the same views in their description of the upsurge of this paradigm. They maintain that the epoch-making publications of the 1970s (Meeks 1972; Gager 1975; Theissen 1978; to mention just a few) were nothing new but a renaissance of a movement which commenced during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Scroggs (1980:164) maintains that:

“Interest in the social reality of early Christianity, of course, is nothing new. Especially during the preceding one hundred years keen interest has often been expressed in such matters. This interest peaked during the first third of this century...”

Van Staden and Van Aarde (1991:55f) also echo the same sentiments. They assert that the interest in the situational context of the biblical documents and the traditions they contain, is not new. They quote the two well-known attempts at a sociological interpretation of early Christianity which are the Marxist reading of Scroggs (1980:177-179) and the Chicago school of New Testament studies. Both of them have been implicitly or explicitly reductionist in postulating social causes for all religious phenomena. The so-called form-critical school also had an enquiry into the socio-historical background of a text as part of its exegetical programme as early as the beginning of the century. The works of Matthew (1897; 1930); Deissmann (1908); Case (1914; 1923); Cadoux (1925) and Lohmeyer (1953) are cited as the most important.

It is necessary to describe what social-scientific criticism is and what it is not. This elucidation becomes significant because for instance, the two expressions “social description of the New Testament world” and “the social-scientific criticism” in some circles are confusingly and interchangeably used (see also Gager 1979:175; Gottwald 1982:143; Schultz 1982:1; Osiek 1984:4).

### **2.2.1 Social-scientific criticism**

Malina (1993:xiii) outlines the use of models from cultural anthropology in social-scientific criticism:

“Models from cultural anthropology do not offer an alternative explanation of the Bible, nor do they do away with literary critical, historical, and theological study. Rather, they add a dimension not available from other methods, along with a way to check on the hunches of interpreters when it comes to questions of social context.”

Van Staden (1990:22) also defines this approach:

“A social-scientific study of the New Testament presupposes a relationship between the text and the socio-historical environment from which it originated. This relationship can be described in different configurations, in each of which specific elements are accentuated. This study supports the view that a text is both a social product, its formation being prompted by

some societal (including religious) stimulus, and a social force, able to effect some change in society."

Elliot (1993:7) also gives a well-knitted description of the social scientific paradigm:

"Social-scientific criticism of the Bible is that phase of the exegetical task which analyses the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilisation of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences. As a component of the historical-critical method of exegesis, social-scientific criticism investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate between composers and audiences. In this process it studies (1) not only the social aspects of the form and content of texts but also the conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process; (2) the correlation of the text's linguistic, literary, theological (ideological), and social dimensions; and (3) the manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and response to a specific social and cultural context - that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary consequence."

These quotations clearly portray the nature of the social-scientific criticism. Thus, this hermeneutical procedure goes beyond the description of the New Testament world, that is beyond a mere and just collection of social data. In



attempting to distinguish the social scientific approach from the social description, Van Staden and Van Aarde (1991:55ff) refer to the pendulum swinging from “what did the author mean?” (social description), to “was there anything in the contemporary society’s structure that this utterance should be a reflection to?” (social-scientific criticism).

Social-scientific biblical critics share the basic assumption that any communication can only be understood properly within the social and cultural codes or cues from which it originated. Since it is accepted that the texts presuppose and encode information from the social system from which they emerge, the meanings communicated in them can only be ascertained with the help of information from those social and cultural systems. Not taking these factors seriously can only lead to a misinterpretation of the text (see Craffert:1991:123; Elliot:1993:9; Malina:1993:12).

### **2.2.2 Social description**

Scholars employing social descriptive analyses of the New Testament attempt to explain the situational context of the New Testament texts and traditions. The interest is primarily historical in character for theological relevance. Joubert (1994:37) identifies the social description of the New Testament as an endeavour to analyse the early Christian world by employing findings from history, archaeology, ancient literature social theories etc. (see also Scroggs 1980: 164). This approach is also referred to by different names such as, social analysis, social description, socio-historical approach, social history even sociological analysis. Osiek (1989:270) maintains that roughly speaking the scholars whose interests lie

in the social description of the New Testament milieu work at a lower level of abstraction focusing more on particularities and the interrelationship of social facts, letting the models arise from the ancient texts themselves. Hence, those engaged with this procedure study the societal phenomena during the time of early Christianity for the purposes of historical interest. The question facing the researcher changes from "what did the author mean?" to was there anything in the contemporary societal structure that his audience could be a reflection of? The texts are processed in this manner until every piece of information that might have some societal relevance has been tagged and included in a database. This data is sorted into categories such as "cultural", "political", "economical" and "religious". Van Staden and Van Aarde (1991: 55) say that:

"each of these categories contain the information on the different social institution that could be assigned to it. The accumulated information serves as a new source from which to extract the information needed to reconstruct any of the settings that could be deemed connected to an utterance in order to facilitate the understanding of that utterance.

Osiek (1984:4) maintains that thereafter, co-operation for the reconstructed setting is sought from both the same period, biblical and unbiblical literary sources from the same period and from archaeological evidence. In this way a picture emerges of the time of the origin of early Christianity (see also Ebertz 1987; Horsley 1989; Blasi 1997).

### **2.2.3 The thrust of social-scientific-criticism: Bridging the broken author-reader contract**

After providing descriptions of social-scientific criticism (2.2.1) and social description (2.2.2), we proceed briefly to allude to the nature and function of the paradigm. Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992:9) see as the main thrust of the social-scientific criticism, the bringing to the surface the unwritten text of the New Testament. What is actually implied in this assertion is that, in writing the text, the New Testament authors presumed that their audience knew and understood how their world functioned.

Since the invention of the art of writing, it has never been possible or even necessary to put everything down in writing, which needs to be communicated. Author/s always depend on the general and cultural knowledge of the reader. Malina and Rohrbaugh (:10) point out that doing all these in good faith, the New Testament authors were not conscious of the fact that they were breaking the contract with their future readers who would be interested in their writings and even call them "Word of God". They, (Malina and Rohrbaugh :10), further remind all the contemporary readers of the New Testament corpus that their composers did not have any of them in mind. It is also doubtful that the New Testament authors were conscious that they were committing to paper what would be so extensively and ideologically read and even referred to by many as "Word of God".

Furthermore, Elliott (1993:7) maintains that the task of social-scientific criticism is to investigate the biblical text as meaningful configuration of language intended to communicate between the authors and their readers. In

this process of course not only the social aspect of the form and content of the texts, but also the conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process are given attention. The correlation of the text's linguistic, literary, theological and social dimensions and the manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and a response to a specific social and cultural content, that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence, is also investigated (see also Elliott 1982:8; Rohrbaugh 1987:103).

In his elucidation of the nature of the social-scientific criticism, Malina (1993:xi) maintains that the meanings which people exchange, are deeply rooted in the social system that envelops them. Therefore in order to understand what another person says and means, requires a listener or reader to somehow share in the world of meaning of the speaker or writer.

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992:20) say that there is a distance between the contemporary readers and the New Testament. Such a distance is a social, temporal as well as a conceptual one and entails radical differences in social roles, values and general cultural features. This distance is the most fundamental, and creates the possibility to understand the New Testament from an emic perspective (refer also to Richter 1984; Rohrbaugh 1987 and Van Staden 1988; Malina 1993).

## 2.3 The basic values of Africa:

### An African social-descriptive approach

After a brief overview of the social-scientific criticism as a paradigm in biblical studies, the researcher intends to delineate the framework for an indigenous, African approach to the New Testament. In other words, the themes inherent to the basic value systems shared by African people on a high level of abstraction will be spelled out here. What the researcher refers to as African social-descriptive approach is an attempt aimed at making a contribution in an ongoing discussion of the importance of biblical studies within the broader scope of African Christian theology (see Punt 1997: 124; Mbiti 1978:72ff; De Villiers 1993:2ff). Some of the questions occupying the exegetes working or reading the Bible in an African context are: can the New Testament message be appropriated in Africa? What is the relationship if any, between Africa and the biblical texts? its historical settings or historical canonical fixing(s)? How can the biblical and African contexts be adequately dealt with? These questions, including many others, call for an appropriate hermeneutic in an African context, which Onwu (1985 :145ff) refers to as "the dilemma of an African theologian." Punt (1997:139) maintains that the development of a hermeneutic, particularly suitable for the African reading of the Bible, depends to a large extent on the perceived relationship between Africa, its culture, its pre-Christian religiosity (African traditional religions) and Christianity. The Euro-centric hermeneutic, approaches and paradigms developed by Anglo-European biblical scholarship can be applied in the African reading of the text, but the quest for a relevant African hermeneutic and exegesis belongs to Africans themselves (see also Bujo 1977:125).

### 2.3.1 Defining the concept "African"

The expression "African" will in this section be constantly and consistently used - for an example, African culture, African philosophy of life, African community, etc. Countless books, conference papers and articles about Africa, Africanism, Africanness, etc. are written and read without a clear attempt to state who or what an African is. It is ostensibly taken for granted by the writer and/or presenter that the listener or reader has the same conception of an African as him/her. This dissertation does not fall into that mode. Due to the fact that the researcher works on the high level of abstraction, it is constrictive for the designation "African" to be defined from the onset.

Sundermeier (1998:9) attempts to identify who an African is and states that:

"Anyone encountering Africans will find that they are passionate lovers of life. They are not influenced by the philosophy of Plato, who questioned the phenomenological world and gave real ontological value only to the invisible. The philosophy of Descartes, who put a distance between human beings (*res cogitans*) and the world (*res extensa*) do not influence them. This led to the domination of nature and animals, which were held in such contempt that in the end the cry of an animal was not valued more highly than the noise of the machine. Africans turn to this world in order to experience wholeness."

Anyanwu (1981:180) indicates some of the problems encountered when trying to define who an African is:

“To define an African as a person born and bred of African stock is really a secular definition, because one then has to define African stock. On the other hand, by African we mean a person born and bred on the continent of Africa, then we have Africans of various types: Bushmen, Pygmies, Nilotics, Bantu, Berbers, Arabs and even Whites, and others. It is a biological fact that these physical types differ from each other in easily recognisable bodily characteristics.”

The above statements indicate that the designation African means different things to different people. Although, sometimes the term Black is interchangeably used with African, it has political undertones referring to those people who were or are still politically, economically and socially disadvantaged. As stated above, for the purpose of this discussion, the designation African, will be consistently employed.

Several meanings and definitions are advanced:

- 1) the traditionally indigenous people of the African continent
- 2) anybody who is committed to Africa
- 3) those who want to see the United States of Africa (Pan-Africanists)

4) Black Africans

5) Those living in sub-Saharan Africa

6) Those who have their citizenship in Africa

The list can still continue. The above-mentioned discourse suggests the identity of who an African is not simplistic. Writing less than a decade ago Oosthuizen (1991:35) observed that "although less than a third of Africa is considered to be urbanised, the process of secularisation or modernisation has been intensified." Even before Oosthuizen, Mazrui (1980:8) pointed out that forces such as Christianity, have tremendously impacted Africa (see also Mazrui:47; Tienou 1990:24). African philosophers and observers agree to the reality of this phenomenon but another reality is that the African people are still hanging on to their traditions and customs. Temples (1959:17f) maintains that even though the Africans are civilised or Christianised in terms of Western standards "will revert back to their behaviour whenever they are overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering." Oosthuizen (1991:35f) says that urbanisation is more of a "mental construction than a material phenomenon".

Rauche (1996:21) says that concepts such as black consciousness, black power and theology are important indicators that Africans are resisting Western influence and attempting to preserve their own identity. The African traditional community obviously has not yet transcended its mythological thought patterns. The belief in mystical powers is a dominant



phenomenon. The inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first Black State President of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 is a classical example: The first part of the ceremony which included the oath by the President, gun salute and formal speeches was observed according to Western standards but the second part at the Paul Kruger Square in Pretoria was characterised and crowned by African traditional ceremonies and rituals.

In view of the above, the expression “African” in this context is a person whether living in the city or village who is culturally and historically attached to Africa. The one who is committed and identifies with Africa. A concise overview of African cosmology will further elucidate the identity of an African.

### **2.3.2 African cosmology**

The attempt to describe African cosmology is not only aimed at further defining an African but to lay a foundation for our understanding of the African value system. The following concerning African cosmology will be discussed, the supreme being, spirits and powers, the vitality force, African concept of time and the cult of the ancestors.

#### **2.3.2.1 Belief in the supreme being**

Belief in a supreme being is generally encountered in African religions as a prominent factor. Busia (1971:5) concurs that “the postulate of God is universal throughout Africa.” Anyanwu (1981:163f) maintains that the African people believe in a divine power. This divine power manifests

himself/ herself/ itself in everyone and everything. It/he/she is the giver of this experience, the author of the experienced divine qualities. Thus, the African goes beyond the visible to an invisible world of spirituality, a world of faith, which is the crown of culture. Therefore God or the supreme being in Africa is viewed as that power who/which organises and integrates the world beyond the physical appearance.

Temples (1959:20) maintains that the African people have been having the most pure form of the concept of God, the supreme being, creator and dispenser of the universe. In articulating this desire Mbiti (1969:229) claims that:

"historically Christianity is very much an African religion, but also that as a Christian faith, is capable of being apprehended by African terms without being made difficult."

Tutu (1978:366) maintains that the African has a genuine knowledge of God:

"It is reassuring to know that one have had a genuine knowledge of God and that we have had our own ways of communion with the deity, ways which meant that we were able to speak authentically as ourselves and not as pale imitations of others."

Idowu (1969:18) says that :

"The worship of one supreme deity is universal among all really primitive peoples."

Faith in that supreme being therefore lies at the root of all traditional religions and socio-cultural conceptions manifested inter alia in:

- \*Animism - the belief that spirits can infuse human beings
- \*Dynamism - all things are subject to the influence of cosmic powers
- \*Fetishism - the belief in an object, natural or manufactured which is infused with power that can give a person fortune or protection.

Gyekye (1987:195f) says that most African people do have a concept of God as the supreme being who created the whole universe out of nothing and who is the absolute ground of all being. There are however some African scholars epitomised by Nyirongo (1997:10) who maintain that prior to the coming of the Christian missionaries to Africa, the Africans did not worship God but gods. Nyirongo's submission is unpopular with many African scholars.

### **2.3.2.2 Spirit and powers**

Gyekye (1987:196ff) maintains that the African ontology besides the supreme being recognises other categories of the lesser spirits, which are variously referred to as deities, spirits, gods, nature gods, divinities, etc. Theron (1996:12) says that these spirits and magical powers are a reality to many. It is believed that the whole universe is infested with spirits, the

spirits of rivers, mountains, hills, etc. The spirits of affliction are those used by people to harm other human beings. Anyanwu (1981:164) submits that living in a community, the African believes that there are mysterious forces surrounding him/her. He/she is in communion with these forces (his/her fellowman, nature, forces animate and inanimate). A person is expected to cope with these spirits and forces determining his/her life. McVeigh (1974:32) calls them "a myriad of spirits". In African communities these spirits are taken care of. There are specialists who are gifted and possess the capacity to manipulate and interpret the workings of these spirits and forces in people. These "mediums" specialise in communicating with the spirits, the "diviners" use the "dolosh" (bones of animals and sea shells) to determine the will of the spirits and the "medicine men" specialise in the knowledge of herbs and animal flesh to ward off the spirits.

### **2.3.2.3 Vitality force**

In addition, but, distinct from the world of spirits and powers, Mbiti (1969:21) asserts that the African people believe in the existence of a force, power or energy which is permeating the whole universe. This, in his opinion should be regarded as a separate ontological category. Rauche (1996:20) identifies this phenomenon as the "muntu" (vitality force), which he says manifests itself as a hierarchical order of life-forces. According to him this vitality force is of existential significance and constitutes justice. Crafford (1996:41) maintains that this force is available to human beings for utilisation at a restricted degree. It brings illness, ill-fortune and causes accidents (see also Parrinder 1962:21; Mbiti 1969:16).

### 2.3.3 African concept of time

Time and a concept thereof is one of the most abstract and intangible concepts in human thought. Kearney (1993:98) maintains that most people around the world relate to time much as a fish relates to water, that is, uncritically swimming through it and of course, being largely oblivious of it. The African conception and experience of time plays an important role in traditional African thought. Most writers on African culture and traditional religions depend on Mbiti's (1969:22f) submission. He defines a period of time, which he calls "sasa". This, he defines it as the present, the immediate future and the immediate past. It is the period in which people are conscious of their existence. The next period of time, he calls "zamani". This is the past-terminal period of time.

Some people refer to coming late for a meeting or an occasion as African time. This is not entirely true because the African does not have an objective value of time. It is only when something is taking place, that time happens or occurs. This, therefore, means that when nothing takes place, there is no talk of any wastage of time.

Oosthuizen (1991:42) contends that in the African approach of time, the future is not an event and thus plays a minor role, while of course, in the secularised world, the future is the centre of the time concept. Basically, the African has a two-dimensional concept of time, namely, a dynamic present and a long past. The future is in this cyclic concept of time greatly devalued. Events merely come and go. But the past receives the main emphasis, it is

where the human being finds his/her orientation, that is, where his/her roots lie and where he/she finds security.

Theron (1996:9) says that the African has a great sense of the past, that is a long history. Time, therefore, does not move into the future but rather into the past. The past provides the motivation for the present. Some observers maintain that the African conception of time has tremendous consequences for the African continent. It has led to poor planning and development. The present is more important in the sense that harmony and balance should be maintained, change should be avoided as much as possible because it will disturb the harmony. Tradition is regarded as essential and should be maintained.

Although there are elements of truth in some of Mbiti's submissions and those who are influenced by his writings, some of the cases are overstated or exaggerated. It is a fact that Africans are event driven more than being conscious of time as an objective reality. But to them what is important is not the time in which an event takes place but the fact that it has taken place. What Mbiti and those persuaded by his thinking fail to observe, is that an African does not have a problem in adapting to the Western conception of time. For instance, a group of Africans working at a company operating according to Western values including conception of time, will not have a problem in being punctual at work and their submission of tasks but the same group of people will not see it inappropriate to arrive minutes late at a funeral service or a traditional occasion where African values operate.

#### **2.3.4 The cult of ancestor veneration**

The cult of ancestors is to the African what Jesus is to Christianity and what Mohammed is to Islam. It is the main focus of the African traditional religions. The ancestral spirits are in an ontological position between the other spirits, the supreme being and people. This belief forms the nucleus of African traditional religions. Crafford (1996:46) maintains that the cult of ancestors is important because it deals with the everyday life of the individual and that of the tribe. The ancestors are also regarded as the mediators between people, the tribe and the supreme being. Setiloane (1986:17) says that the interaction of one's spirit with those of other people in the community does not terminate with death. Even after death, the "vital participation" of the deceased is experienced in the community in general and also in the home and clan circles in particular. The cult is therefore the experience in the life of the people (see also ; Daneel 1973:53ff; Oosthuizen 1977:273).

Who/what are the ancestral spirits? They are the spirits of the departed. They are also called the living-dead. The first step in the cult is the funeral itself. But before the day of the funeral some rituals are performed on the corpse and on the close members of the family. As much as possible close contact with the members of the public is avoided. The shaking of hands is strictly forbidden. The widow/widower for instance is not supposed to talk to the other mourners unless very close to her/him. On the day of the funeral all members of the family are obliged to attend. African funerals are characterised by large crowds. More than empathising with the bereaved family, those attending the funeral, together with the family members,

relatives and the community at large pay tribute to the deceased, thus gaining his/her favour.

After a minimum of six months up to a year, after the spirit has wandered around, it will come back home. A special ceremony is made to welcome home the spirit. This is called in Zulu, "Ukubuyiswa ekhaya" (the bringing-home ceremony). In most cases a cow is slaughtered. It is an occasion in which the mourning cloths are taken off. In some African cultures this ceremony is more important than the funeral itself. It should be noted that it is not the ceremony which brings the spirit back home, but a mere formality of welcoming him/her back. From that time, the spirit becomes part of the family. The family can now start to offer sacrifices in the form of food, beer, snuff, etc. at the corner of the hut or at the cattle kraal.

#### **2.3.4.1 The category of spirits**

The ancestral spirits are categorised:

##### **(a) Children**

In most cases, children are not regarded as ancestral spirits with influence. They are remembered but not venerated.

##### **(b) Men and women**

In most African cultures the spirits of men are more important than women. The women spirits are remembered and inherited by her immediate family,



whereas the men's spirits would be venerated by his brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, etc.

**(c) Family heads**

Their spirits are more important than the rest. Under normal circumstances, the ancestor is remembered for a few generations. Thereafter the person's name as an ancestor moves to the background. The family head and chiefs are remembered and venerated by generations to come.

**(d) Notorious people, criminals**

These are not venerated as ancestral spirits. They are regarded to have, through their criminal deeds, injured the tribe. It is believed that they become wandering spirits continuing their evil practices.

**2.3.4.2 The function of the ancestral spirits**

The ancestral spirits fulfil a wide range of functions. It should be indicated that the role and influence of the ancestors is essentially applicable only to the direct descendants. This of course, as indicated above excludes the spirits of great names such as Shaka to the Zulus. Their spirits are never forgotten. They will forever be venerated by the entire Zulu nation throughout the ages. The ancestors can however, collectively (as a community of the living-dead) be called upon to help in a specific crisis situation such as drought, pestilence, floods, etc. Such a call can be made by

a tribe or nation at special occasions or community rites, such as agricultural rites, rain making ceremonies, etc.

The ancestors remain part of the social community and also unite the community. They take care of the daily needs of the tribe and bestow rain and fertility. They also protect the morals and traditions of the family, tribe and nation. The ancestors are therefore the guardians of the community's morality. This means that a transgression of the order and rules of the community is at the same time a transgression against the ancestors (see also; Parrinder 1962:59; Mbiti 1969:84f; Crafford 1996:46f; Theron 1996:31f).

There are two omissions or misconceptions made by many writers on the cult of ancestors which deserve to be observed. This is due to the fact that the "the people who first brought it to the notice of the world were definitely biased ... and ignorant" (see Setiloane 1986:17). Statements such as "these ancestors however do not play a role in the personal lives of individuals members ... " (in Theron 1996:31) are inaccurate and misinformed. It should be acknowledged that in general, Africans are a communal society but the starting point in the veneration of ancestors is the family. Who welcomes the spirit back home? It is not the tribe but the family. It is true, as indicated above that there are times when the ancestors are collectively approached but the ancestors are involved with families and individuals in those families. It is not only the tribe or family which needs protection but the individual also needs it from the ancestors. The second omission is that though the ancestors are important in the relationship between people and the inanimate world, there are times when they are by-passed. During the

times of calamity, severe drought, crisis, pestilence, etc., the Africans would approach the supreme being directly. For instance in Kwa-Zulu Natal there are places or mountains called "iziguqo" (place to kneel) where the tribe would go and kneel and talk to *Qamata* (Zulu name for God).

#### **2.4 Resemblances between typical ancient Mediterranean values and typical African values (on a high level of abstraction)**

Where do we search to find the meaning of a word or an action? The meaning of words are found in a dictionary, we might say, but the meaning of actions depend on the culture, the people and their circumstances. Take for instance eye-contact. In African culture the avoidance of eye contact is an expression of respect and reverence. In Western culture not making eye contact means that a person has something to hide or lacks character. The same action has two different meanings in the two different cultures. If one does not understand the culture and its values, one would interpret the action incorrectly. The same may be experienced when the actions of the biblical characters are interpreted. We can translate the Bible by using a Greek and Hebrew dictionary. But that does not mean that we will understand the Bible and its message fully. In order to truly understand the meaning of what the Bible says (especially the actions and utterances of biblical characters) we need to understand the culture and the values of that time. Biblical scholars who apply social-scientific methods have made a valuable contribution in our understanding of these actions and utterances. Numerous resemblances apparently exist between ancient Mediterranean values and African values (as will, hopefully, become clear in the following subsections). Some of them will be used as an example to demonstrate the

interrelatedness of African and ancient Mediterranean values, albeit at a high level of abstraction - dyadic personality, honour and shame, purity - pollution system and “insiders” and “outsiders”.

## **2.4.1 Dyadic personality**

### **2.4.1.1 The Mediterranean world**

Malina (1993:65) describes the typical dyadic personality as a non-individualistic, strongly group orientated disposition of the first century Mediterranean world. In his description Elliott (1993: 128f) contends that in contrast to individual personality, dyadic personality is a sense of self which is determined by and dependent upon the perceptions and evaluations of others. This conception is externally rather than internally orientated, shame-faced rather than guilt-based.

Social scientists, especially psychologists are on an ongoing basis engaged in trying to define personality, individuality or personology. In their endeavours, they use different theories. The word personality is often used to explain the individual's social dimension. Someone who is said to be having a strong personality, could be someone who can use his/her influence or impress people easily. The word personality could also be used to refer to someone's general behaviour patterns, his/her nature. Predictions are therefore, sometimes made about someone's behaviour on the basis of his/her personality. It can also be said that some actions on the part of an acquaintance confuse us because the behaviour does not fit in with the person's personality. “Personality” can therefore be understood as the

changing but nevertheless relatively stable organisation of all physical, psychological and spiritual characteristics of the individual which is responsible or determines his/her behaviour in interactions with the context in which the individual finds himself/herself (see Meyer, Moore and Viljoen 1997:11f).

Malina (1993:67) attempts to compare the first century Mediterranean world conception of personality with the Western perspective. Concerning typical Western views he states:

“You might not have thought this is what you think you are like, but take the time to consider this description of an individual. In our culture we are brought up to stand on our own two feet, as distinctive wholes, distinctive individuals, male and female. We are motivated to behave in the “right” way, alone, if necessary, regardless of what others might think or say. In our process of identity formation, we are led to believe and act as though we do so singly and alone, responsible only for our own actions, since each person is a unique sphere of feeling and knowing, of judging and acting. When we relate to other people, we feel that they are as distinct and unique beings as we ourselves are. In addition to being unique and distinct persons, each of us lives within our unique social and natural environments. This is individualism.”

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992: 229) further elucidate the Western view of personality and individualism:

“In contemporary North American culture we consider an individual’s psychological makeup to be the key to understanding who he or she might be. We see each individual as bounded and unique, a more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness and judgement that is set over against other such individuals and interacts with them.”

The sort of personality and individualism as explained above has been rare or non-existent in the cultures of the New Testament world. Malina (1993:64) portrays the conception and experience of the personality which appropriately describes the persons, their utterances and actions encountered in the pages of the New Testament:

“One unique personhood, one’s inner self with its difficulties, weaknesses, confusions, and inability’s to cope, and one’s distinctive, individual realm of hopes and dreams are simply not of public concern or comment. Rather, persons of such inculturation know how to keep their psychological core hidden and secret. They are persons of careful calculation and discretion normally disavowing any dependence on others.”

Furthermore Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992:22) contend that:

“In the Mediterranean world of antiquity such a view of the individual did not exist. There every person was

embedded in others and had his or her identity only in relation to these others who form a fundamental group. For most people this was the family, and it meant that individuals neither acted nor thought of themselves as persons independent of the family group. What one member of the family was, every member of the family was, psychologically as well as in every other way. Mediterranean's are what anthropologists call "dyadic." that is, they are "other-oriented" people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are."

#### **2.4.1.2 African views of personality**

Before it could be demonstrated how this value (used as a model), dyadic personality as seen by the social-scientific critics, can be utilised to interpret the New testament texts, it is appropriate to allude to the African view of personality with a view of seeing how the African social-descriptive paradigm can also make a contribution.

In making the contrast between the African and Western concept of personality, Menkiti (1979:157) says that:

"..whereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the core individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entitles ascribing of the description "man" must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical,

psychological characteristics of an individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community. One obvious conclusion to be drawn from this dictum is that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be and this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as man.”

Gbadegesin (1998:292) maintains that in order for one to comprehend the African conception of individuality and also the community, it is useful to trace the coming-to-be of the new member of the family, i.e. birth. The new baby would arrive with the waiting hands of the elders of the household. The experienced elderly women in the household see to it that the new baby is delivered safely and that the mother is not in danger after delivery. They introduce the baby into the family with cheerfulness, joy and prayers. From there on the new mother may not touch the child except breastfeeding. In all these, the importance of the new arrival as a unique individual is reconciled with his/her belonging to the family which decides his/her name but also has a duty to see his/her birth as a significant episode in its existence.

Gbadegesin (1998:292f) continues to state that:

“The meaning of this is that the child as an extension of the family tree, should be given a name that reflects his/her membership thereof, and it is expected that the name so given will guide and control the child by being a constant reminder to



his/her or his/her membership of the family and the circumstances of his/her birth.”

Oduyoye (1991:466) makes a contribution in this regard and elucidates the perception of the personality of the African people of Ghana:

“To constitute the African people of Ghana, one begins by identifying the groups of people whose language is understood without too much effort; the linguistic phenomena called dialects also mark affinity of people. In Ghana the Akuapens, Akyem Asante, Brong, Fante, Kwahu, all large groups belong to the Akan family. They share a world view that rests on a religious interpretation of the universe. They are one people with a variety of interpretations and expressions of fundamental systems which they have in common.”

The above, concerning African personality, clearly indicates that Africans have a distinctive feature of collective consciousness which is manifested in their behaviour patterns, expression and spiritual self-fulfilment in which values such as the universal brotherhood, sharing and treating other people as humans are concretised. In traditional Africa, human beings are not existing as individuals. A person does not easily take a decision on his/her own, and will not act as an individual. He/she is part of the social community and the society has priority over him/her. Everything is aimed and meant for the well-being of the society and at harmony in the social order and life. A human being, thus exist only in and for the community.

According to traditional Africans, individuality and the sense of personhood is fulfilled through his/her participation in the tribe. In other words the individual is not a person until he has been accepted by the community. In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He/she owes his/her existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his/her contemporaries, including the departed spirits (cult of ancestors). The community must make, create or produce the individual for the individual depends on the corporate group (see Mbiti 1969:108; Nyirongo 1997:101).

In the course of our discussion of African personality the expression “traditional African” has been constantly employed. This should in no way provide an impression that urban or modern Africans have a different conception. The concept of African individuality and community will never be lost. Even in urban areas such a philosophy and concept is entrenched and manifest. For instance the many social societies, where people help each other during the time of need, are growing. During the time of calamity or need, e.g. when a young man marries, the uncles and the other members of the family would assist him in paying lobola (bride wealth). Poor families are relieved by having their children sent to live with economically well-to-do families. It is not unusual in African society to have an elder brother or uncle paying for the education of his younger brother/sister (see Theron 1996:10).

Setiloane (1986:10) makes a significant observation about the people of African origin living in Europe for study or work purposes:

“There are numerous tragedies among Africans who go and live abroad in the countries of Europe and the US. Their most common complaint is “loneliness” and the distance of people in spite of their closeness and numbers. The privacy of life which Western man has come to almost make a religion of, to them becomes a hurdle, resulting in depression mental disturbances and often even suicide”

From the vantage point of the African social-descriptive approach, the first century Mediterranean world value of dyadic personality (as seen in Africa and in the first century Mediterranean world) can be used as a paradigm for interpreting some New Testament texts. For instance in Matthew 16:13-28 and Mark 8:27-30, Jesus and his disciples arrive at Caesarea Philippi. They are free from the danger of interference from the crowd. Jesus asks his disciples about the views held about Him by the people in general. But also what do they think about him:

“...ἤρῳτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων, Τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου;” (Mt 16:13).

The clarification of the status of Jesus (Mt 16:13-20; Mk 8:27-30; Lk 9:18-22) in Caesarea Philippi therefore underscores this pivotal value of the first century Mediterranean world. The identity of Jesus is clearly stated:

“...Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ζῶντος.”  
(Mt 16:16; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20)

In these texts, “Peter plays the role of a moral entrepreneur, supporting Jesus career and prodding it along. The keys of the kingdom refer to access to God’s benefaction. Peter would be a broker like Jesus. Binding and loosing seem to refer to declaring authoritative judgements of obligatory custom and empowerment given to all the disciples as well in 18:18” (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992:112).

This question/enquiry by Jesus manifests this basic value in the first century Mediterranean world and in Africa, i.e. how people (the community) viewed a person. One of the tragedies of Jesus as a person found in the pages of the New Testament is that he was rejected by his own, the Jews:

“...εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον,”  
(Jn 1:11).

“...Αἱ ἀλώπεκες φωλεοῦς καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνώσεις, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἔχει ποῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν κλίνει.” (Lk 9:58).

“οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ λίθος ὁ ἐξουθενηθεὶς ὑφ’ ὑμῶν τῶν οἰκοδόμων, ὁ γενόμενος εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας.” (Ac 4:11).

## 2.4.2 Honour and Shame

### 2.4.2.1 The ancient Mediterranean world

The lives of modern persons are probably centred around economics and all that goes with it such as labour, production, consumption and possession. These do not only motivate many people's behaviour, but claims most of their energy and time. Malina (1993:31) maintains that:

“In the United States, the social institution upon which most Americans focus their attention, interests, and concerns is economics. When the average U.S. family is in difficulty, it is invariably due to the fact that the U.S. provisioning system, the system of jobs, of goods and services production and consumption is in trouble. Thus we can fairly say, given our experience, that the focal institution of U.S. society is economics. In this framework, the organising principle of life in this country is instrumental mastery - the individual's ability to control his or her environment, personal and impersonal, to attain a quantity-oriented success: wealth, ownership, “good looks,” proper grades, and all other countable indications of success.”

During the first century Mediterranean world, economics was not the be-all and end-all. People worked primarily to conserve their status and not to gather possessions. Those who tried to make money were suspected of doing it at the expense of the group to which they belonged. The pivotal or

primary values of the first century Mediterranean world was honour and shame (Malina, Joubert and Van der Watt 1996:8).

Elliott (1993:130) defines honour and shame as a:

“Socially approved and expected attitudes and behaviour in areas where power, sexual status, and religion intersect. Honour is the public claim to worth and status (both ascribed and achieved) along with the social acknowledgement of such worth, status, and reputation. In ancient patriarchal societies, honour is associated primarily with male familial representatives and symbolised by blood lineage, name, and physical attributes (male testicles; strength).

Malina (1993:31f) also asserts that honour is the area where the three lines of power, gender and religion intersect. Power means in this context the ability to exercise control. There are therefore two sides to honour. The first was the person’s claim to worth, in other words, the amount of honour he (in all cases it was the male) thought was due to him. The second was the society’s acknowledgement of that claim. Honour was therefore, the status which one claimed in the community together with the recognition of that claim by others.

One could gain or loose his honour status. In order for a person to gain or consolidate his honour, he was expected to score victory over another person. The community watched and decided whether or not to confirm victory and by so doing validating the winner’s claim to greater honour. The

constant conflict between the Jewish leaders, particularly the Pharisees and the Scribes with Jesus was motivated by their honour status. In Matthew 12:1-9, Jesus went through the corn field on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and started to pick some ears of corn and eat them. The Pharisees made a public challenge to Jesus:

“...Ἰδοὺ οἱ μαθηταί σου ποιοῦσιν ὃ οὐκ ἔξεστιν ποιεῖν ἐν σαββάτῳ .” (Mt 12:2b).

Jesus now had to publicly defend his honour:

“...Οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε τί ἐποίησεν Δαυὶδ ὅτε ἐπείνασεν καὶ οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ; πῶς εἰσηλθὼν εἰς οἶκον τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἄρτους τῆς προθέσεως ἔφαγον, ὃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἦν αὐτῷ φαγεῖν οὐδὲ τοῖς μετ’ αὐτοῦ, εἰ μὴ τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν μόνοις;”  
(:3-4)

Jesus did not only demonstrate his profound knowledge of the Scriptures by far more than them but that He was the Messiah:

“κύριος γὰρ ἐστὶν τοῦ σαββάτου ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου”  
(:8).

Jesus therefore successfully defended his honour (See also Mt 1:1ff.; 19:3ff.; 22:34ff; Mk 7:1; 8:5, 11; 10:2ff).

A more classic illustration of the challenge-riposte is between Jesus and Satan is to be found in (Mt 4:1-11). Soon after his baptism (Mt 3:13-17) which the confirmation of his honour, the devil challenges this status. Jesus successfully defends this claim by refusing to do as suggested by Satan. Another example of honour and shame in the New Testament is the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The death of Jesus on the cross represents his humiliation, and loss of his honour status. He was put to shame:

“ἔταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ” (Phlp 2:8).

The Jewish leaders had successfully put Jesus to shame by handing him over to the Romans to be executed. But the resurrection of Jesus from the dead signifies the reversal of the shame of Jesus. All the Gospel accounts (Mk 16:1-20, Mt 28:1-20, Lk 24:1-53 and Jn 20:1-21:14) state that the resurrection of Jesus was discovered on the first day of the week by Mary Magdalene. All but Matthew say that the stone had already been rolled away and Jesus was gone. The resurrection of Jesus, thus, signifies the restoration of his honour status by God the Father. Jesus is therefore established as the head of God's household on earth (see Jacobs-Malina 1993:113).

#### **2.4.2.2 Typical African views of honour and shame**

Honour and shame also function as primary African values. In describing the significance of birth amongst the Pedi (Northern Sothos) Mönnig (1967:98) says that:



“Among the Pedi the birth of a child is an event of great importance. Not only does it initiate a new member into the group, but, in the case of a first child, it confers on the mother the status of parenthood which, for the Pedi, is synonymous with attaining the full status of a woman. It also concludes the obligations of the mother’s group to the father and his group, proves the manhood of the father and perpetuates his line. The rites connected with birth centre around the mother and the child. The mother is invested with a new status and the child is accorded the status of a new member of the group. The father does take part in some of the rites, but it is obvious that his status and role remain unchanged, although his prestige is considerably enhanced.”

The question of status plays an important role in the African value system. A person acquired his/her social status by birth. This, however, does not yet automatically secure for him/her the prestige and the full privileges which the clan or the tribe has to offer. For instance a man who is still unmarried e.g. cannot assume the leadership of an extended family or a tribe, even if he is the legitimate successor by virtue of his birth. He does not yet offer any guarantee that he will contribute his share towards the continuity of the clan (Breutz 1991:75).

Writing about the Zulu value system, Krige (1962:30f) explains the concept of honour and shame:

“The behaviour towards relatives-in-law is largely bound up with the custom of *hlonipha*. This word literally means to have shame or to shun through bashfulness, and affects women to a far greater extent than men. A married woman *hlonipha* her father-in-law and all his brothers, the elderly among her brothers-in-law, her mother-in-law, and all other wives of her father-in-law. This means that in their presence she must cover her body from armpits and shoulder-blade downward to cover her breasts, and she must put on her *umNqwazo* (band round the top-knot or over the eyes) and keep her eyes down. She must not eat in their presence nor chew food while standing or walking outside their kraals.”

The custom of *hlonipha* applies to men too, only in their case is it not so strict. A man and his mother-in-law may not pronounce each other’s names, and a man may not use his wife’s name, but refers to her as “*oka so and so*,” affixing the name of her father. He may not enter a hut in which his son’s wife may be, but this *hlonipha* may be removed by the present which he gives her to free her from covering her face in his presence.”

In the African value system the question of honour is crucial when coming to the choice of a marriage partner. There are different customs which are observed in the choice of a marriage partner. In some societies the choice is made by the parents, and this may be done even before the children are born. This could happen for instance when in a particular household there is a

young boy. His parents would go to another household where there is a young girl or where there was an expectant mother and put in an “application” for the present girl or for the child to be born in the event that it is a girl. Sometimes these arrangements could be done when two wives know that they are pregnant. The children, however, get married only when they are old enough and not immediately after birth (Mbiti 1969:135).

It was and still widespread in some African communities for parents to arrange marriage between their children. In most cases marriage is and was between relatives. As long as the parents and the family had an influence on the choice of the future partner, marriage between kinsmen were given preference than between strangers. This attitude was based particularly on the economic consideration that the marriage-cattle are thus retained in the family group. In this regard it is customary amongst the Botswana to state:

*“Ngwana wa rrangwane nnyale kgomo di boele sakeng”*  
(marry at your brother’s place, so that the cattle may remain in the kraal).

The most significant factor in the choice of the partner is the family’s honour status. Concerning the Basuto, Ashton (1967:62) contends that:

“In choosing a wife for the senior son, the family is influenced by two considerations - the girl’s suitability and her family standing. She should be respectable, chaste, modest, hard-working and good tempered: the sort of girl who will make a steady wife and a good mother. Her family should have a

reputation for honesty, friendliness and respectability, and should be of at least approximately equal social and economic standing to theirs. Ordinarily there is a fairly wide choice for the Basuto are not particularly snobbishly but the chiefs and other leading families attach great importance to this point, and so limit their range of choice.”

African values (of honour), especially concerning the choice of a marriage partner provides a valuable premise in the interpretation of some New Testament texts. In the New Testament, for instance, the “kinship” of believers is clearly articulated. In their associations i.e. their horizontal relationships, the believers are encouraged not to be equally yoked to unbelievers:

“Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ἀπίστοις·...” (2 Cor 6:14a)

In his Second Coming of Jesus (parousia), Jesus will be coming to his own:

“Ἐπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἄρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἄερα· καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἔσόμεθα” (1 Th 4:17).

The African practice of the initiation rites also plays an important role in the bestowal of the honour status to the teenagers. The birth of the child as stated above (2.5.1) introduces him/her to the corporate community. But this is but just an introduction. The child remains passive and has still a long way to go. Mönnig (1967:111) says that:

“The uninitiated Pedi youths form a community of their own in which they enact much of the life of adult members of the larger community. As a group they are looked down upon by the adult members of the society. They are considered useless individuals, and they form a lawless gang whose actions fall largely outside the pattern of tribal law.”

The boy or girl must outgrow childhood and enter into adulthood, both physically, causally and religiously. This is also a change from passive to active membership in the community.

The initiation school amongst many African communities is a permanent institution:

“The rites of birth and childhood introduce the child to the cooperate community, but this is only the introduction. The child is passive and has still a long way to go. He must grow out of childhood and enter into adulthood both physically, socially and religiously. This is also a change from passive to active membership in the community. Most African people have rites and ceremonies to mark this great change. The initiation of the youth is one of the key moments in the rhythm of the individual life, which is also the rhythm of the corporate group of which the individual is a part" (Mbiti 1969:121).

Mönnig (1967:112) maintains that:

“The initiation of its youth is to the Pedi a sacred institution. The initiation of boys is taboo to all women and uninitiated children, and that of the girls is equally taboo to men. Everyone is extremely reticent in speaking about it, and women know very little about male initiation and men little about the initiation of girls. As an institution it is one of the cornerstones of the whole social and political organisation. It is not an individual affair, but is communally undertaken by the whole tribe, and is under the personal direction and control of the chief. It is not, as is the case with some other Bantu tribes, an initiation merely into adulthood. As an institution it is the means of investing the initiate with the status of citizenship of the tribal community, and of according the potential of full participation in the social, political and juridical activities of the tribe, according to the sex of the initiate.”

The candidates in the initiation school receive instruction and training in the laws, customs of the tribe and matters pertaining to adulthood. The school is greatly enveloped in secrecy and mystery. Those who have never been to the school should not have access to what is taking place. Those who disobey the orders given at the school or are found neglecting their prescribed duties are severely punished, and in the past were even killed. The candidates are exposed to adverse conditions such as washing with cold water and hunting animals for food (see Stayt 1968:101ff).

Upon completion of their course, the candidates return home amidst feasting and merry-making in celebration of their new-found status as men or women. Besides the physical drama which the initiation rites have, the occasion has also a symbolic meaning. The youth are ritually introduced to the art of communal living.

The African concept of honour and shame can be applied to the New Testament text, thus providing a premise for an interpretation of the text - African socio-descriptive approach. The New Testament narrates that when Jesus was eight days old was presented to the temple:

“Καὶ ὅτε ἐπλήσθσαν ἡμέραι ὀκτῶ τοῦ περιτεμεῖν αὐτόν, καὶ ἐκλήθη τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦς,...” (Lk 2:21a).

The rituals of purification were made. This has striking similarities with the African rituals of birth. In the Venda culture, after the birth of the child the rituals are performed. After the visit of the family medicine-man, the mother is ready to come from her seclusion. Before she could leave the hut, she is visited ceremonially by her husband. He would obtain powder, made from the blood of a menstruating woman, which he rubs on the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. His wife presents him with a bracelet, matuvho (which means an intense desire). This bracelet must be given to him before he may accept food from her or sit anywhere in the hut where she has sat during the birth of the child. It is believed that if this purification is not duly performed, the husband will be attacked by a shivering disease from which he will not recover (Stayt 1968:87).

The African context, i.e. the salient features underlying the initiation rites, provides the basis for interpreting some biblical text. The Christian rite of baptism and its significance is an example:

“Baptism is the Christian experience of the passion, death resurrection of Jesus. Baptism symbolises expressly not only the beginning of a new life in Christ, but also death to the old man, the old life of sin. By baptism the Christian is washed, sanctified and made righteous in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. Christ sacrifices the church, cleansing it by the washing of water in the word (McKenzie 1976:80)”

Wilson (1976:96f) explains the significance of water baptism. The believers are 'buried' with Christ when plunged in the baptising water. It is a token that they had died to their old life of sins. They are raised again with Christ when they emerge from the water. This means that they receive a new life in Christ.

Käsemann (1973:159) maintains that baptism according to Paul in Romans 6:1ff, signifies that the believer has been freed from dead and has experienced new life:

“Freedom from death is presented so universally and therefore with such theological objectivity that individual existence threatens to be lost to view. If in a certain respect Christ is a bearer of destiny for the world as Adam was the destiny which



he brings is not a fate that of Adam. In what sense, then can it still be called destiny? The apostle stands before the task of making intelligible in terms of the reality of everyday life, of the community and of the individual, the universal realisation of eschatological life... he does this by characterising it as freedom from the powers of sin and the law and therewith summons Christians with inner necessity to confirm in their personal life the change of aeons that has been affected."

Such an interpretation of the biblical text in an African context goes beyond comparing baptism in the New Testament and the initiation rites in African traditional religions and culture. But it identifies features which undergird the African life and world-view and thereafter using it to identify a particular context in the New Testament text which will enable an African reader to appropriate the text.

Mönnig (1967:98) refers to African purification and initiation rites and the New Testament:

"The purification rites in the New Testament as well as the significance of baptism can be understood in the light of the African value in ritual initiating a child after birth or teenagers after the initiation school. The African reader of the Bible can therefore relate to the New Testament texts, because some of the practises encountered in it and their symbolic meanings are not unfamiliar to the African habitat."

The African ancestor veneration is another context which could be considered to interpret some of the New Testament texts:

“Then the woman asked, “Whom shall I bring up for you?”

“Bring up Samuel,” he said.

“When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!” (1 Sm 28:11-12 - LXX)

“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.” (Mt 17:1-3)

“...This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:25b).

The above texts contain the same features of the cult of ancestral veneration in African traditional religions. In 1 Samuel 28:1-20, Saul consults with a witch at Endor, his request is that she should bring Saul back to life. The witch actually manages to bring back “an old man” to life. Saul communicates with Samuel. In Mt 3:1-2 the “two Hebrew ancestral spirits”, Moses and Elijah are brought to life. They are seen talking to Jesus. In 1 Cor 11:23 the author says that Jesus commanded his followers to continue partaking, in remembrance of Him. Is this not the same with the

cult of the ancestors? Such texts and many others have led to the so-called Christinisation of African rituals by some Christian traditions and African theologians:

“Natural theology makes adaptation in the Roman Catholic church easy. The Catholic church believes that something good remained in every human being after the fall. This good, and the good customs resulting from it, are begin claimed by the Catholic church in the name of Jesus Christ. This view is based on a synthesis between the indigenous truth and the Christian truth. Bridges should be build between Christianity and the local culture. In this process assimilation and accommodation is the focus” (Daneel 1973:60).

Mosotheoane (1973:86) has observed that:

“Despite a concerted effort on the part of at least some church leaders in at least some parts of Africa (certainly in South Africa) to eradicate any remains of the traditional ancestor cult among Black Christians. African believers continue to reverence their departed fore-bears. By adopting the view that the ancestor cult is “incompatible with an enlightened and spiritual conception of the Christian faith, and so cannot be tolerated as a practice in the Christian church.”

The question which the researcher observes is not necessarily the merits or demerits of ancestor veneration but the embodiment of the gospel features in

the cues of the cult. The Africans view ancestors as mediators between people and the supreme being. They (ancestors) are responsible for providing protection, guidance fortune etc. these features are also pertinent in the Christian view of God and Jesus Christ.

West (1999:4) clearly articulates this reality when he states that Africans do not transact with the Bible "empty-handed". Besides their distinctive experiences of reality, both religio-culturally and socio-politically the particular questions that such experiences generate, Africans have a range of hermeneutics strategies for interpreting the biblical texts. These interpretative tools of ordinary African interpreters should be adequately classified and analysed. These includes paintings and folk songs.

### **2.4.3 The In-group and out-group (Insiders and Outsiders)**

#### **2.4.3.1 The ancient Mediterranean world**

Malina (1996:1) maintains that the New Testament writings are definitely ethnocentric. Reminick (1983:7) states that:

“Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones.”

Malina, furthermore says that all biblical documents are ethnocentric. He cites amongst others the destruction of the non-Israelites in the Old Testament. If Jesus was not totally anti-Gentile, He was surely unconcerned about the non-Israelite population. He came to proclaim God's Kingdom to Israel. Supporting Malina's submission, Griffith (1992:15) is of the opinion that were it not for the Gospel, which gave the Old Testament legitimacy, we would have for instance opposed Moses and the prophets. Malina (1996:6) strengthens his argument by rewriting some of the Matthean statements:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that lead to destruction, and those who enter by it are many [in Israel]” (Mt 7:13).

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to save and to give life as a reason for many [in Israel]” (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45).

“The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the [Israelite] saints who had fallen asleep were raised and appeared to many [in Israel]” (Mt 27:52ff).

Malina (1996:6) and Sanders (1985:220) maintain that the composition of the Jesus Movement comprising of the Jews and Gentiles, or rather the opening of Non-Jews as members of the church is the post-resurrection innovation, of which Paul and Luke were responsible for.

One would expect Malina to be consistent with this vantage point that Jesus was anti-Gentile. It is surprising that in his social-scientific commentary on

the synoptic gospels with Rohrbaugh (1992:74f) they ignore the fact that the centurion who affirmed Jesus, "...surely this was a righteous man..." was a Roman (Gentile).

The following words by Jesus also weighs against Malina's submissions:

"...Ἀμὴν λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν, παρ' οὐδενὶ τοσαύτην πίστιν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ εὗρον" (Mt 8:10)

In v.13 of the above text Jesus says to the centurion, "Go it will be done just as you believed it would, and his servant was healed at that very hour."

If Malina's statements and submissions that Jesus was anti-Gentile or unconcerned about the non-Jews are serious and are to be believed, why did Jesus complement this high-ranking official's faith? Why did He heal his servant who was definitely Gentile? However, Malina's ideas shed some light into the sectarian or ethnocentricity of the first century Mediterranean world. The early church for instance employed familial language such as father, brothers, sisters, house of God, the world (denoting that there are outsiders), the holy ones, the called ones, etc. They differentiated themselves from the outsiders (see Meeks 1983:85ff). Esler (1997:143) states that Paul uses these variety of ways to create in his congregations, social patterns analogous to those expected among family members in the ancient Mediterranean.

#### 2.4.3.2 Typical African views of insiders and outsiders

The African sense of regarding themselves as insiders and others as outsiders is very strong. Crafford (1996:9) maintains that:

"African cosmology consists of a unity, harmony and totality made up of the supreme being, the spirits, people, animals, vegetation and inanimate objects. A firm balance between all things is maintained by cosmic powers which are present in varying degrees in everything. The supreme being is the origin of life-force, and the spiritual realm its mediators, making it available in a limited way to people, animals, plants and objects. Life-force can be enhanced or diminished by magical activities."

Although in Africa today ethnicity appears to be a politically incorrect expression, some social scientists, contend that it is a stark reality in the post-colonial Africa. Scarrit and Hatter (1970-71:1) pose some realistic questions:

"What happens to the members of the formerly dominant ethnic-racial minority when an African state attains independence under majority rule. Under what conditions do they remain in the country, and if they remain how do their relationships with Africans change? Are they accepted as full members of the national community and do they change their values to the point where they accept such an identity or do

they become foreigners temporarily resident in an alien land? Specifically, how are the transformed majority-minority relationships reflected in the area of minority citizenship in the new African nation?"

Rich (1989:37f), also affirms the reality of ethnicity and maintains that the saliency of African politics need to be seen within the context of struggles for power at the political centre around the post-colonial state. In general, the state systems in Africa have been too weak to a national political leadership to emerge and politics have been characterised by factionalism and personal political leadership. In most cases, states in Africa have been confronted by a vacuum in national mythology which has been partially filled by an ethnic myth which may not as yet command universal allegiance.

Bekker (1993:1), writing in the context of the South African political scenario, maintains that although acknowledged by governments, recognised by development agencies, debated by scholars and sometimes built into institutions - there are wide disagreements as to what ethnicity is all about and there is little discussion in South Africa about the subject. Adam (1994:15ff) contends that ethnicity in Africa is reality. It however, manifests in different forms. The greatest challenge facing the government of South Africa, for instance is to skilfully manage this phenomenon. The Black Consciousness Movements dismiss the idea of building the rainbow nation and non-racialism as a liberal illusion and a strategic error. Different groups of Afrikaner nationalists reject the ideal of building a new united South Africa nation. They remain convinced that the Volkstaat (a people's



republic) is still an achievable reality. The Zulu nationalists epitomised by the Inkatha Freedom Party favour ethnic identity under the guise of a Federal State (Johnson 1994; Louw 1994).

The social reality of the in-group and outsiders discussed above can help in the interpretation of the New Testament texts. In the New Testament pages, the Jesus Movement is portrayed as a group which regarded everyone else as an outsider to be potentially included through their evangelistic endeavours.

#### **2.4.4 Purity - Pollution system**

##### **2.4.4.1 The ancient Mediterranean world**

In their description of the purity and pollution system, social scientists maintain that purity or sacredness has both a broader and a narrower reference and usage. In the broader sense “sacredness” is that which is protected, whether or not by religion against violation infusion or defilement. It also covers the religious, but is not limited to it. In this sense sacredness carries the meaning of the respected, venerated and invaluable. Accordingly, a wide variety of religious and non-religious objects, practices, places, customs and ideas may acquire a sacred or holy character (Gould and Kolb 1964:613). In the narrower sense sacredness refers to that which is protected specifically by religion against violation and intrusion and defilement. It is therefore that which is holy, sacrosanct or concentrated to or by religion.

Social scientists describe “profane” as that which is unholy, irreverent, blasphemous, defiled or opposed to the religious. It is that which is ordinary, common, unconsanctified, temporal or outside the religious. Thus, profanity refers to the treatment of the religious irreverently or contemptuously or to cause the holy to be defiled or desecrated by improper contact with the ordinary and unconsanctified.

Elliot (1993:132) endeavours to define purity-pollution system as:

A system of order based on the social construct that categorises phenomena and behaviour into the binary opposites of clean/unclean, whole/fragmented, sacred/secular, valued positively and negatively, respectively.”

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992:72) in their description of the purity-pollution system maintain that:

“All enduring human societies provide their members with ways of making sense out of human living. Such ways of making sense out of life are systems of meaning. When something is out of place as determined by the prevailing system of meaning, that something is considered wrong, deviant, senseless. Dirt is matter out of place. When people clean their houses or cars, they simply rearrange matter, returning it to its proper place. The point is, the perception of dirt and the behaviour called cleaning both point to the existence of some system according to which there is a proper

place for everything. This system of place is one indication of the existence of a larger system for making sense out of human living."

One traditional way of talking about such an overall system of meaning is called the purity system, the system of pure (in place) and impure (out of place) or the system of clean (in place) and unclean (out of place). Pure and impure, clean and unclean, can be predicated of persons, groups, things, times and places. Such purity distinctions embody the core values of a society and thereby provide clarity of meaning, direction of activity, and consistency for social behaviour. What accords with these values and their structural expression in a purity system is considered "pure," and what does not is viewed as "polluted."

Hanson and Oakman (1998:202) on their part illustrate how the New Testament text could be read. They define the sacred-profane system as:

"An ideology and system of regulating the proper place for everything: clean/unclean, sacred/profane, normal/deviant, in-group/out-group. This applies to objects, people, times, places, animals, and food, and these categories are often arranged in hierarchies. It provides a society with meaning, orientation, and maps of behaviour and belonging."

The above definitions, descriptions and reflections of the purity-pollution system are indicative of the fact that each and every culture has an ethos, i.e. a sense of right or wrong, good or bad, proper or out of place, meaningful

and meaningless. Each society therefore desires to regulate the conduct of people through a system of rules and regulations, as well as punishments prescribed for transgressions. The objective of course is to maintain an orderly community.

In the so-called first world countries, including some developing countries, personal freedom is an important value. A Bill of Rights and laws protecting these rights, are mechanisms meant to safeguard these values. People in these cultures have the right to privacy, the right to free speech, etc. and whoever and whatever infringes on these rights is punished by law. During the first century Mediterranean world, one of the fundamental values was purity. Greed was a cardinal sin against this ethic. Conduct that will be punished is any form of trespassing on one's neighbour's property. The basic offence against this system, was uncleanness.

The purity system was a way by which meaning was deferred. Purity had to do with wholeness. The system determined a proper place for everything. When something was out of place it was considered to be wrong, deviant, senseless, taboo or dirty. What was pure or clean was in place. People, groups, things and places could be in or out of place. It was required of each individual to be a complete, normal specimen of its kind (Osiek 1984:32f; Malina 1993:149ff).

#### **2.4.4.2 Typical African views on purity and pollution**

The purpose of discussing this value is not simply to explain some of the New Testament texts or behaviour patterns of some New Testament persons,

but to indicate how this value (purity-pollution) as a salient feature at that time can be one of the keys in unlocking some of the New Testament texts. In order to do that, we need to refer to some specific texts. However, before this exercise, in consistence with our discussion so far, it is appropriate to refer to the African concept of this value, sacred and profane.

One of the features of the African traditional religions is that the cosmos is perceived and experienced as a sacred environment charged with powers and spirits which exert their influence on human life. Such powers have to be manipulated by ritual and magical activities. There are some forests, rivers and mountains which are regarded as sacred. The African community is also understood as a closed, sacred tribal unit at the head of which is the sacral monarchy in which the chief is the mediator between the tribe, the supreme being and the cosmic powers. The traditional healers and diviners are revered as sacral people and fulfil various religious duties. The clan and the family heads are the community priests. Social and religious activities are not distinguished from one another (Crafford 1996:5)

Africans in general have a list of taboos in the areas of agricultural, pregnancy sexual intercourse, childbirth, food, death, etc. Mbiti (1969:111) says that:

"In many African societies the pregnant woman must observe certain taboos and regulations, partly because pregnancy in effect makes her ritually "impure", and chiefly in order to protect her and the child, one of the most common regulations concerns sexual intercourse during pregnancy. In some

societies as soon as a woman realises that she is expectant, she and her husband completely stop having sexual intercourse until after child birth. In other societies this is stopped two or three months before childbirth. This abstinence is observed by the woman after childbirth, for periods ranging from a few days to even two or three years..."

Another taboo related to pregnancy and childbirth is stated by Stayt (1968:84f.). He maintains that amongst the Bavenda (a tribe in the Northern Province of South Africa) after the discovery that the woman is pregnant, the mother-in-law and or some elderly women are notified, never her own mother. It is this woman who informs the husband. "He receives the news with great joy and his wife is ordered to take care of herself during this important period. Usually, during the first pregnancy the wife will stay with her husband until two months before childbirth. She goes to her mother's home until after the child has been born. In subsequent pregnancies the woman stays at her husband's home. Generally during pregnancy the woman is greatly respected. Great care is given to her. She, however, is supposed to observe some taboos of various foods imposed upon her."

Krige (1962:62) maintains that pregnancy amongst the Zulus is a time of great concern, not only for her health but for the future welfare of the child, who is easily affected by anything the mother may do, and stands in danger of being harmed by wizards. During pregnancy, the woman is required to be extremely careful because there are all manner of dangers in the world around her that may harm the unborn baby. In order to safeguard the unborn child from evil influences, the woman must be treated by a traditional

doctor, who will prescribe special medicine to her. There appears to be no special food taboos, but every expectant woman must at all times be careful about the type of food she eats, because of the fact that animals are supposed to possess the peculiarity of passing on their physical characteristics to the unborn child. For instance it is believed in some African circles that the woman who eats rabbit meat, will have a child with long ears.

There are some New Testament texts which indicate that the actions or utterances of the people portrayed are undergirded by the value system purity/pollution as it was understood in the first century Mediterranean world. What is important also is that the same text could be understood when we employ the African social-descriptive approach. In other words, the words and deeds of these New Testament people could be the same if they lived in traditional Africa because their value systems have much in common. This therefore, also means that an African will not find it difficult to relate to the message of the New Testament because its players are or would act more or less like him/her.

A selection of a few of these texts will be appropriate. It should be taken into consideration that in the culture of the first century Mediterranean Palestine, people were classified according to this value. For instance the high priest, the priests and followed by the Levites were the holiest of the people in Palestine. The Gentiles were the last in the hierarchy in this classification of people. Contact between the Jews and the people belonging the lower stratum was forbidden. The author of the Fourth Gospel makes the Samaritan woman to articulate this reality:

“λέγει οὖν αὐτῷ ἡ γυνὴ ἡ Σαμαρίτις, Πῶς σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ὢν παρ’ ἐμοῦ πεῖν αἰτίς γυναικὸς Σαμαρίτιδος οὔσης; (οὐ γὰρ συγχρῶνται Ἰουδαῖοι Σαμαρίταις,)” (Jn 4:9).

The Temple and the city of Jerusalem were regarded as the most holy places. The crowd which stoned Stephen brought accusation against him.

“...Ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος οὐ παύεται λαλῶν ῥήματα κατὰ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἁγίου [τούτου] καὶ τοῦ νόμου.” (Ac 6:13b)

The Jews from Asia happen to see Paul in the temple. They stirred up the crowd and accused him for desecrating the temple:

“κράζοντες, Ἄνδρες Ἰσραελῖται, βοηθεῖτε· οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ κατὰ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τοῦ τούτου πάντας πανταχῇ διδάσκων, ἔτι τε καὶ Ἕλληνας εἰσήγαγεν εἰς τὸ ἱερόν καὶ κεκοίνωκεν τὸν ἅγιον τόπον τούτον.” (Ac 21:28).

There were also places which were regarded as least holy than the others. Galilee was called “Galilee of the Gentiles”. It was simply not an auspicious enough place to imagine that a prophet could come out of it:

“...Μὴ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ὁ Χριστὸς ἔρχεται;”  
(Jn 7:41b)



The system of purity-pollution in the first century Mediterranean world, as seen by social-scientific critics, and the African social-descriptive approach helps us in understanding such texts. As indicated above, the issue at stake is not only to understand these texts against the cultural milieu of Jesus' time. This would be simply the task of the social description of the New Testament. The social-scientific critics would endeavour to explain some of the actions and utterances of the New Testament people as being underlined or informed by this value (purity-pollution).

As early as during the earthly ministry of Jesus, the adherents to his Movement corporately regarded themselves as distinct from the other groups or formation and also holier than the other groups. Jesus altered the existing boundaries of holiness which were established by the Jews. He moved all over Galilee preaching, healing, feeding and teaching people. In this regard, he clashed with the other religious groups which forbade contact with those less holier than themselves. Borg (1987:131) maintains that Jesus changed the politics of holiness to the politics of compassion:

“Just as the ethos of holiness had led to a politics of holiness, so also the ethos of compassion was to lead to a politics of compassion. The ethos of compassion profoundly affected the shape of the Jesus Movement, both internally and in its relationship to the world. The “shape” of the alternative community of “counterculture” was visible in the constituency of its membership which stood in sharp contrast to the relatively rigid social boundaries of the Jewish social world: boundaries between righteous and outcast, men and women,

rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. These boundaries, established by the politics of holiness and embodied in the culture as a whole and in varying forms in other renewal movements, were negated by the Jesus Movement. The negation pointed to a much more inclusive understanding of the community of Israel.”

The early church regarded itself as separate from the world. As much as the first century Mediterranean world drew a line between different people, the early believers made a distinction or drew a line of demarcation between them and the world. The author of 1 Peter writes to the Christians (predominantly Jews) who were driven out of Jerusalem and scattered throughout Asia Minor:

“καὶ αὐτοὶ ὡς λίθοι ζῶντες οἰκοδομεῖσθε οἶκος πνευματικὸς ἐς ἰεπάτευμα ἅγιον, ἀνευέγκαι πνευματικὰς θυσίας εὐπροσδέκτους [τῷ] θεῷ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.”

(1 Pt 2:5).

The author of Ephesians reminds readers about their identity:

“ἅπα οὖν οὐκετὶ ἐστὲ ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι, ἀλλὰ ἐστὲ συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ,”

(Eph 2:19)

The members of the church who acted like the world were excommunicated. Their actions showed that they no longer belonged to the group which was holy.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

The above discussion outlined the contribution of the social-scientific critics (predominantly Western scholars), that knowledge of the social values of the New Testament time would help in the interpretation of the texts. Social-scientific criticism has thus clearly distinguished itself from the historico-critical approaches and investigations, by concerning itself primarily with the social descriptions or analyses of the first century Mediterranean world. The underlying feature of the social-scientific criticism as indicated above, is its use of contemporary theories and methodologies from the social sciences in understanding and interpreting the New Testament.

This unique feature and distinction of the social-scientific criticism does not and should not provide a stage for unfair competition and dialogue with the adherents of the historico-critical and literary-critics of the New Testament. Some social-scientific critics are sharply criticising the historiographic approaches by making remarks such as, “the historiographic approaches are bankrupt”, “under the historico-critical approaches, the study of the Bible came to a standstill” and “the historico-critical exegetes have been conducting business as usual by sifting the same sand many a times.” On the other hand the historical-criticism exegetes refer to the social-scientific paradigm as “socialising the New Testament” and “marrying our old enemies” (see Gager 1975; Edwards 1979; Oakman 1996). It has not been

the intention of this thesis to explicitly or implicitly suggest that the social-scientific criticism paradigm can replace the traditional historical-critical methodologies.

Elliott's (1993:7) assertion spells out and is representative of the position of many social-scientific critics:

“...the social-scientific criticism is a sub-discipline of exegesis and is inseparably related to the other operation of the exegetical operations of the exegetical enterprise: textual criticism, literacy criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism and theological criticism. Social-scientific criticism complements these other modes of critical analysis, all of which are designed to analyse features of the biblical text.”

The researcher acknowledges the contribution of the Western New Testament social-scientific criticism. At the same time he went further to illustrate how, what he has referred to as an African social-descriptive criticism should be taken seriously in New Testament criticism. It should be taken into consideration that the evangelisation of Africa by the early missionaries from Europe and North America has been accompanied by processes such as colonialisation, Westernisation and domination. The Christian message and the gospel was meant to convert “pagan” Africa. To most missionaries, therefore, evangelisation meant the conversion of Africans from their pagan, heathen, savage and barbaric traditions and customs. Nothing positive was seen in African traditional religions. In most cases, after conversion, Africans were to be separated from their

unconverted relatives. They were made to change their “heathen” names and adopt Christian or biblical names. Christianity was brought to Africa by Western missionaries who for most of the time had a very negative approach to African culture. In many cases they did not only reject elements of culture that contradicted biblical principles alone, but African culture in totality. In practice it meant that Africans, when becoming Christians, had to adhere to Western culture as well. The whole process of acculturation was intensified by the effects of colonial rule in Africa. Theron (1996:17) agrees with Crafford (1993:165) when he says:

“Christianity came to Africa clothed in the garments of Western civilisation. The first missionaries to Africa viewed conversion to the Christian faith more or less as the parting with the traditional way life and the acceptance of Western civilisation, Traditional religion and culture were seen as irreconcilable with Christianity, and ever as inferior.”

These sentiments are held by Crafford (1996:165):

“Recently the scholars in the field of African Christianity (including those of Western origin) admit that the treatment of the early missionaries of the African religion and culture was an error of judgement. There are certain elements in African religion and culture which are compatible to Christianity and the Bible. For instance the African belief in the supreme being, who is creator, sustainer, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent is close to the biblical view of God. Although there are

negative elements in Africa traditional religion such as the sacralisation of the universe, the cult of ancestors, killing for “muti” purposes etc., African ideas can play an important role in the understanding of the Christian message and the reading of the New Testament.”

The interpretation of the New Testament texts also from the African social-descriptive vantage point underscores the contribution of Africa to the Christian faith and also the interpretation of the New Testament. Such an assertion, i.e. African contributions to textual criticism might however be frowned upon and also sound unthought of in some circles of Euro-centric biblical scholarship. What has Africa to do with the Bible, Christianity, worst still biblical criticism?

Maimela (1990:70ff) makes interesting and noteworthy remarks about Africa’s contribution towards the Christian faith. He regards the physical contribution of Africa towards Christianity as a prelude to spiritual contribution and as a platform for biblical hermeneutics. He maintains that Africans should be made aware of the fact that their forefathers and mothers have made a significant contribution to the origin and growth of Christianity. He goes further to state that:

“Indeed, one of my theses is that without Africa and its people the world would not have had Christianity and the Jewish religion both of which have been given birth through the African contribution.”

Few examples in this regard are cited. When Abraham, the carrier of God's blessings to the world, encountered all sorts of problems in Canaan because of the drought, we are told that he would have died of hunger had the Africans in Egypt not come to his rescue by giving him food and shelter. Thus by saving him from starvation and giving him sustenance, Africans in fact literally saved God's promises to Israel, promises that were later to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Maimela (1990:70) also refers to Jacob and Moses. In view of the fact that Africans are such welcoming people who do not discriminate against other people because of colour or religion, they accommodated Jacob and his sons. It is also not surprising that Joseph, "a foreigner" was elevated to the rank of governor and partner in the running of the affairs of the Egyptian state. It was because of this African help and intervention that the Israelites settled, multiplied in Egypt and later demanded their freedom. Furthermore, Moses who was used by God to free the Hebrew slaves was brought up in the African royal family and given the best education that Africa could provide at that time.

Finally, Maimela (1990:71) contends that when Jesus was threatened by Herod, Africa was ready to host him. Jesus went to his uncles and aunts in Africa. Joseph (the father of Jesus) did not run away from Bethlehem to Athens in Greece or Rome or London. Africa, thus acted in a caring and protective manner to the founder of the Christian faith. To crown it all:

“The Bible declares that even on his way to the cross, Jesus did not receive help from any of his Roman oppressors or from any of his Jewish sympathisers, rather it was from his African

uncle, Simon from Cyrene (modern Libya), that Jesus received help to carry the cross which weighed heavy on his shoulders.”

Besides this physical contribution of Africa to Christianity, on the level of biblical hermeneutics, Africa can also not be ignored. Crafford (1996:24) says that there are motifs which can be closely associated with Christianity and which can indeed help to better understand Christianity and its Scriptures in all its dimensions. It is therefore the task of Black theologians and philosophers from Africa to bring these correctives to the fore.

A challenge to African theologians is made by Fong (1980:30) that their knowledge of Africa is imperative before they can attempt to interpret Scripture:

“Theologians and Christian activists must first be rooted in a community before they can begin to evoke a theology meaningful and challenging for and with a community. As painfully slow as the process may seem at times, anything less than this would still be elitist or paternalistic”

The central thesis of the African social-descriptive paradigm is not to politicise the New Testament criticism. The submission of the researcher is not necessarily the call for the Africanisation of the Christian faith or the New Testament. The challenge is to invite African scholars to appropriate scientific methodologies from the social sciences in relation to African culture and value system to interpret the Bible for Africa. The position



affirmed here is not an African biblical scholarship against the Western biblical criticism, but a call of equal participation and co-operation.

In essence a basic framework for an African social-descriptive approach would entail:

- a. A clear identity of what the concept "African" means
- b. A clear view of African cosmology
- c. An understanding of the African concept of time
- d. A sympathetic understanding of the cult of ancestor veneration

These aspects form the building blocks of an African worldview. It is only from this perspective that Africans traditionally engage everyday phenomena and impose meaning on their experiences. It is also from this perspective that the Bible is read. Fortunately, these values, which the present researcher also shares have resemblances to the typical ancient Mediterranean values, albeit on a rather high level of abstraction. In this regard numerous points of contact exist in terms of both cultures' views of personality, honour and shame purity and pollution, etc., which makes intercultural communication between the African context and the context of the Bible possible.

An African social-descriptive approach, as defined in this chapter firstly takes seriously the present context of the researcher. (Therefore this context in terms of the African family will be further elucidated in the next chapter). Secondly, this approach enables the researcher to enter into dialogue with the world of the New Testament. Due to the various points of resemblance



between the African and the Mediterranean cultures, (as shown in this chapter) it is indeed possible to approach the New Testament optimistically. Thirdly, this approach is descriptive, therefore, it will approach relevant data in the New Testament world (with special emphasis on the Gospels) on a rather high level of abstraction in order to describe regular patterns, generalities, etc. The aim is not so much to explain complex exegetical phenomena, but to form a general picture of family that will enhance our understanding of the New Testament from an African perspective.