

Theology disrupted: Doing theology with children in African contexts

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The thrust of this article is an attempt to respond to the question whether we can read and interpret the bible in Africa from the child theology vantage point. The author's answer is in the affirmative in two ways: Firstly, it is that the majority of children in Africa are facing abuses of unprecedented proportions. Historically and traditionally, African scholars always read and interpreted the bible with African lenses. The African bible critic and exegete should be part of the church, the body of Christ which ought to be a lotus of healing. Theologising in the context of the crisis of the 'child' in Africa is fairly a new development and needs to be aggressively pursued. The second aspect of this author's response is that when Christianity entered the Graeco-Roman as well the Jewish milieu, it used the family symbolism such as father, brothers, love, house of God, children of God, and so on. The New Testament authors therefore used family as reality and metaphor to proclaim the gospel. The African theologian, critic and exegete, is therefore in this article challenged to make a significant contribution using the African context in that, '... the African concept of child, family and community appears to be closer to ecclesiology than the Western concepts'.

Introduction

Child theology is relatively a new concept, field of study and a movement in African hermeneutics. However, such a reading and interpretation grid and paradigm are not unfamiliar to Africa. Bunge (2006:572) is of the opinion that reading and interpreting the bible from the vantage point of the child is just like, 'feminist, black, African, Liberation etc. theologies ...'. Grobbelaar (2008:62) posits that the unique emphasis of child theology is that the child or children are at the centre of theological reflection. This hermeneutical procedure can be helpful to the church to revisit its doctrines and practices. Furthermore, White and Willmer (2006:6) contend that child theology is the interpretation of the bible through lenses of the child – just like the lens of gender, race, class etc.¹

White (2013:158) gives another dimension of child theology and hermeneutics and maintains that it is a way of studying the bible and doing theology that takes as its starting point the example of Jesus when He placed a little child in the midst of the disciples (Mt 18:1ff), 'καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος παιδίον ἔστησεν αὐτὸ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν ...'.² He continues to say that child theology is disruptive the other theologies in Africa – already referred to above. In this text, the disciples were having an (*theological*) argument about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus introduces a child as a vital clue of what the Kingdom of Heaven is really like. White (2013:159) further makes an assertion that since then, the child placed by Jesus in the midst of his disciples has not been paid much attention to in the cause of biblical and theological studies to this present day. Having said that, the thrust of this article is to argue that the landscape, spectrum and milieu of African hermeneutics will be once more enriched by yet another hermeneutic of contextual relevance – *Reading the bible through the lenses of children in Africa*.

The place of a child in Africa

It is appropriate from the onset and up front that I state the position or status of a child in traditional Africa. In traditional African societies, the birth of a child is both physical and religious. Actually, the significance of this birth commences long before the real birth. The pregnant mother receives special treatment from family, relatives and even the community. Indeed, in most African societies, marriage is not fully recognised until the woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a

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1. Furthermore, developing vibrant religious undertakings of children can also empower religious communities to rethink their ministries to children and strengthen their support for all children in need (p. 574).

2. Matthew 18:2 'He called a little child and had him stand among them ...'

Note: This article emanates from a consultation on 'Child Theology' in August 2015, co-hosted by the Centre of Contextual Ministry, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

child³ (see Mahlangu 2014:33). Having children in Africa is considered as a validating factor in a marriage. A married woman who does not have children feels very much miserable. The agonies of being childless are so immense that the woman stops at nothing to help herself bear children. Mbiti (1975:86) captures the depth of such misery, pain and despair in the prayer articulated by a childless woman in Rwanda:

O Imana⁴ (God) of Rwanda
 If only you would help me!
 O Imana of pity, Imana of my father's home (country)
 If only you would help me!
 O Imana ... if only you would help me just this once!
 O Imana, if only you would give me a homestead and children!
 prostrate myself before you ...
 I cry to you: Give me offspring,
 Give me as you give to others
 Imana what shall I do, where shall I go!
 I am in distress: where is the room for me
 O merciful, O Imana of mercy, help this once.

Furthermore, Uka (1985:190) also maintains that childlessness is a huge problem in traditional Africa:

Hence every newly married couple look forward to having a child or children shortly after nine months of marriage, believing that they extend their life and immortalise their names especially through their male children. Children are the glory of marriage and in most African societies with a rural agricultural base, having many children is a highly prized achievement. This is one of the potent reasons why marrying more than one woman was upheld. Also providing many children provided a man with an enhanced social stature and much needed labour force. In fact parents laboured to train their children in order that they might support them when they became old, weak and incapable of looking after themselves.⁵

To further underscore the importance and centrality of 'child' in Africa, among the Northern South Sotho

3. In some societies once the man discovers that the woman is pregnant he may not sleep with her until few weeks or month after birth. Obviously this has little to do with physical considerations but the woman is regarded as religiously or ceremonially unclean at this time. To the Ingessana people of Sudan – once a woman is pregnant she goes back to her home until few weeks/months after delivery. This is a religious affair ... the first born baby must be born at his/her mother's place. For the Mao people of Kenya – once a woman is pregnant there is no direct communication between husband and wife (Mahlangu 2014:34). All these beliefs and rituals indicate the significance of the birth of a 'child' and the fact that even before he/she is born 'religious' ceremonies are observed. Thus this birth of a child and childhood process in Africa are a religious process in which the child is constantly flooded with religious activities and an attitude starting long before it is born. A child not only continues the physical line of life but becomes involved in intense religious activities. Hence, the physical aspects of birth and the ceremonies that accompany pregnancy, birth and childhood, are regarded with religious feeling and experience – that another being has been born into a profoundly religious community and religious world.

4. The Creator God.

5. Breutz (1991:75) discusses the child in relation to status. For instance a man who is unmarried and has no children cannot assume the leadership of an extended family or a type, even if he is the legitimate successor by virtue of his birth. Mahlangu (2014:34) further alludes to the centrality of 'child' in African traditional society. He contends that in Africa the ideal of life is to be venerated by one's own family members. The woman is not the only one stigmatized by childlessness, but the entire family. There is no way that the woman can redeem herself from this situation. This is unlike a man who can redeem himself by marrying another woman who will bear children to him – provided the problem of procreation does not lie with him. Even there, his parents will agree with his wife that one of his brothers or a close relative to raise his family without him (the husband) knowing anything about it.

(The Pedi) people of South Africa, the birth of a child is an event of great importance. Not only does it initiate a new member into a group, but in the case of the first child it confers on the mother (ostensibly to the father too) the status of parenthood which, for the tribe, is synonymous with attaining the full status of a woman/man. The birth of a child also concludes the obligations of the mother's group to the father and his group; it proves the manhood of the father and perpetuates his lineage. 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 (see Mahlangu 1999:53; Mönnig 1967:98).

It is in this light, as mentioned above – the child occupying such an important place in society that in this article I intend to discuss the fact that 'child theology' can be a hermeneutical procedure and paradigm through which the biblical text can be read and interpreted in Africa. In the subsequent discussion, I will submit two reasons for this position. Firstly, it will be indicated that though the child is important in Africa, children today face unprecedented abuses and hardships. Such a phenomenon cannot and should not escape the attention and focus of biblical critics and exegetes in Africa. Historically African scholars have always read Scriptures in the light of current issues encountered by Africans – '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). Secondly, the author will contend that 'child' as part of family (reality and metaphor) is also a hermeneutical tool to read, interpret and analyse the biblical text in Africa.⁶ An illustrative text will be briefly considered – John 3:1–8.

Excursus– African traditional conceptions of 'Child'

Child and childhood are historically, culturally and socially variable. It is a truism that 'child' and childhood are best understood within a cultural context and to attempt to universalise the concept child is a misinterpretation of the world of the child. Children and the notion of 'child' have been regarded in different historical epochs, in different cultures and in different social groups (see Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:233). Hertzog (2005:72) maintains that:

just as feminism in the seventies had to learn that sisterhood is not 'universal' but comprises different ethnic, national and religious women's movements, so then the post-modern and post-colonial discourse on children has to take multiple forms depending on geography, culture, politics, gender and religion. (p. 72)

6. 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 is the Father, Jesus the Son, the converts were the brothers and sisters of Christ and the true heirs of Abraham.

Who or what is Africa, African or Africanness?

Up to this point of this article, the expression 'African' has been constantly and consistently used. Countless books, conference papers and articles about Africa, Africanism and Africanness are written without a clear attempt to state who or what an African is. It is ostensibly taken for granted by the presenter and/or writer that the listener or reader shares the same conception of the definition with them (Mahlangu 1999:30, 2014:4).⁷ I wish to briefly state my understanding of who/what an African is. Several meanings and definitions could be advanced: the traditional indigenous people of the African Continent; anybody who is committed to Africa, those who want to see the United States of Africa (Pan Africanists); Black Africans; those living in sub-Saharan Africa and having citizenship in Africa (the list can still continue). The above-mentioned points suggest that the identity of who an African is, is not simplistic. Writing more 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 1980:47; 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 Westernised or/and Christianised they '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. For instance, the inauguration of the late Nelson Mandela as the first Black State President of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 is a classic 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

7.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 that 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 in 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.

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.

In the light of the above definition of who/what and African is, what then is the conceptions of 'child' among traditional Africans? This view is closely linked to the African concept of personality and community. Mahlangu (2014:52ff) says that a sense of community plays a very important role in African society. People are not surrounded by things but beings. Humanity is basically family, basically humanity. From birth to death and life hereafter, a person is bound as a communal being to everyone around themselves, those still to be born, the living and the living dead. Therefore, ontological harmony is very important. The person is the centre of existence, not as an individual but as family and community. Thereafter, the concept of self and community is the strongest force in traditional Africa. All people within a tribe ought to be related to each other. If two strangers meet, it is their duty to determine how they are related to each other. In South Africa, we are acquainted with the so-called ubuntuethic. This is an important element in the African concept of self and/or community. It is the capacity to express compassion, justice, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building, maintaining and strengthening community. It is about the self being so rooted in the community, that your personal identity is defined by what you give to the community – 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. This can also be explained in terms of the expression or saying, '*umuntungumuntungabantu – mothokemothokabatho*', that is, it is through others that one attains selfhood. In the Shona (of Zimbabwe) greeting in the morning and at lunch-time:

Mangwani. Mararasei?

(Good morning. Did you sleep well?)

Ndarara, kana mararawo

(I slept well, if you slept well)

Maswerasei?

(How has your day been?)

Ndaswera, kana maswerawo.

(My day has been good if your day has been good). (Boakye-Boateng 2010:107; Fayeni 2009:167)⁸

The traditional African concept of 'child' is thus located within a string of kinship and relatedness in community relationships. In Africa, a child is everybody's child. Characterised by a communalistic philosophy, traditional African communities place the child in close contact with a larger group, socialise the young into the group and the group in turn has the responsibility towards the child. The child in turn responds by offering a duty towards not only the immediate family members but also the larger community.

8.The Zulu concept of self and community is also very interesting. It is informed by the belief in the origin of human beings. It is believed that man originated as a group/family. As a clan they originated from the reeds. Therefore the interests of the community come first more than those of the individual. Therefore the view of man is not individualistic. Persons only become people within their cohabitation with others.

Thus, a reciprocal relationship prevails. The reciprocity principle entails values 'sharing resources, burden, and social responsibility, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, social harmony and mutual trust'. The community demands that the child forsakes individual good in order to submit to the collective interests. This is opposed to the Western worldview that attaches great importance to individual interest, autonomy, universality, natural rights and neutrality. The African communalistic worldview stresses the common good social practices and traditions character, solidarity and social responsibility (See Daly 1994; Fayeni 2009; Hansungale 2005; Muyila 2006; Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:235; Oyeshile 2006:104).

Gbadegesin (1998:292) maintains that in order for one to comprehend the African conception of a child, it is useful to trace the coming-to-be of the new member of the family, that is, 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 thereon, 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 their belonging to the family which decides their name but also has a duty to see their birth as a significant episode in its existence. Gbadegesin (1998) continues to state:

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. The African concept of 'child' is therefore closely tied with the concept of self and community. (p. 292f)

The place of child theology in African contextual hermeneutics

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way they treat their children. (Nelson Mandela)

Kilbourn (1996:5) maintains that children come in an assortment of shapes, sizes and colours. They have differing joys, expectations, hopes and dreams. God had uniquely designed each child in his own image and likeness – creating each one as an exciting bundle of potentiality. God has also given the gift of childhood to be a special time for nurturing children's God-given gifts and abilities. With the help and encouragement of family, friends and extended family members, children should find childhood a time to discover the person God created them to be. Unfortunately, this is not the case with many children in Africa⁹ and South Africa. Piliyesi (2014:208) for instance brings to the fore the plight of

9. Since 2014 in Nigeria 276 girls remain missing after being abducted by Boko Haram from their school by the terror group Boko Haram. The girls were taken because they were pursuing their education – a reminder to us all of the many obstacles related to culture and tradition that girls in many parts of Africa must overcome to improve their lives.

the girl child in Malawi. Girls in that country are inundated by issues such as gender discrimination, domestic violence, sexual abuse and so on. Adoo (2005) adds by stating that this problem is not only encountered in Malawi but throughout the African continent:

A girl in Africa faces a double sword from within and outside cultural values. In the past and even today she experiences multidimensional forms of discrimination. When a girl does not go to school her rights are abused under the veil of preservation of cultural values. When she is educated, her rights are criticized under the pretext that she does not fit into the cultural context or she is a feminist. Thus, new forms of marginalization continue to haunt the girl child in Africa. (p. 67)

In the article, 'Karaboyakerekemabapi le ditšhiwana le banabaobalegokotsingkalebaka la HIV AIDS: Maikutlo a sedumedisakapebeleng',¹⁰ Mahlangu (2011) contends that, one of the most tragic and difficult challenges of the HIV and/or AIDS scourge, is the growing number of children who have lost their parents to AIDS-related diseases. This crisis is both enormous and complex, affecting many millions of children (see Piot and Bellamy 2004:4f). Maqoko (2009:iii) maintains that AIDS has done great damage to families and their children. In most cases after their parents have died these children remain under the care of extended family and in most cases their grandparents. AIDS orphans are too many and their needs have saturated the existing pool of community-based support. Deaths caused by AIDS leave children vulnerable, in great distress and poverty. Matteson (2008:11) has observed about orphans, 'We did not know that a child can grieve. We thought they were too small to understand what happened. We did not know that children go grieving for a long period. I never used to understand the behavior of orphans'. Research on orphans and other vulnerable children shows that many programmes have not adequately addressed their physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological plight. Worse still, very little has been researched and published on the philosophical, theological and biblical basis for the church's response to the needs of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC).

As stated above the history of biblical interpretation in Africa has always been in cognisance of the African context. Justin Ukpong's (2000:3ff)¹¹ publication on the development and history of biblical interpretation in Africa is undoubtedly regarded as epoch making in reading and interpreting the

10. The English title is, 'The church's response towards orphans and vulnerable children as a result of HIV AIDS: A theological biblical perspective'.

11. In this particular article Ukpong (2000:3–18) surveys biblical studies in Sub-Saharan Africa – particularly in terms of the encounter between the biblical text and the African context. The article plots its developments since the 1930s in three phases. The first phase (1930–1970s), a phase characterised by a reactive and apologetic mode of engagement with its missionary history and the western academy. During this phase various African scholars attempted to legitimize African religion and culture through comparative studies. In a subsequent phase (1970s – 1990s) the mode of interpretation took a more proactive tone, while still remaining within a reactive paradigm. In this phase the African context was increasingly used as a resource in the hermeneutic encounter as manifested in inculturation-evaluative methods and liberation hermeneutics (black theology and feminist hermeneutics). Ukpong refers to the period after 1990, as a proactive stance leading to the development of contextual Bible Studies and inculturation approaches, which recognise the importance of the ordinary reader and make the African context the explicit subject of biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation in Africa thus has made bold strides which can be said to place it at the threshold of maturity.

bible in Africa.¹² In this article, Ukpong contends that Africa can rightly be referred to as the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity. The earliest such attempts can be traced to the city of Alexandria and he mentions the names of theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and others who lived and worked there (Trigg 1988:21–23). Another equally significant publication is a book, *The Bible in Africa* (West and Dube) was a culmination of a project that started in 1995 which seemed to have worked a major turning point for hermeneutics and exegesis in Africa. This collective book with somewhat thirty-nine essays indicates not only the vitality of African biblical scholarship but its particularity as a variety of ways that link the biblical text to the African context (see Ukpong 2000:11). African biblical scholarship emphasises the ‘inclusiveness in regard to interpretative communities in Africa (scholars, non-scholars, male and female, children,¹³ rich and poor, clergy and laity, Christian and non-Christian)’. On the other hand, this ‘inclusiveness’ involves an extensive range of interpretative methods (historical–critical as well as literary approaches). In these variety of methods, inculturation hermeneutics or ‘theologies being’ and liberation of ‘theologies of bread’ emerge as the main trends and constitute the most persuasive paradigms of African biblical scholarship (Le Marquand 2000:86; Loba-Mkole 2007:8; Loubser 2000:117; West 2000:34–35).¹⁴ A further development of these paradigms is what Loba-Mkole (2007) refers to as ‘intercultural hermeneutics and exegesis as a constructive dialogue between the original biblical culture and the culture of a receptive audience, taking into account cultures of Christian traditions as well’.¹⁵

12. See Ernest van Eck’s (2006) remarks at the beginning of his article – *The Word of Life: African theology as biblical and Contextual theology*. Loba-Mkole (2007) agree that Ukpong’s work launched the application of the method of inculturation biblical hermeneutic in Africa.

13. The author’s insertion, in the original quote the ‘child’ is not listed.

14. Another important milestone hermeneutics in Africa was the publication of *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Getui et al. 2001), a first outcome of the Hammanskraal Conference, which took place as a post-conference to the 54th General Meeting of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societatis (SNTS) which was held at the University of Pretoria in August 1999. Peder Borgen, a former President of SNTS, described this conference as a ‘necessary and important step’, which sets in sharp focus the basic question of the relationship between the Gospel and culture. Borgen underscored that the Gospel must be noted in the culture of a people, which, theologically speaking, refers to an incarnation aspect of the Christian message. He continued to say ‘there was an awareness not only of this encounter between the Gospel and a particular culture, but also a realization of the universal perspective of the Gospel. There is a basic aspect of “givenness” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its interplay with culture and context’ (see Borgen 2001:1; Lategan 2001:295). A further development from the Hammanskraal conference was the publication of *Text and Context* (Mugambi & Smit 2004). At this particular time, African contextual hermeneutics was enhanced by specific methodological approaches such as reconstruction hermeneutics (Farisani 2004:63–64), rainbow hermeneutics (Cloete 2004:170–175) and ubuntu hermeneutics (Punt 2002:90,101). Beyond this book, different African biblical hermeneutics are also investigated in terms of hermeneutics of liberation, hermeneutics of engagement, afro-centric hermeneutics semoya (spirit) hermeneutics, womanist hermeneutics, developmental hermeneutics, post-colonial hermeneutics, story-telling hermeneutics and many more.

15. The epistemological privilege is not given only to the receptive audience but equally shared by the three sets of cultures involved in this dialogue. A unique epistemological privilege is granted to the original biblical cultures because of their canonicity, the cultures of Christian traditions benefit from their particular elderliness and the current target cultures are entitled to a peculiar epistemological privilege because of their present livingness in blood and flesh. Intercultural exegesis can also be better conveyed by the expression ‘intercultural mediation’ since the dialogical process under consideration involves not only literary works but also artistic symbols and human heroes who ensure the transmission of the gospel from one culture to another (Loba-Mkole 2005:2). In Africa, the epistemological value of intercultural mediation needs to be measured against authentic messages of Jesus and those of church traditions. This particular intercultural exegesis will first deal with some current understanding of the text, before proceeding to its linguistic analysis and the study of its historical context. Finally, it should be stated that intercultural biblical exegesis has become a reality in Africa since the introduction of inculturation biblical hermeneutics by Ukpong (1996). The African context and people are not used just as a field of applying ‘exegetical’ conclusions, but they stand as a subject of interpretation, equipped with genuine epistemological privilege.

From the above discussion, it is clear that African theologians never hesitated to address issues affecting sections of the population, the oppressed, women, HIV/AIDS infected and affected, the poor etc. It is in this context that I argue that the plight of the child in Africa presents a challenge to biblical scholarship in Africa. Despite the staggering magnitude of the crisis faced by the ‘child’ in Africa, there has been a little theological reflection. Maluleke (2003:59) uses words such as ‘theological impotency’ and blames Western-orientated theological education which does not prepare African theologians for the day-to-day realities faced on the African Continent. When referring to the problems besetting Africa, Musa Dube symbolically portrays Africa as the bleeding woman (Dube 2001:50ff).¹⁶ While biblical scholarship in Africa should remain true to its methodological practice and remain true to scientific objectivity, the plight of the African child cannot be ignored in their theological reflection. Therefore, child theology provides a new hermeneutic for the African scholar.

‘Child’, reality and metaphor – a new hermeneutic

The mounting study of the family in the classical period (Graeco-Roman) is gaining momentum and continues to engage among others, biblical scholars. This mounting interest by biblical critics and exegetes is indicative of the fact that the family as reality but also as metaphor could be a hermeneutical procedure, paradigm and methodology through which the bible could be read and interpreted (see Mahlangu 1999:290). Sources about the ‘child’ in the Roman family were generated by the male elite. The general attitude towards children was as contained in the sources written from an adult male’s perspective. Thus, the physical as well as the scholastic needs of the children were not determined by themselves but by the adult community and the state (Dixon 1992:98, 214; Rawson 1991:7). A pre-mature baby and child did not have any significant legal status. This was seen even before the baby was born. Contraception and abortion methods were known and practised in the Roman society (Osiek and Balch 1996:65; Rawson 1991:9). The fact that the mother did not abort the foetus was no obvious guarantee that they could live or survive. There was yet another hurdle to cross – a fitness test to pass. When the actual time of delivering a baby came, the father was involved in determining the fitness of the child. If the child was found to be unfit, deformed or sickly the umbilical cord was cut short and subsequently the baby bled to death. In the case where the baby was unwanted, where parents were unwilling or unable to raise the child, he/she was exposed in a public place, doorsteps of temples, crossroads or rubbish heaps, either to die or be adopted

16. ‘Mama Africa has been struck by a new disease: HIV/AIDS. She is now a nurse. She runs home-based care centres, for her dying children and people. She washes them, feeds them, holds them in her arms and rocks them, singing a little song while she waits for her death. And when they finally die, she rises to close her eyes, to wrap them and bury them. Mama Africa bears it in her own flesh, the wounds of their suffering. And they die in her loving arms ...’

(Homblower & Spawforth 1996:321f; Osiek & Balch 1997:65ff; Rawson 1991:10f; Weaver 1992:172).¹⁷

Unlike their Roman and Greek neighbours, the Jews valued children as a gift from God. Du Plessis (1998:311) says that a Jewish couple's greatest desire was to have many children. Safrai (1976:750) states that it is important to realise that the ideal of marriage was the perpetuation of the family line and therefore the number and survival of children was seen as the family's chief blessing. As a matter of fact, if after 10 years the marriage was childless, the man was required to divorce his wife and marry another. Hence Roth (1966–1970:118) is of the opinion that the greatest misfortune that could befall a woman was childlessness. Unlike the Romans, the Jewish traditions prohibited abortion and considered it to be possibly equivalent to murder, and also any idea of abandoning children after their birth was apparently quite alien. Upbringing was highly esteemed. Hence, Barclay (1997:69) maintains that the Jewish tradition is distinguished by the care it devotes to the instruction of their children. The children who were disobedient, failing to follow in the ancestral ways were bringing great shame to their parents.

The Jews regarded the male child as more important than the girl. For instance, a boy was circumcised and named on the eighth day (Lk 1:59; 2:21 and Phlp 3:5), while a daughter was named only after a month. Archer (1990:17) says that the birth of a son was not only significant but regarded as a special blessing from above, more often than not the direct result of divine intervention. Thus having given birth to the first child Eve triumphantly said: 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord' (Gn 4:1). The promise of God to Abraham and Sarah was not to give them a child but a son: 'I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her ...' (Gn 17:16). Safrai (1976:50) also maintains that male children were seen as particularly important in the building of families, as a 'baraita' rules: 'with both male and female children the world could not exist but blessed is he whose children are male and love to him whose children are female'.

Illustrative text – The metaphor of birth

(John 3:1–8)

Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, learned and pious teacher, very different from the other Pharisees,¹⁸ he was genuinely impressed by what Jesus said and did. He at least did not attribute Jesus' extraordinary powers to satanic influence, as other Pharisees did. On the contrary, he recognised in Jesus as 'ῥαββί, οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ¹⁹ ...', and he was anxious to know more about Him; but he was also anxious to avoid giving the impression that he intended to become a committed disciple, 'he came to Jesus by might'

17.The fact that children were treated like this in the Roman family does not show that they were not important but indicates that the Graeco-Roman world was the man's world. The 'significance' of children could be discerned from the following fact: The manner in which adoption procedures were fully developed proves that a family which was childless and did not wish to divorce, had to have children (Dixon 1992:108).

18.Who for a pretence made big prayers and made found his phylacteries.

19.A teacher come from God.

(v. 2). Nicodemus puts to Jesus the question of how one can inherit the Kingdom of God (see also Hendriksen 1961:133).²⁰ No doubt Nicodemus was longing for that Kingdom to come, for he would ostensibly assume that he would have the right to enjoy its blessings not only by virtue of the privileges which belonged to his race but also as a reward for his loyalty to Pharisaic traditions. But as soon as Nicodemus had paid his compliments to this 'unprofessional Rabbi', Jesus cuts away from under his feet all ground for self-satisfaction: 'Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐδὲν αὐταὶ δεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ²¹' (verse 4). In other words, 'whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child,²² he shall not enter therein' (Mk 10:15).

The discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus (the expression of faith, through the symbol of the new birth) contains some of the most significant metaphors in the Johannine corpus. Hence, Van der Watt (1997b:l) maintains that one of the most important 'family imageries' and ethically powerful statements in the Johannine writings is the fact that 'no one who is born of God will continue in sin ...' (1 John 2:29, 3:10; 4:7 and 5:1–2 18). Malina, Joubert and Van der Walt (1996:21) in this regard state that birth was in the 1st-century Mediterranean world the most important way of becoming a member of a family. The New Testament uses this image to say how a believer becomes part of God's family. The Holy Spirit is responsible for this experience of a person being made a believer – a child of God, to be part of the divine family of God. This family metaphor of being born in the family of the Father permeates throughout the discourse, even beyond.

Jesus ignores Nicodemus' confession or flattery, '... Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him' (3:2). Jesus confronts Nicodemus with a stunning statement, '... I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again' (3:3). Right from the onset Jesus uncompromisingly states that man, they are, is excluded from salvation, that is, from the sphere of God. Yet, he states that salvation may be possible for him to become another man – a new man.

The terms 'born from above' and 'born of the Spirit' appear to be used interchangeably and are virtually synonymous. The dualistic framework of John's Gospel is also encountered in this pericope. The spirit and flesh are mutually exclusive; as flesh begets only flesh and only spirit can beget spirit (3:6; 6:63). The flesh is in this context not necessarily regarded as evil, but it is incapable of effecting salvation (6:63) (see Miller 1976:44). Lindars (1972) also says that:

The Spirit is not a component part of man, but the influence which directs the whole man once he has been reborn.

20.It may be that same question as asked by the rich young man about the qualifications for entering the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:17) or that of the scribe relating to the supreme commandment of the law (Mk 12:28) – these were the matters often discussed by the Rabbis.

21.Truly Truly I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

22.Boldness (my own) to just make explicit the importance of the child.

This influence is analogous to the wind (verse 8). The man born from the flesh is a man as he is by nature, impelled by the forces of his own natural endowment. The man born from the spirit is man as he is when open to the influence of God, with all his natural forces brought under the control of the Spirit. (p. 153)

The most important expression in this dialogue is γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν.²³ The word γεννάω appears some 90 times in the New Testament, 45 times in Matthew's Gospel and 28 in the Johannine corpus. This word and the related concepts, such as 'beget', 'bear', 'become' and so on, are used literally and metaphorically (Brown 1975:176ff). The expression 'born again' can be understood as meaning 'being born from above' or 'born new'. Here Jesus explains the origin of the believer. The believer's true origin and existence does not belong to this world – their beginning and end are in God through Jesus Christ. The references of being born from above mean that man must receive a new origin. He must exchange his old nature for a new one and be born again. This is an act of God (Brown 1975:179). Jesus meant to impress to Nicodemus that he descended from God's presence to raise man to God. Jesus therefore transposes the topic to a higher level. Whereas Nicodemus is on the level of the sensible, he must be raised to the level of the spiritual.

The Fourth Evangelist uses the family metaphor of the birth to express a spiritual reality of faith. The word γεννάω implies that another birth has already taken place. Van der Watt (1997a:4) maintains that the family in the Mediterranean world was generally regarded as the basic social structure. Birth into a family therefore meant to become part of the family with everything that it involved especially on a social level. Pursuant of this notion, Blasi (1997:259f) says that in the 1st-century Mediterranean world to be a child of someone meant to participate in an identity and in a particular nexus of the parents' social networks. Just as one acquires family, friends, relatives, neighbours and a name from the parents, the Johannine church acquired these by being born in God's family. Birth was therefore an important way of determining one's identity. This birth metaphor suggests the social orientation of the Johannine community. Blasi (1997:257) states that the evangelist's discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus is meant to describe the separation of the Johannine Christians from the community of the local synagogue.

Still on the question of the social features of the Jesus–Nicodemus dialogue, Rensberger (1989:25) maintains that the determinative factor in the milieu of the Johannine church was a conflict with the synagogue. He says that in visualising the Johannine community, one must think of a group of Christians still entirely within the fold of the Jewish community. Its confession of Jesus as the Messiah, however, brought them into growing tension with the authorities of the Jewish community. Unlike Paul, who describes the experience of being children of God in legalistic terms such as adoption, the Fourth Evangelist

23. You must be born again ...

employs a simplistic metaphor, 'to be born (begotten) by the Father'. Also noting the simplistic nature of the Johannine rendering of the spiritual reality of rebirth, Brown (1966:138) observes that according to this community, man takes on flesh and enters the kingdom of this world because his earthly father begets him. In the same way, man can enter the Kingdom of God only when the Heavenly Father begets him. Whereas life can come to a man from his father, eternal life comes from the Heavenly Father.

The Johannine church therefore appears to have affirmed their identity in terms of their election by the Father: '... whoever received him, he gave them power to become children of God' (1:12), '... from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace' (1:16). Blasi (1997:258) acknowledges that even if the notion Christians 'being born of God' did not necessarily start with the Fourth Gospel but was perhaps grounded in the Pauline corpus, (G14:4–6), the Johannine church took this imagery and made it their own. Howard-Brook (1994:87) maintains that the Johannine community's heart-felt desire was to bring the synagogue and its religious leaders to a commitment to Jesus. The Jesus–Nicodemus dialogue is actually a reflection of this ideal.

An attempt has thus far been made to investigate John 3:1–8 by way of raising questions pertaining to the cultural, social and religious location of the Johannine community. In this process, it has been illustrated that there is a connection between the Johannine ecclesiology and the first historical readers of the Gospel. In other words, the text of John's Gospel contains an 'ecclesiology' and Christological ideology, which has encoded and replicated the community's cosmology. Jerome Neyrey (1988:115–150) illustrates this assertion in his applications of a theoretical model of a cultural anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1984:34ff) to the Gospel of John. Mary Douglas has developed a model whereby she maintains that in a community the interaction between a subgroup and its larger social matrix is measured. She plots such an interaction as a graph with horizontal and vertical axes. In the horizontal axis, group positions range from strong to weak groups. The vertical axis is used to illustrate the correlation between the community's experience and expectations of the surrounding social group ranging from low to high grid.

Neyrey (1988:1, 18ff.) endeavours to show that the cultural and social cues of the Johannine community are embedded in the text. He maintains that during the time of Jesus, the overall system of ideology, values, structures and classification was characterised by purity. Furthermore, Judaism was characterised by factionalism which manifested in different social configurations such as priests, Qumran volunteers, Scribes, Sanhedrin and so on. Each of these groups claimed to legitimately adhere to the system of Judaism. Thus, the grid was low or failing as shown by the emergence of these competing sects and parties.

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus regarded Himself as a member of the Jewish covenant community (1:45; 5:39; 7:40–44;52). He, however, challenged the manner in which the Jewish faith and Scriptures were interpreted particularly by the Pharisees, as for instance the Sabbath (9:21–24, 5:16, 9:16). Thus the controversy between Jesus and the Jewish leaders further indicates that the grid was low and failing (see Neyrey 1988:128).

Malina et al. (1996:12) maintain that one of the distinctive features of the ancient Mediterranean world was the distinction between group and outsiders. The 'Jesus group', though initially operated within Judaism, gradually was establishing itself as a separate group. It developed its own rituals, which were to serve as boundary lines to strengthen the structure or system of group. Neyrey (1988:128) claims that unlike Matthew's 'inheriting life', 'the Fourth Evangelist's language suggests grouping, 'crossing' and entering' (3:4–5; 4:38; 10:1–2). The ritual of water baptism, (born of water and the spirit – 3:5) makes one to be part of a group. Jesus makes Nicodemus feel that he belongs to another group, an outside group, 'that which is born of flesh is flesh' 'that which is born of the spirit is spirit' (3:6).

Conclusion

Child theology is relatively not an old movement but its impact and significance in the hermeneutical landscape especially in Africa is very much promising. This article is indicative of this assertion. In the foregone discussion, the author attempted to respond to the question whether we can read and interpret the bible from the child theology vantage point. The author's answer is in the affirmative in two ways: Firstly, it has been indicated that the majority of children in Africa are facing abuses of unprecedented proportions. Historically and traditionally, African scholars always read and interpreted the bible with African lenses. The African bible critic and exegete should be part of the church, the body of Christ which ought to be a lotus of healing. Theologising in the context of the crisis of the 'child' in Africa is fairly a new development and needs to be aggressively pursued. The second aspect of this author's response is that when Christianity entered the Graeco-Roman as well the Jewish milieu, it used the family symbolism such as father, brothers, love, house of God, children of God and so on. The New Testament authors therefore used family as reality and metaphor to proclaim the gospel. The African theologian, critic and exegete, is therefore in this article challenged to make a significant contribution using the African context in that, '... the African concept of child, family and community appears to be closer to *ekklesiology* that the western concepts'. (Mahlangu 2014:33ff).

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