The Role of the Bible in African Christianity (8)

(8) THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction

The Bible is both organic to Africa and a foreign artefact brought to Africa.

North Africa is part of the Mediterranean world in which the Bible was born.[1] This is evident, for example, in the presence of Africans and Africa in the Bible, and in the impact of Africa and Africans on the formation of the Bible and interpretation of the Bible. For example, among the most significant for biblical reception was the Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint. The traditional story is that seventy-two or seventy (hence the shorthand 'LXX') learned Jews were sent to Egypt at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 BCE) to translate the Jewish law (Torah, the Pentateuch) into Greek for the library in Alexandria.

It is not clear how and when Christianity came to Roman North Africa, but what is clear is that there were distinctive features in this form of Christianity, some of which derived from local religious and cultural traditions and some of which are directly related to their interpretation of the Bible.[2] For example, when confronted by the emissaries of the emperor Constantine, the Donatists resisted incorporation, proclaiming: 'You come with edicts of emperors, we hold nothing in our hands but volumes of scriptures.'[3]

The scriptures continued to play an important part in African receptions of the Bible through the work of North African theologians like Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 212), Origen (185-254), Cyprian (ca. 200-258) and Augustine (354-430).[4] But these were all Africans of a particular kind, orientated as they were to the Mediterranean world. Further inland other Africans were also engaging with the Bible, including the rural regions of Egypt, with its emerging Coptic language and culture, who looked south to the desert hinterland, and whose biblical interpretation is indelibly shaped by the 'era of the martyrs' brought about by the accession of Diocletian (284).[5]

Just as the Nile facilitated the expansion of Christianity from the delta region to Upper Egypt and to the three kingdoms of Nubia, so the Rea Sea enabled contact between the Semitic peoples of the south-western Arabian coast and the northern Cushite communities of Ethiopia (or Aksum).[6] Just as trade routes carried the Bible across North Africa, so too trade routes carried the Bible to sub-Saharan Africa.

While the Bible has always, in some sense, been associated with North Africa, the same is not true for sub-Saharan Africa. The Bible was brought to these parts of Africa relatively recently, initially (1415-1787) with the wave of explorers, traders, and ecclesial representatives of the medieval Catholic Church, directed by Portugal. Slave and trade posts, with chaplains in attendance, were established at various

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[1] Gosnell L.O.R. Yorke, "Biblical Hermeneutics: An Afrocentric Perspective," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 52(1995): 9; Keith Augustus Burton, *The Blessing of Africa* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2007), 17-55.
[2] Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 20.
[3] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 37.
[4] Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa*, 20-51; Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24.
[5] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 10-11.
[6] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 34-41.

strategic sites on the African coast, circumnavigating the African continent from the Zaïre River to Ethiopia.[7]

This first wave of European mission, characterised by a particular form of imperial Christianity, was followed by a second wave, characterised at first by 'literally hundreds of European conquests of Africa',[8] and then by the more systematic European 'scramble' for Africa, precipitated by the Berlin Congress of 1885.[9] Both Roman Catholic and Protestant missions were a feature of this period.[10] This second wave, of modern nineteenth-century Catholic and Protestant missionary and imperial Christianity (1787-1919), did not find an undisturbed territory. Sub-Saharan Africa was already in flux, with large population movements and migrations across the sub-continent, propelled by the innumerable incursions from the African coast for slaves and by local African struggles for control of resources, such as the *Mfecane* in Southern Africa.[11] Not only did these movements of Africans themselves become carriers of Christianity and the Bible, the social upheavals generated both by external and internal forces produced a whole range of dislocated groups and individuals who were willing to engage with the new formations brought about by Christianity and the Bible.

The third wave (1920-1959) of missionary-colonial influence in sub-Saharan Africa is closely related to the second, but can be considered as the transition from a colonial period to that of the independent African state. Across villages and towns in sub-Saharan Africa, first the mission-educated Africans and then the Africans educated by the colonial government 'began to act as a local or regional centre of opposition'.[12] Some became the leaders of missionary-established churches, others founded African Independent Churches, while yet others founded liberation movements, each in their own diverse ways providing sites of opposition and resistance. Central to each site was a foundational vernacular book, the Bible, and through it African Christianity began 'to talk back' to power.

Though significantly diverse, there are many 'family resemblances' with respect to biblical interpretation across Mediterranean North African, as well as Coptic, Nubian, and Ethiopian North Africa, and also sub-Saharan Africa. Common to them all are a set of intersecting distinctive features.

Four Distinctive Features of African Christianities

It is clear from the above that in order to understand the role of the Bible in African Christianity, we recognise the distinctive features of African realities with which the Bible transacts. From the above brief historical and hermeneutical overview of the Bible's presence in Africa, we can discern four distinctive features that characterise the Bible's role/s in African Christianity: the Bible, Christian tradition, African culture and/as religion, and African contemporary contexts.[13]

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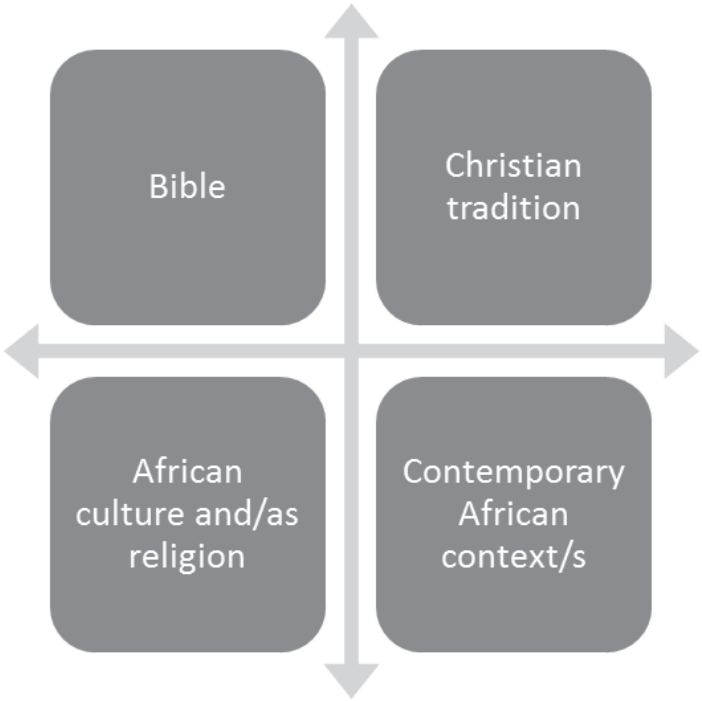
[7] Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 52-73; Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 45-80.
[8] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 97.
[9] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 97.
[10] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 84.
[11] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 167-69.
[12] Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 608.
[13] The work that follows incorporates the contributions of my colleague Billy Meyer, and our class in the Bible in African Christianity module, Kulekani Mpanza, Siyabonga Ntombela, Xabiso Socatsha, David Castillo, Karoline Mora, Takuze Chitsulo, and Mote Magomba.



The Bible

The Bible itself has a complex identity in African Christianity. Within Coptic Christianity the Bible is a form of icon, embodying 'a rich tapestry of icons' of biblical figures. 'The Bible is understood as a witness not of deceased historical figures, but of living examples', who together with the saints are 'constantly praying for and attending to the spiritual needs of the faithful'.[14] Psalms in particular are well known, well loved, and well used in West Africa,[15] particularly in the large African Independent Churches, but also in 'mainline' missionary churches. Psalms are categorised according to local cultural concepts into protective, therapeutic, and success Psalms.[16] The Yoruba, for example, inhabited a world full of potential threat, where every material threat, such as debt or sickness, had a spiritual origin, either in one's own personal enemy (*ota*) or in an array of other local indigenous deities (*orisa*).[17] Indeed, 'the primary concern of their day-to-day prayers was to enlist the power of God for the same kind of help and protection which the *orisa* provided for their devotees'.[18] The Bible became central to this daily concern for protection, healing, and success, becoming the prime source of imprecatory potent words (*ogede*), used on their own, or recited

[14] J.A. (Bobby) Loubser, "How Al-Mokattam Mountain Was Moved: The Coptic Imagination and the Christian Bible," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 108.
[15] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Biblical Interpretation and Social Location of the Interpreter: African Women's Reading of the Bible," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 34-35.
[16] David Tuesday Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 337.
[17] Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," 337; J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 259.
[18] Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 259.

over amulets containing various natural ingredients and/or the actual written words of a Psalm.[19] The Psalms closely resembled the traditional resources they had been instructed to abandon by the missionaries, and because the Bible was considered an iconic and aural object of power, it was readily appropriated and prescribed by African Christian practitioners. For example, Chief Ogunfuye prescribes Psalm 7 for protection against enemies and the evil one, either together with a special prayer recited every day or by writing the Psalm on parchment and putting the amulet in a special consecrated bag kept under the supplicant's pillow.[20]

The Bible is also translated text. Indeed, translation of the Bible into African indigenous languages is a very important aspect of African Christianity,[21] with vast resources allocated to Bible translation all over the African continent. The notion of 'translation' in African Christianity extends beyond the technical dimensions of translation to include the idea that 'the gospel' (usually with a capital 'G') can be translated into African languages. Implicit in this understanding of translation was the recognition that God and the gospel were already present in African communities prior to the missionaries, that African languages had the conceptual capacity to articulate the gospel, and that Africans had the capacity to do the technical translation work.[22]

The Bible in African Christianity is also full of literary, historical, and sociological detail. African Christianity tends, like other Christianities, to interpret the Bible through theological lenses (see below). But in sub-Saharan contexts, because the Bible is to some extent separable from the forms of Christianity that brought it,[23] the Bible maintains its own distinctiveness as a sacred text. And the detail of particular texts is part of this distinctiveness. So, for example, Isaiah Shembe, founder of the large and still thriving African 'church', Ibandla lama Nazaretha, the Church of the Nazarites, drew on a biblical narrative that had no previous history of interpretation in missionary Christianity (or the many African Christianities forged on the basis of missionary Christianity). The story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 becomes the foundational biblical text for Shembe for a liturgical practice involving young women.[24] Alongside such forms of appropriation of particular biblical detail, African biblical scholarship has played a significant role in bringing the less familiar literary and socio-historical detail of the Bible into the public realm in helping African Christianities to engage with a host of contextual issues, like gender,[25] HIV,[26] unemployment,[27] and post-colonialism.[28]

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[19] Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," 338-39.
[20] Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," 340-41.
[21] Ype Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994).
[22] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh and Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University and Orbis, 1995); Aloo Osotsi Mojola, "The Swahili Bible in East Africa from 1844 to 1996: A Brief Survey with Special Reference to Tanzania," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).
[23] Gerald O. West, "Early Encounters with the Bible among the Batlhaping: Historical and Hermeneutical Signs," *Biblical Interpretation* 12(2004).
[24] Gerald O. West, "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla Lamanazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's Daughter," *Old Testament Essays* 20, no. 2 (2007).
[25] Musa W. Dube, ed. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).
[26] Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, eds., *Grant Me Justice! HIV/Aids and Gender Readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).
[27] Gerald O. West and Sithembiso Zwane, ""Why Are You Sitting There?" Reading Matthew 20:1-16 in the Context of Casual Workers in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa," in *Matthew: Texts@Contexts*, ed. Nicole Duran Wilkinson and James Grimshaw (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).
[28] Makhosazana K. Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel: A Postcolonial *Imbokodo* Reading of the Story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16)," in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared*

Christian Tradition

Though the Bible is central to African Christianities, African theologians like John Mbiti considered it essential that African Christianity must remain in continuity with 'the major traditions of Christendom' so that it was linked into 'the mainstream of ecumenical and apostolic heritage'.[29] Mbiti's position is founded on a distinction between 'Christianity', which 'results from the encounter of the gospel with any given local society', and so is always indigenous and culture-bound, and the gospel, which is 'God-given, eternal and does not change'.[30] 'We can add nothing to the gospel, for it is an eternal gift of God,' writes Mbiti.[31] For Mbiti, 'the gospel' apprehended by Africans is substantially the same as that transmitted by the missionaries. But for Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh, the contribution of the African soil/soul is more distinctive. While not disputing significant continuity between what the missionaries proclaimed and what Africans appropriated, Sanneh asserts that 'the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture – so the missionary needs to discover Him in the new culture'.[32] For Sanneh, 'the gospel' is not fully understood until African voices have spoken.

The debate between Mbiti, on the one hand, and Sanneh and Bediako, on the other hand, represents, in my analysis, the difference between those forms of African Christianity that consider themselves as African forms of 'international' or 'ecumenical', or 'mainstream' Christianity and those forms of African Christianity that emphasise their break from or their discontinuity with the various forms of missionary Christianity. This distinction is expressed differently in the analysis of different scholars,[33] but can perhaps be understood as a continuum, with forms of African Christianity that are very similar to their missionary antecedents on one end and with forms of African Christianity that are very distinct from missionary manifestations of Christianity on the other end. Useful as typologies might be in providing a sketch of African Christianities in broad strokes, each particular local form of African Christianity should be analysed in its own terms rather than too quickly allocated a place within a typology.[34]

For those forms of African Christianity that locate themselves in some form of continuity with missionary Christian theological traditions, the theological frameworks from those traditions provide the

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Meaning, ed. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2008); Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

[29] John S. Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978); cited in Kwame Bediako, "John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology," in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 372.

[30] Cited in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 117.

[31] John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 59, no. 236 (1970): 438.

[32] Lamin Sanneh, "The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (1983): 166.

[33] In addition to the works cited above and below, see for example C.G. Baëta, ed. *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1968); Adrian Hasting, *African Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1976); Edward W. Fasholé-Luke et al., eds., *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collings,1978); Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998); Éloi Messi Metogo, ed. *African Christianities*, Concilium (London: SCM Press,2006); Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: Dept. of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005); Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff, and Klaus Hock, eds., *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (London and New York: Continuum,2008); Ogbu U. Kalu, *Clio in a Sacred Garb: Essays on Christian Presence and African Responses, 1900-2000* (Trenton, NJ.: Africa World Press, 2008); Paul Gifford, "Trajectories in African Christianity," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8, no. 4 (2008).

[34] James L. Cox and Gerrie Ter Haar, eds., *Uniquely African? African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press,2003); David Maxwell and Ingrid Lawrie, eds., *Christianity and the African Imagination: Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

theological categories for interpreting the Bible. Notions of the Bible's 'authority' or 'inspiration' are theologically determined, and dogmatic or systematic theological categories are used to construct a 'biblical' theology. Theological frameworks are thus used to give a theological 'shape' to the Bible, providing a particular theological tradition's understanding of the Bible's central theological 'message'. And for those forms of African Christianity that locate themselves outside and distinct from missionary Christian theological traditions, their own theological frameworks play a similar role.

An example that does not fit easily into either of these options, demonstrating again the need for documenting and analysing each particular case of African Christianity, is that of the World Harvest Church in Nairobi, Kenya. Here the Bible is interpreted through theological categories that derive from a range of traditions, including Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Christianity (as well as African Religion), providing a complex theological matrix. In this case, there is a strongly individualistic theological orientation, with the Bible offering a record of God's covenants and commitments to the African individual in their immediate context.[35] The biblical text itself, whichever biblical text is selected, is not dealt with in any depth. The theological framework offers the primary interpretive resources.

Though the Bible is more prominent in the church or community founded by Isaiah Shembe in South Africa in the early 1900s (see above), with no connection to any form of missionary Christianity, here too the theological categories constructed by this African indigenous 'church' provide a shape to the Bible. In the example referred to above, the Judges 11 story of Jephthah's daughter is used because it demonstrates the theological virtues of community solidarity and obedience to the 'rule' or ordinances of the community. However, there are indications that a more individual theological emphasis is finding a place in this theological tradition.[36]

In the more scholarly forms of African Christianity, such as those forms found within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and South African Black Theology, ideological frameworks exert more influence on biblical interpretation than theological frameworks. Within the work of the Circle a range of feminist, womanist, and African women's theoretical and ideological conceptual resources are integrated into their theological orientations as they interpret the Bible. For example, although working within an Evangelical theological framework, Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate draws deeply on a gender-based hermeneutics of suspicion in interpreting both her West African context and the biblical text.[37] Within South African Black Theology there is a similar ideological suspicion about the liberating capacity of the Bible itself, with a clear recognition that there are biblical theologies of both life and death.[38] In these cases the diversity of the Bible is not given a theologically determined unity; instead, the diversity of the Bible is recognised as forms of theological contestation within the biblical tradition itself.

African Culture and/as Religion

As is already apparent from the analysis above, African Christianities are partially constituted by African religion and African culture. My formulation, 'African culture and/as religion', indicates the difficulty of

[35] Paul Gifford, "The Bible in Africa: A Novel Usage in Africa's New Churches," *Bulletin of SOAS* 71, no. 2 (2008): 205-08.
[36] Gerald O. West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter (Judges 11) among the Amanazaretha: From the Early 1900s to Today," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. William John Lyons and Emma England (London: Bloomsburg, 2015).
[37] Dorothy B.E.A. Akoto, "The Mother of the Ewe and Firstborn Daughter as the 'Good Shepherd' in the Cultural Context of the Ewe Peoples: A Liberating Approach," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000); see also (Durable) Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate, *African Theology/ies: A Contemporary Mosaical Approach* (Bloomington: Author House, 2014).
[38] Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

separating 'culture' from 'religion', and so I choose to allow these terms to mutually interact with each other.

The earliest attempts to analyse African Christianity among Africans themselves grappled with the place or role of African culture and/as religion,[39] and the discussion has continued.[40] What is clear is that the Bible is a distinctive feature of African Christianities and that there is a 'primal' connection or resonance between the culture and/as religion of biblical communities and the culture and/as religion of African communities. Because the Bible was both produced by and its texts located within what Kwame Bediako refers to as 'a primal world-view', there was a substantial resonance between large parts of the Bible and the primal world-views of Africans. Drawing on Harold Turner's characterisation of a primal world-view – including a recognition that humanity has a kinship with nature, a recognition of humanity's finitude and creatureliness, a recognition of a spiritual world of powers and beings more powerful than humanity, a recognition that humanity can enter into relationships with the spiritual world, a recognition that there is continuity between this life and the after-life, and a recognition that there is no boundary between the physical and the spiritual – Bediako argues that Africans shared a phenomenological relationship with the biblical world-view.[41] And while some African theologians have argued that this primal world-view was primarily preparatory, preparing Africans for 'the gospel'/Christianity, others like Bediako have argued that this primal world-view was/is also constitutive of African Christianity.

Because, argues Lamin Sanneh, 'language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture', the missionary decision to render the Bible in African vernaculars was 'tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as western cultural imperialism'.[42] Sanneh sees 'translation as a fundamental concession to the vernacular, and an inevitable weakening of the forces of uniformity and centralization'; translation introduces 'a dynamic and pluralist factor into questions of the essence of the religion'.[43]

We may discern two dimensions to this central argument of Sanneh's. The first dimension is the revitalisation of indigenous religion and culture. This occurs when the technical process of translation pushes indigenous respondents to re-examine their culture in order to assist the translators with appropriate language with which to translate biblical texts. This return to local culture, a culture that has often been held by missionaries and other 'civilising' forces to be inadequate at best and demonic at worst, revitalises the culture, as local respondents in the translation process reclaim aspects of their culture in order to provide a language for translation that is true to both the biblical text and their culture. And because there is so much resonance between African culture (and/as religion) and the culture (and/as religion) of biblical communities and the texts they produced, the scope for potential 'revitalisation' is substantial.

The second dimension is the potential of the receptor culture to now add its own voice to the voices of the many other communities of faith that have interpreted the Bible before them. If God really does speak the vernacular, then what is it that God is saying as understood by this new community of faith? The very act of making the Bible available in the language of the indigenous people causes the Bible to slip or be prised from the grasp of the missionaries who brought it. 'If hearers of the Word of God in their own languages may then be presumed to respond in their own (cultural and religious) terms,' argues Bediako, 'this is another way of saying that it is not others' but their own questions which they would bring to the

[39] Kofi Appiah-Kobi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).
[40] Rosino Gibellini, ed. *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). See also the references in footnote 33 above.
[41] Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 91-108.
[42] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 3.
[43] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 53.

Bible, taking from it what they would consider to be *its* answers to their questions.'[44] To put it provocatively, what 'the gospel' is has yet to be determined, for not all African indigenous voices have yet been heard speaking for themselves. We could go further, arguing as this essay does, that what the Bible is within African Christianities has yet to be determined by reflecting more carefully on what Africans actually do with the Bible.[45]

As I have already indicated above, there are also indications that those forms of African Christianity that have traditionally rejected African culture and/as religion (being aligned to forms of missionary Christianity that have a long history of suspicion towards African culture and/as religion) are showing signs of the re-emergence of elements of African culture and/as religion. For example, the African cultural and/or religious notion of 'well-being' has been recovered in African neo-Evangelical, Neo-Pentecostal, and neo-Charismatic Christianities, albeit in a more individualistic form.[46]

And, of course, a defining feature of African Independent/Initiated/Indigenous Churches (AICs) has been African culture and/as religion as a primary resource for interpreting the Bible.

Contemporary African Context/s

Culture and/as religion is the soil and soul of African Christianity, and what is referred to here as 'contemporary African context/s' is the changing terrain of the African landscape, particularly the major 'issues' that are a part of African realities. Each African Christianity engages with a range of contextual issues, and some issues are so significant that every different form of African Christianity must 'do theology' with respect to such issues.

For example, every African Christianity is in some sense 'post-colonial', with post-colonial being understood as engagement with aspects of the colonial (and missionary) legacy. Every African Christianity is to some extent a hybrid; the very use of a term like 'African Christianity' signals this hybridity. As Gabriel Setiloane provocatively puts it, 'I am like someone who has been bewitched, and I find it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which I have been captivated.'[47] While Setiloane emphasises here the power of the Christian narrative to captivate,[48] other African Christians, like Ogbu Kalu, emphasise the agency of Africans. 'In the very process of indigenous assimilation, the decoders (ordinary African Christians) weave a new pattern following the lines of congruence, making their religious experience an organic, unified one.'[49]

HIV/AIDS is another example of a contextual issue that has left its mark on every African Christianity, even those that have not overtly dealt with the pandemic.[50] And we can add other contextual issues that call forth a theological response from African Christianities, such as cultural and political liberation, racial and economic liberation, post-liberation reconstruction, gender-based violence, patriarchy and masculinity,

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[44] Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 63.
[45] Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order: A Time to Drink from Our Own Wells," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996): 15.
[46] Abiola Ibilola Mbamalu, *The Use of 'Abundant Life' in John 10: 10 and Its Interpretation among Some Yoruba Prosperity Gospel Preachers* (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010).
[47] Gabriel Setiloane, "Where Are We in African Theology?," in *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, December 17-23, 1977*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 64.
[48] See also Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 9.
[49] Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*, 6.
[50] Musa W. Dube and Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "HIV/Aids as the New Site of Struggle: Theological, Biblical and Religious Perspectives," *Missionalia* 29, no. 2 (2001); Beverley G. Haddad, ed. *Religion and HIV and Aids: Charting the Terrain* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press,2011). See also the comprehensive bibliography developed and maintained by the Collaborative for HIV and Aids, Religion and Theology (Chart) www.chart.ukzn.ac.za/

disability, land and ecology, leadership, sexuality, and many others. And in each case, the Bible is the first African Christian resource that African Christianity turns to in order to address such contextual demands. In an essay on 'African Biblical Interpretation', Musa W. Dube reflects on how African Christianities have interpreted the Bible in terms of contemporary African contexts. She identifies twelve 'African Bibles', including the 'Saharan Bible', the 'Enculturation Bible', the 'Black Liberation Bible', the 'Reconstruction Bible', the 'Community Bible', the 'HIV/Aids Bible', the 'Indigenous African Bible', the 'Oral Bible', the 'African Earth Bible', the 'Gendered African Bible', the 'Colonized Sub-Saharan Bible', and the 'Pentecostal Bible'.[51]

What Dube's analysis demonstrates is not only the contextual issues the African Bible has addressed, but also some of the other significant factors that shape the role of the Bible within African Christianity. But before we come to these other significant factors, it is important to reflect more fully on the intersecting relationships of the four distinctive features discussed above to each other.

Relationships between the Four Distinctive Features

The four distinctive features analysed above are the primary features that must be taken into account when reflecting on the role of the Bible in African Christianity. This matrix of four distinctive features has been gleaned from discussions by other scholars over the past sixty years.[52] What is already clear from the discussion above is that the four distinctive features overlap to some extent. For some African Christianities, for example, the Bible is difficult to separate out from the Christian tradition. This would be the case for Coptic Christianity. But for others, like the 'Christianity' of Ibandla lama Nazaretha, the Bible is entirely separate from any missionary form of the Christian tradition. It is also difficult to distinguish in particular cases between African culture and/as religion and the contemporary African context, for culture and religion are among the core issues confronting African Christianity.

In addition to recognising some overlap between the four distinctive features, we must recognise that each of the distinctive features does not carry the same weighting or influence in each of the particular forms of African Christianity. So, for example, we even have a form of African Christianity, the Johane Masowe weChishanu Church, an 'apostolic' church in Zimbabwe, which claims to be a form of African Christianity consisting of 'Christians who don't read the Bible'.[53] But for most forms of African Christianity the Bible is a decisive and central presence.

With respect to each of the other distinctive features, each form of African Christianity weights the contribution of each of these differently. As already indicated, iBandla lama Nazaretha places substantial weight on African culture and/as religion and the contemporary African context, but very little emphasis at all on the historic Christian tradition. The value of using a matrix of four distinctive features is that it offers us a useful tool to consider how each of the distinctive features is deployed in any African Christianity, and how the distinctive features each relate to biblical interpretation. In this way the matrix of four distinctive features offers a potentially useful analytical tool with which to understand the role of the Bible in African Christianities.

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[51] Musa W. Dube, "African Biblical Interpretation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[52] See the references used in this essay as an example of this scholarship.

[53] Matthew Engelke, "Text and Performance in an African Church: The Book, 'Live and Direct'," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004); Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

Other Significant Factors

We have identified three other significant factors that affect how we understand each of the distinctive factors and their relationships to each other. These are synchronic/diachronic perspectives, emic/etic perspectives, and oral/textual perspectives.

Synchronic/Diachronic Perspectives

African Christianity is not static. Indeed, what makes African Christianity a topic of considerable interest to world Christianity, as well as to scholars of religion, is that it is so dynamic. So any analysis of an African Christianity must be clear about whether its orientation is synchronic or diachronic. For example, how the Bible is used within the 'church' or congregation founded by Isaiah Shembe in the early 1900s in South Africa, Ibandla lama Nazaretha, can be analysed synchronically, focussing on a particular historical moment, such as its formation in the early 1900s.[54] But the changing contours of how the Bible has been interpreted in this congregation can also be analysed, focussing on a diachronic analysis.[55]

Diachronic forms of analysis are particularly important when considering the influence of contemporary African contexts on how the Bible is interpreted. Some historical and sociological perspective across time is important to understand how African Christianities have engaged biblically with HIV/Aids, recognising that this was facilitated because of work that had been done in the area of gender. Similarly, engaging with HIV then opened up opportunities to engage with the issues of masculinity and sexuality. These connections can only be recognised if a diachronic perspective is adopted.

Emic/Etic Perspectives

Any analysis of the role of the Bible in African Christianity must also distinguish between 'insider' (emic) perspectives on the Bible and 'outsider' (etic) perspectives. For example, while many African Christianities claim to be 'Bible-based' (an emic claim), analysis of how they actually use the Bible by scholars from outside the community (etic analysis) might find that the Bible actually plays very little part. The primary focus may in fact be on the Christian tradition of that community, which offers predetermined interpretations of almost any biblical text.[56]

Allowing emic and etic perspectives to interact and engage with each other may be a useful way forward for our analysis of the role of the Bible in African Christianity.[57]

Oral/Textual Perspectives

The Bible in African Christianity is more than a text. It is an icon and it is an oral/aural 're-membering'.[58] In understanding the role of the Bible in African Christianity the 'Oral Bible', to use Dube's term, must be taken seriously. When African Christians say, as they often do, 'The Bible says…', they are often recollecting an oral/aural version of the text. As we pay more careful attention to the role of the Bible in African Christianity, focussing on how the Bible is actually used rather than on general claims about the Bible, the textual and the oral/aural Bible will be found to interact with each other in important ways.

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[54] Gerald O. West, "Reading Shembe 'Re-Membering' the Bible: Isaiah Shembe's Instructions on Adultery," *Neotestamentica* 40, no. 1 (2006).
[55] West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter; Nkosinathi Sithole, "An African Bible for African Readers: J.G. Shembe's Use of the Bible in the Sermon" *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 1 (2011).
[56] Gifford, "The Bible in Africa: A Novel Usage in Africa's New Churches."
[57] West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter."
[58] Isabel Mukonyora, James L. Cox, and Frans J. Verstraelen, eds., *Re-Writing the Bible: The Real Issues* (Gweru: Mambo,1993).

Conclusion

Taken together, the four distinctive features (the Bible, Christian tradition, African culture and/as religion, and contemporary African context/s) and the three significant factors (synchronic/diachronic perspectives, emic/etic perspectives, and oral/textual perspectives) that affect how we understand each of the distinctive features, offer an analytical tool with which to understand more deeply the role of the Bible in African Christianity.

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