From Resource to Subject: A Critical Analysis of the African Context in Biblical Hermeneutics (1990s-Present)

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive critical analytical evaluation of the pivotal epistemological shift in African biblical hermeneutics from using the African context as a resource for interpretation to treating it as the very subject of interpretation. Tracing the contours of this transition from the 1990s to the present, the article argues that this move constitutes a deliberate decolonial turn, aimed at asserting African intellectual agency and addressing the existential concerns of African communities in a post-colonial world. The analysis begins by contextualizing this shift within the broader, contested history of biblical interpretation. It highlights the philosophical and practical limitations of both Western historical-critical methods and the earlier African comparative approaches. The article then offers a detailed critical examination of the core methodologies and claims of the "subject" paradigm. This examination focuses on its postcolonial impulses, its engagement with concrete African realities (e.g., poverty, HIV/AIDS, corruption), and the specific, critical contributions of African women's hermeneutics. The article pays particular attention to the works of key scholars like Musa Dube, Madipoane Masenya, and Gerald West. It dissects their theoretical frameworks and practical applications. However, a central component of the analysis is a rigorous engagement with the significant philosophical, methodological, and practical challenges facing this approach. These challenges include the risks of cultural relativism, the problem of the hermeneutical circle, the ambiguous status of biblical authority, and the internal tensions within African scholarship itself. These tensions concern the homogenization of the "African context, particularly." The conclusion reflects on the future prospects of this hermeneutical trajectory. It considers its potential to foster truly authentic, transformative, and self-critical biblical scholarship for the African church and society. It also considers its implications for global theological discourse.

Keywords: African Biblical Hermeneutics, Context as Subject, Postcolonial Criticism, Reader-Response, Decoloniality, Liberation Hermeneutics, African Women's Hermeneutics, Bosadi, Mamal

1.0 Introduction

The history of biblical interpretation is, in essence, a history of hermeneutical consciousness. This consciousness involves a growing and often contentious awareness of the complex, dynamic interplay between text, reader, and context (Jeanrond, 1994, p. 1). For centuries, the dominant paradigms of Western biblical scholarship operated on a foundational assumption. These paradigms ranged from the sophisticated allegorical methods of Philo and Origen in Alexandria to the rigorous, scientific historical-critical method of the European Enlightenment.

The assumption was that authentic meaning resided primarily behind the text. Meaning was found either in its recoverable historical origins or in the text's intricate linguistic and literary structures (Bartholomew et al., 2003, p. 5; Porter & Adams, 2016, p. 12).

Within this framework, the role of the interpreter's own social, cultural, and political location was systematically marginalized. It was treated as a source of bias, a contaminant to be purified through methodological rigor. It was not recognized as the constitutive lens through which all understanding is inevitably formed. The ideal was a detached, objective observer. However, as postmodern and postcolonial critiques would later reveal, this stance was itself a particular, culturally situated perspective masquerading as universal truth (Adam, 1995, p. 23).

It is within this global hermeneutical ferment that African biblical scholarship has carved out its own distinctive, vigorous, and increasingly influential trajectory. As chronicled in the seminal work *The Bible in Africa* (West & Dube, 2000, p. xi), the journey of biblical interpretation in Africa has been one of profound negotiation, creative appropriation, and at times, outright resistance. This journey evolved from the early comparative methods of the mid-20th century. These methods sought parallels and points of contact between the biblical world and African cultures. Subsequently, a second phase emerged where the African context was consciously employed as a resource. Its purpose was to illuminate, explain, and contextualize the biblical text for an African audience (Getui, Holter, & Zinkuratire, 2001, p. 3). This was a vital step in the decolonization of the African mind. It asserted that Africa was not a theological vacuum.

However, from the 1990s onwards, a more radical and transformative shift began to coalesce. A growing, confident cadre of African scholars started to argue that the entire interpretive process required a fundamental reorientation. Their goal was to make the Bible truly meaningful and transformative in Africa. They contended that the African context should not merely serve as an illustrative tool or a handmaiden to an ancient text. This context includes visceral struggles for liberation, rich cultural wisdom, resilient primal worldviews, and pervasive pathologies of poverty, disease, and corruption. Instead, these scholars proposed a hermeneutical inversion. The African reality itself, in all its complexity and urgency, must become the subject. It must become the central focus and the primary question that the biblical text is compelled to respond to (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 2; Dube, 2001, p. 8). This was no longer about understanding the

Bible through the lens of Africa. It was about understanding and transforming Africa, with the Bible as a critical but not supreme dialogue partner.

This article offers a sustained critical analytical evaluation of this profound hermeneutical shift. It contends that the move to position the African context as the subject of interpretation is not merely a change in methodological technique. Rather, it is a deliberate, politically charged decolonial project. It represents an epistemological break from the hegemony of Western scholarly models. It is an endeavor to produce a theology not only conducted in Africa but also authentically for Africa. This theology speaks directly to the life-and-death issues facing the continent and empowers its communities.

2.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theoretical methodology of critical hermeneutical analysis and conceptual literature review. It is non-empirical in nature, as its purpose is to analyze and synthesize existing scholarly discourse on African biblical hermeneutics from the 1990s to the present. The analytical framework integrates postcolonial critique, reader-response theory, and liberation hermeneutics to evaluate the epistemological shift from context-as-resource to context-as-subject. Primary sources include peer-reviewed monographs and edited volumes by key African scholars (Dube, Masenya, West, Ukpong, Mosala), which are subjected to both descriptive exposition and critical interrogation. This methodological approach is justified because the research question concerns the evolution of theoretical paradigms rather than the collection of primary empirical data. The study does not rely on interviews, surveys, field observations, or any form of primary data collection.

The analysis will proceed in four interconnected parts. First, it will situate this development within the broader historical narrative of biblical hermeneutics. It will demonstrate this development as a conscious and critical departure from previous models, both Western and African. Second, it will provide a detailed critical examination of the core methodologies and theoretical underpinnings of this "subject" paradigm. It will analyze key proponents such as Dube, West, and Masenya and their distinct approaches, from postcolonial critique to contextual Bible study. Third, and crucially, the article will engage in a rigorous critique of this movement. It will explore its philosophical tensions (e.g., relativism), practical limitations, and the vibrant

internal debates that shape it. These debates concern particularly gender and the definition of "context." Finally, the conclusion will reflect on the future trajectory of this hermeneutic. It will assess its sustainability, its potential for shaping both the African church and civil society, and the lessons it holds for the global academic discourse on biblical interpretation. Through this critical journey, the article aims to demonstrate that the "African context as subject" is one of the most vital and challenging developments in contemporary biblical studies. It demands serious engagement from scholars across the theological spectrum.

3.0 Historical Trajectories: Situating The 'Subject' Turn

To appreciate the critical significance and radical nature of the "African context as subject" model fully, one must understand it as a deliberate and sophisticated reaction to previous hermeneutical traditions. It also develops from these traditions. This historical grounding reveals the "subject" paradigm as an act of intellectual liberation. It is a conscious breaking of chains forged by both external imposition and internal limitation.

3.1 The Hegemony of the Historical-Critical Method and Its Discontents

The historical-critical method achieved near-total dominance in Western academic biblical scholarship from the 19th century onwards. It was built upon the epistemological foundations of the European Enlightenment. Its primary goal was a scientific, objective reconstruction of the history behind the text. This included the identification of sources (e.g., the Documentary Hypothesis for the Pentateuch), the determination of dates and authorship, and the elucidation of the original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) that produced the text (Porter & Adams, 2016, p. 45). Scholars like Aland and Aland (1987, p. 67) exemplify this meticulous, scientific approach in their quest for the original New Testament text. While this methodological tradition yielded invaluable philological, historical, and textual insights, its philosophical claim to objectivity was problematic. As postmodern criticism later compellingly argued, this claim was a powerful illusion. The method was, in fact, deeply contextual. It emerged from the specific intellectual milieu of European modernity with its emphatic trust in empiricism, historicism, and a positivist view of knowledge (Adam, 1995, p. 34).

When this model was exported to Africa, primarily through missionary education systems and Western-trained theological educators, it created a profound form of epistemological dependency

and alienation. The African scholar was meticulously trained to ask questions about the Greco-Roman world, the history of ancient Israel, or the source criticism of the Pentateuch. However, the scholar was often implicitly or explicitly discouraged from asking how the text speaks prophetically to the pressing, existential issues of contemporary Africa. These issues include the scars of colonialism, endemic poverty, political tyranny, ethnic conflict, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic (West & Dube, 2000, p. 25). The context of the African interpreter, their reality, their questions, their very worldview was systematically excluded from the realm of legitimate, "serious" academic inquiry.

As Gatumu (2024, forthcoming) astutely argues, this created a deep and troubling disconnect. The disconnect existed between the scholarly, "scientific" exegesis conducted in universities and theological colleges, and the vibrant, pneumatic, and deeply context-driven interpretations happening in the African Independent Churches and among ordinary believers in their daily struggles. The historical-critical method, for all its analytical power, risked rendering the Bible a relic of antiquity. It became a text to be dissected rather than a word to be lived. It positioned the African scholar as a perpetual consumer, rather than a producer, of hermeneutical frameworks.

3.2 The Comparative Phase and the Limitations of the 'Resource' Model

In response to this palpable alienation, the first waves of consciously African biblical scholarship adopted a comparative or phenomenological approach. This approach flourished from the 1930s to the 1970s. Pioneering scholars like John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Byang Kato, though differing in their theological conclusions, shared a common goal. They sought to demonstrate that African Traditional Religions and cultures were not a *tabula rasa* upon which the biblical message was to be unilaterally inscribed. Instead, they argued that African cultures contained profound points of contact (*praeparatio evangelica*). These points of contact could facilitate a more authentic reception of the Gospel (Getui, Holter, & Zinkuratire, 2001, p. 7). They drew extensive parallels between the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and African kinship systems and lineage practices. They found parallels between the sacrificial systems in Leviticus and African ritual practices of atonement and communion with the ancestors. They also drew parallels between the concept of God in the Old Testament and the pervasive African belief in a Supreme Being, often remote yet creator of all.

In this model, the African context served as a resource. It was a rich repository of cultural data, proverbs, and social structures that could help to explain, validate, and contextualize the biblical world for an African audience (Adamo, 2006, p. 15). This was a necessary, empowering, and foundational step in the decolonization of African theology. It asserted cultural dignity and provided a bridge for the Bible to cross into the African imagination.

However, for all its historical importance, the comparative model was ultimately limited by its fundamental hermeneutical structure. The African context remained in a servant role. Its primary function was to illuminate the biblical text. The fundamental center of gravity remained the Bible. African culture was the satellite orbiting it. The hermeneutical question was still, "How does African culture help us understand the Bible?" The more radical and politically charged question was, "How does the Bible help us understand, critique, and transform our African reality?" The comparative method often risked falling into a static, synchronic, and sometimes romanticized view of culture. It presented an idealized, pre-colonial Africa. This view failed to adequately address the dynamic, complex, and often traumatic realities of post-colonial African states grappling with modernity, corruption, and social fragmentation. It could account for cultural affinity, but was less equipped to handle prophetic confrontation or socio-political analysis.

3.3 The Emergence of the 'Subject' Paradigm: An Epistemological Rebellion

It was against this backdrop, the contextual nature of Western historicism and the limited, service-oriented role of cultural comparison that the paradigm shift of the 1990s took firm root. This shift was influenced by liberation theologies from Latin America and Black Theology from North America. It was profoundly energized by the political struggles against apartheid in South Africa and other post-colonial dictatorships across the continent. A new generation of African scholars began to articulate a more politically engaged, advocacy-oriented, and unapologetically context-centered hermeneutic.

This shift, as exemplified in the works of Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, and others featured in West and Dube (2000, p. 89), was not merely a change in method. It was an epistemological rebellion. It asserted that the only legitimate starting point for theological reflection and biblical interpretation is not the text's ancient world. Rather, it is the contemporary

world of the suffering, struggling, and hoping African community. The Bible is then brought into a critical and dynamic dialogue with this reality. The Bible is not a timeless oracle dispensing ready-made answers. Instead, it is a conversation partner that is itself subjected to rigorous scrutiny from the perspective of African life and its demands for justice, life, and dignity.

This is the very core of the "subject" paradigm. The lived experiences of African people, their struggles for liberation, their quest for identity in a globalized world, their cultural resilience, and their existential pains become the subject matter. It becomes the central question, the *locus theologicus*, to which the biblical text is asked to respond. In a decisive re-orientation of the hermeneutical circle, the Bible is moved from the center to the periphery as the sole authority. The African reality, in all its stark urgency, takes center stage. This represents a fundamental reconfiguration of power in the interpretive process. It is a decolonial move that seeks to dethrone the hegemony of Western academic questions and empower African communities to set their own theological agenda. This paradigm shift, however, is not monolithic. It encompasses a diverse and sometimes contentious range of methodologies, which the following section will critically unpack.

4.0 Critical Examination of the 'Subject' Paradigm: Methodologies and Claims

The hermeneutic of the African context as subject is not a monolithic enterprise. It encompasses a diverse and sophisticated range of methodologies. Each methodology has its own theoretical commitments, analytical foci, and understanding of what constitutes authentic liberation. A critical analysis must dissect these approaches to understand their unique contributions, their internal logics, and their inherent assumptions about text, context, and power.

4.1 Postcolonial Hermeneutics: Deconstructing Imperial Narratives

Perhaps the most theoretically robust and internationally recognized strand within this paradigm is African postcolonial biblical criticism. Musa Dube most prominently champions this approach. Drawing explicitly on the work of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said (on Orientalism), Homi Bhabha (on hybridity), and Gayatri Spivak (on the subaltern), Dube (2001, p. 15) reads the Bible through the unflinching lens of empire and colonial encounter. She argues persuasively that the Bible itself is, in many of its narrative sections, an imperial text. It often narrates stories of invasion, land dispossession, and the subjugation of indigenous peoples (e.g.,

the conquest narratives in Joshua). Furthermore, and perhaps more critically, she examines how the Bible was weaponized as a "cultural bomb" in the colonial project. It was a tool to dismantle African worldviews, justify political and economic domination, and inculcate a sense of cultural and religious inferiority (Dube, 2001, p. 28).

Dube's methodology involves a sophisticated two-pronged approach. First, she performs a deconstructive reading of biblical texts. She meticulously exposes their inherent imperial ideologies. For instance, in her landmark analysis of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), she moves beyond a traditional theological interpretation. She reveals a divine mandate for expansionism that mirrors the logic of the Roman Empire. This mandate, she argues, later provided a potent theological justification for European colonial expansion (Dube, 2001, p. 56). She notes the language of absolute authority ("All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"). She notes the command to "go" and "make disciples of all nations." She also notes the imposition of a new religious system through baptism. For Dube, this is not merely a missiological call but a blueprint for cultural and territorial acquisition.

Second, she advocates for a reconstructive reading strategy. African readers should adopt a "hermeneutics of resistance." This involves consciously identifying with the subjugated characters in the biblical narrative, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, rather than uncritically aligning with the Israelite conquerors. It means reading "against the grain" of the text's dominant ideology. The goal is to recover voices of resistance and to challenge the text's claims to absolute truth when those claims are used to legitimize oppression (Dube, 2001, p. 62).

The critical strength of Dube's approach is its uncompromising examination of the Bible's complicity in historical trauma. It forces a necessary and uncomfortable confrontation with the text's "dark side." It powerfully empowers African readers to break free from a docile, accepting posture towards a text that has been used to harm them. However, a critical question arises from this rigorous deconstruction. Does this approach risk reduce the Bible to solely an instrument of oppression? If so, it may foreclose its potential as a resource for liberation and hope for the very communities it seeks to empower. The tension between the Bible as a problem and the Bible as a solution is a central aporia in this strand of the "subject" paradigm. If the text is inherently imperial, what, beyond deconstruction, is its value for building a post-colonial African identity? This is a tension that Dube and other postcolonial critics continue to navigate.

4.2 Social-Scientific and Advocacy Hermeneutics: Engaging African Realities

Running parallel to the postcolonial critique is another major strand. This strand directly engages with the concrete socio-political, economic, and public health crises of the African continent. Scholars like Gerald West (South Africa) and Justin Ukpong (Nigeria) have developed pragmatic hermeneutical models. These models begin not with a theoretical framework of empire. Instead, they begin with a specific, tangible African reality such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, corruption, gender-based violence, or ethnic conflict and then bring the biblical text into a critical and transformative dialogue with it (West & Dube, 2000, p. 112; Getui, Holter, & Zinkuratire, 2001, p. 45).

Gerald West's work with the Institute for the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project (ISB&WM) and the Ujamaa Center for Community Development and Research in South Africa exemplifies this approach. He advocates for a "contextual Bible study" model. This model consciously privileges the reading practices of "ordinary readers", the poor, the marginalized, the unemployed, and the theologically untrained (West, 2000, p. 78). In this collaborative model, the academically trained scholar undergoes a fundamental role shift. The scholar no longer acts as the authoritative exegete who delivers the "correct" meaning from on high. Rather, the scholar becomes a "facilitator" or "organic intellectual." The facilitator provides critical tools, resources, and questions. This enables the community to interpret the text for themselves in light of their own struggles and experiences (West, 2000, p. 82). Here, the African context is not just an abstract subject. It is the embodied, daily experience of the poor and oppressed. The primary hermeneutical question is relentlessly practical: "How does this text address our poverty, our struggle for land, our experience of violence, or our fear of HIV/AIDS?"

This approach is profoundly democratic and praxis-oriented. Its ultimate goal is not merely a more nuanced academic understanding but concrete social transformation and community empowerment. It seeks to bridge the chasm between the academy and the community. It makes biblical interpretation a tangible tool for civil society advocacy, conscientization, and building a more just society. The Bible, in this model, becomes a "site of struggle" where communities can find language for their lament, resources for hope, paradigms for resistance, and visions for a new social order (West, 2000, p. 95).

A critical analysis must acknowledge the immense power and ethical integrity of this model. However, it must also ask critical questions about the role of critical distance and the text's complexity. Can the academic facilitator truly avoid subtly imposing their own theoretical or theological framework in the selection of texts and the framing of questions? Furthermore, does the pressing desire for the text to be immediately relevant and liberating sometimes lead to a forced or simplistic application? This approach may bypass the text's historical particularity, its literary ambiguity, or its potentially oppressive elements that a more detached reading might uncover. The model's great strength, its commitment to immediate relevance, may also be its key methodological vulnerability.

4.3 African Women's Hermeneutics: The Subject within the Subject

A particularly vital, critical, and indispensable voice within the "subject" paradigm comes from African women theologians. Scholars like Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mpshe), Musa Dube, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye have rightly and powerfully pointed out a significant problem. The overarching category "African context" can often be a homogenizing and patriarchal term. It masks the specific, compounded oppression of women. They argue that for African women, the context is one of double or even triple marginalization. This marginalization comes from global Western powers (neo-colonialism). It comes from patriarchal African cultures and traditions (which often privilege male elders). It also comes frequently from patriarchal structures within the institutional church (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 45; Dube, 2001, p. 102).

African women's hermeneutics, therefore, insists on making the female African experience the specific, nuanced, and non-negotiable subject of interpretation. These scholars have developed creative, culturally grounded, and critical methodologies to achieve this. Masenya, for example, has developed the *Bosadi* (Womanhood) approach. This approach uses the wisdom, resilience, and lived experiences of Northern Sotho women. These experiences are encapsulated in their proverbs, songs, and cultural practices. The *Bosadi* approach uses this wisdom as a critical lens to read the Bible. This allows her to both appreciate the text and critique it. She challenges the patriarchies embedded within both the biblical world and her own African culture (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 56). It is a hermeneutic of both affirmation and suspicion.

Another widely employed powerful method is the "hermeneutics of suspicion." This is a borrowed but effectively repurposed tool from feminist theology. Here, texts that have been historically weaponized to subordinate and silence women are rigorously questioned. Examples include Ephesians 5:22-24 on wifely submission, or 1 Timothy 2:11-15 forbidding women to teach. These texts are re-contextualized and re-interpreted from the standpoint of women's dignity and agency (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 62).

Musa Dube, merging her postcolonial and feminist commitments, introduces the concept of "Mamal" readings. This approach focuses on the often-overlooked stories of mothers and children in the Bible. These characters are frequently the most vulnerable victims of imperial violence and patriarchal neglect. Examples include Hagar, the Canaanite woman, and the massacre of the innocents. This provides a powerful lens to critique interconnected structures of oppression (Dube, 2001, p. 135).

The critical contribution of African women's hermeneutics is its radical insistence on intersectionality. It demonstrates with piercing clarity that the "African context" is not a unified field. It is fractured and stratified by gender, class, age, and other power dynamics. This constitutes an essential internal critique of the broader "subject" paradigm. It challenges the paradigm to be more self-reflexive, more nuanced, and more radical in its analysis of power. It raises a critical question for all contextual hermeneutics: when we claim to center the "African context," whose context are we truly centering? The movement from the general ("Africa") to the particular ("the Akan woman farmer") marks a significant maturation of the paradigm.

5.0 A Critical Evaluation: Challenges, Tensions, And Internal Debates

While the "African context as subject" paradigm represents a powerful, necessary, and intellectually vibrant development in biblical scholarship, it is not without its profound philosophical, methodological, and practical challenges. A rigorous critical analysis must engage with these tensions. It is within these tensions that the most productive future developments will likely emerge.

5.1 The Problem of the Hermeneutical Circle and the Specter of Relativism

The hermeneutical circle describes the dynamic and inescapable interplay between the reader's pre-understanding (*Vorurteil)* and the text itself. This concept is central to modern hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Gadamer (Jeanrond, 1994, p. 45). The "subject" paradigm makes a conscious and deliberate virtue of this reality. It does so by privileging a specific pre-understanding: the African context. However, this strategic move raises a critical and persistent philosophical question. If the context becomes the primary arbiter of meaning, does this not lead to an unchecked relativism? Could a text mean fundamentally different and even contradictory things depending on the community interpreting it? For example, if a text like Joshua can be a story of divine promise for one community and a narrative of genocidal conquest for another, is there any stable criterion for evaluating interpretations beyond their functional utility for a given group?

This is a classic critique leveled against all forms of strong reader-response and contextual hermeneutics. Proponents of the African "subject" paradigm offer several nuanced responses. First, they argue they are not advocating for a simplistic "anything goes" relativism. They advocate for a critical and self-aware dialogue. The text, they maintain, retains its own voice and its "otherness." It can resist, challenge, and confront the reader's context, not merely confirm it (Jeanrond, 1994, p. 78). The dialogue is two-way. A community reading the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) from the context of land dispossession may find a powerful resource for resistance. However, the text's specific contours of Jezebel's manipulation of religious and legal systems may also challenge the community's own internal practices of corruption or gender injustice.

Second, scholars like Gerald West argue for a "strategic particularism" rather than a full-blown relativism (West, 2000, p. 112). The goal is not to make a universal claim that this is the only meaning of the text. Rather, the goal is to assert that this meaning is life-giving, truthful, and transformative for this particular community in this specific context. Its fruits, its capacity to promote human dignity, justice, and liberation within that community, judge the validity of the interpretation. However, the practical balance is notoriously difficult to maintain. The pastoral and political pressure to find immediate relevance for a community in crisis can lead to a utilitarian or eisegetical reading. This reading may overlook the text's more ambiguous,

historically contingent, or theologically challenging dimensions. It may favor a straightforward, applied message instead (Clements, 1976, p. 89).

5.2 The Authority of the Bible: Text as Tool or Normative Canon?

Closely related to the problem of relativism is the contentious question of biblical authority. In the historical-critical model, authority resided in the reconstructed original meaning or authorial intent (Porter & Adams, 2016, p. 78). In the "subject" paradigm, where the African context is the subject and the Bible is often subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion for its patriarchal or imperial ideologies (as in Dube's work), where does ultimate authority lie? Is the Bible reduced to a mere tool for social analysis? Is it a repository of stories that can be used or discarded solely based on their utility to the African struggle? What is its status for the believing community that holds it as sacred scripture?

This creates a significant and often unresolved tension. This tension is particularly acute for scholars who work within and for the Christian church, which comprises the vast majority of African Bible readers. Gatumu (2024, forthcoming) highlights this pastoral and theological tension. He notes that a hermeneutic that is too deconstructive can alienate the very faith communities it seeks to serve. It does so by undermining the foundational authority of their sacred text. How can one maintain a critical stance towards the text, calling out its violence in Joshua or its patriarchy in Ephesians, while also honoring its normative status within the community of faith?

The spectrum of responses to this tension within African scholarship is wide. On one end, a scholar like Itumeleng Mosala (1989, p. 56) has argued for a materialist hermeneutic. This approach is so critical of the Bible's ideological functions that it effectively sidelines the text as a direct source for liberation. Mosala urges a focus on the struggles of the oppressed themselves instead. On the other end, some more evangelical African scholars express concern that the "subject" paradigm risks replacing the text's authority with context's. This would make culture or experience the final norm. Most practitioners, however, seek a more dialectical relationship. They view the Bible as a contested site. It is a collection of traditions containing both life-giving and death-dealing elements. It requires a constant, critical sifting, a "hermeneutics of discernment." The Bible is engaged not as a monolithic oracle but as a complex conversation

partner in the ongoing struggle for life. Its authority resides not in its every verse but in its overall trajectory towards justice and liberation as revealed through critical engagement with the context of the oppressed.

5.3 The Risk of Essentializing "The African Context"

As pre-empted by the powerful critiques of African women's hermeneutics, a major pitfall of the "subject" paradigm is the persistent tendency to speak of "the African context" in singular, homogenizing terms. Africa is a continent of staggering diversity, linguistic, cultural, religious, ecological, and political. An interpretation that claims to speak for "the African context" can easily fall into the trap of creating a new stereotype. It can create a monolithic "African reality" that ignores specificities and silences internal differences.

A critical analysis must therefore ask: whose Africa is being centered? Is it the Africa of the rural villager or the urban elite? Is it the Africa of the male elder or the young, educated woman? Is the "African worldview" being described that of a Yoruba king in Nigeria or a Maasai *Moran* in Kenya? The paradigm's great strength is its commitment to particularity. However, this commitment can be undermined by a lazy or totalizing use of the term "African." The most sophisticated work in this field is now increasingly attentive to this problem. Scholars are specifying their contextual focus with greater precision. For example, they focus on "post-apartheid South Africa," "the experience of Akan women in Ghana," or "the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Botswana." This move from the pan-African to the deeply local is a sign of the paradigm's maturation and its internal capacity for self-critique.

5.4 The Relationship with Western Scholarship: Rejection or Critical Appropriation?

The "subject" paradigm is, by its nature and history, a decolonial project. It seeks to break the dependency on Western academic models and assert intellectual autonomy. However, this raises a profound practical and intellectual challenge. The very theoretical tools used by its leading proponents, postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha, Spivak), feminist theory, and liberation theology, are themselves largely products of the Western academy or are in deep dialogue with it. Dube uses Said and Spivak (Dube, 2001, p. 12). Masenya engages with Western feminist thought (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 34). West draws on Marxist and Freirean frameworks (West, 2000,

p. 25). This creates a paradoxical situation where African scholarship deconstructs Western epistemological hegemony using tools that hegemony produced.

Is this a fatal contradiction, a form of intellectual co-option? A more nuanced critical evaluation would argue that it is not. Instead, it represents a savvy, strategic, and subversive use of available resources. It is a case of using the "master's tools" not to rebuild the master's house but to dismantle its foundations and build a new, more inclusive dwelling, as Audre Lorde's famous metaphor hints. The goal is not a simplistic rejection of all things Western, which would be both impossible and intellectually impoverishing. The goal is a critical, selective, and creative appropriation of global intellectual resources for a specifically African project. It is an assertion of agency, the power to choose, adapt, and re-contextualize theories based on their utility for understanding the African reality. This demonstrates that the "subject" paradigm is not about isolationism but about engaging in the global conversation from a position of strength and self-defined interest. This engagement rebalances the hermeneutical power dynamic.

5.5 The Internal Dialectic: Inculturation versus Liberation Hermeneutics

A critical internal debate further complicates the "subject" paradigm. This is the persistent, often unstated, tension between the hermeneutics of inculturation and the hermeneutics of liberation. While both operate within the broader framework of centering the African context, they stem from different historical moments. They prioritize different aspects of that context. They can lead to divergent, even conflicting, interpretive conclusions and theological emphases. This internal dialectic represents a fundamental struggle over the primary purpose of African biblical hermeneutics.

Inculturation Hermeneutics: Reclaiming Cultural Identity

The inculturation trajectory has strong continuities with the earlier comparative phase. It is primarily concerned with the project of cultural and theological rehabilitation. Its central aim is to heal the cultural and spiritual schizophrenia induced by colonialism. It does so by demonstrating the profound compatibility and resonance between the biblical message and African cultural values, symbols, and worldviews (Getui, Holter, & Zinkuratire, 2001, p. 18). The "African context" in this model is often, though not exclusively, conceived as the repository

of traditional, pre-colonial wisdom. Concepts like *ubuntu* (humanness/community), the centrality of ancestry, the sacredness of life, and the integral relationship with the land are central.

Proponents of this approach, such as the earlier Justin Ukpong and many scholars in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, when employing cultural frameworks like *Bosadi*, seek to Africanize Christianity. They do this by using African categories as the primary lens for reading the Bible. They thereby create a theology that feels authentically African. For example, they read the concept of the "Communion of Saints" through the African understanding of the living-dead (ancestors). They interpret biblical sacrifices through the lens of African ritual practices of atonement and community cohesion. The strength of this approach is its positive affirmation of African identity. It is a hermeneutic of recovery and celebration. It answers the question, "Can I be fully African and fully Christian?" with a resounding yes.

Liberation Hermeneutics: Confronting Sociopolitical Struggle

In contrast, the liberation trajectory gained momentum from the 1990s. It is fundamentally a hermeneutic of suspicion directed not only at the biblical text and Western interpretation but also at African culture itself. For liberationists, the primary "African context" is not the idealized, traditional past. Rather, it is the contemporary, gritty reality of sociopolitical and economic injustice, poverty, corruption, political oppression, and the structural violence of the post-colonial state (West & Dube, 2000, p. 134). Scholars like Itumeleng Mosala and Takatso Mofokeng, and in a different key, Musa Dube with her postcolonial focus, argue that an uncritical inculturation hermeneutic is dangerously myopic.

Their critique is twofold. First, they argue that a focus on cultural affinity can easily become apolitical. It can distract from the concrete struggles of the poor and oppressed. Celebrating the parallels between King David and an African chief, for instance, may ignore the oppressive and patriarchal structures that both systems often upheld (Mosala, 1989, p. 67). Second, and more critically, liberationists insist that African culture is not a pristine, innocent space. It contains within it its own structures of oppression, particularly regarding gender, caste, and age. These structures have been used to justify the subjugation of women, youth, and minority groups. Therefore, a hermeneutic that simply uses culture as a lens risks baptizing these oppressive

elements. Liberation hermeneutics demands a prophetic confrontation with all structures of death, whether they originate from the West or from within Africa itself.

The Critical Tension and Its Implications

The tension between these two approaches creates a critical fault line within the "subject" paradigm. Is the primary task of African hermeneutics the reclamation of cultural identity or the liberation from oppressive structures? The answer is not simple. The most sophisticated scholarship seeks to hold these two in dialogue. However, prioritizing one over the other has significant consequences.

An overemphasis on inculturation can lead to a conservative, even romantic, theology. Such a theology is ill-equipped to address the realities of neocolonialism and global capitalism. It can, as the liberationists fear, align theology with the interests of the powerful who benefit from traditional hierarchies. Conversely, an overemphasis on liberation, particularly one that relies heavily on Western Marxist or postcolonial theory, can risk disdaining the very cultural resources that provide meaning and resilience to African communities. It may appear alien and disconnected from the spiritual worldview of the people it seeks to empower.

The way forward, as suggested by the work of Madipoane Masenya, is a both/and approach. This approach practices a "hermeneutic of suspicion" towards both the biblical text and African culture. It also employs a "hermeneutic of retrieval" to draw liberating elements from both (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018, p. 87). It requires asking simultaneously: "How does this text, read through our culture, affirm our dignity?" and "How does this text, in critical dialogue with our culture, challenge our complicity in injustice?" Navigating this internal dialectic is perhaps the most delicate and crucial task for the future of African biblical hermeneutics. It determines whether the "subject" paradigm will function as a tool for cultural nostalgia or as a dynamic engine for holistic transformation.

6.0 Conclusion: Prospects and Trajectories for the Future

The shift in African biblical hermeneutics from treating the African context as a resource to positioning it as the subject of interpretation marks a decisive and irreversible moment in the history of biblical scholarship. This critical analysis has demonstrated that this move is far more

than a methodological adjustment. It is a bold, creative, and necessary decolonial project. It represents a fundamental reorientation of power, epistemological, theological, and political. It responds to the failures of both a contextual Western historicism and an apolitical cultural comparativism. By centering the struggles, wisdom, and existential questions of African people, this paradigm has transformed the Bible from a relic of the ancient Near East into a living, relevant, and contested site of meaning for millions of believers on the continent.

This journey of critical examination has revealed that the paradigm's greatest strength, its unwavering commitment to context, is also the source of its most profound and productive challenges. The risks of relativism, the ambiguous status of biblical authority, the persistent danger of essentialism, the complex relationship with Western theoretical frameworks, and the internal dialectic between inculturation and liberation hermeneutics are not problems to be solved and discarded. Rather, they are constitutive tensions that must be continually managed, engaged, and leveraged for deeper insight. It is in wrestling with these aporias that the most sophisticated African scholarship is produced. This scholarship demonstrates a remarkable capacity for self-critique and intellectual growth.

The future of this hermeneutical trajectory, as hinted at by scholars like Masenya and Ngwa (2018, p. 112) and Gatumu (2024, forthcoming), lies not in moving beyond this paradigm. It lies in deepening its commitments while navigating these tensions with ever-greater nuance and sophistication. This will likely involve several key trajectories.

First, there will be a move towards greater specificity and intersectionality. The future lies in moving beyond generalized "African" contexts to more finely grained analyses of specific communities, languages, and social locations. This means not only acknowledging but also centering the fact that gender, class, age, disability, ethnicity, and geography fracture the "African context." The work of African women scholars has paved the way. Future scholarship will need to follow this lead, engaging in a "hermeneutics of detail" that listens to the specific voices of, for example, rural youth, urban informal settlers, or survivors of particular conflicts. The call to use African mother tongues in interpretation is part of this, as language carries within it unique philosophical and cultural concepts that are lost in translation.

Second, the infusion of African primal worldviews and spirituality will become a more prominent resource. The future will involve moving beyond the use of cultural artifacts as mere illustrations. Scholars will mine African primal spirituality and cosmology as foundational epistemological frameworks for encountering the biblical text. This involves taking concepts of community (ubuntu), the vital force inherent in all creation, the role of ancestors, and the permeability between the spiritual and physical worlds seriously. These are not primitive superstitions to be corrected by the Bible. Rather, they are valid lenses for theological reflection. This engagement must be critical and avoid romanticization. However, it has the potential for a genuinely unique African theological contribution that challenges the often disembodied and hyper-rationalist tendencies of Western theology.

Third, the paradigm will continue to strengthen its internal dialogues and critique. The conversation between different strands within African hermeneutics, for instance, between postcolonial critics and those focused on primal worldviews or between male and female theologians, will need to become more robust and constructive. The creative tension between inculturation and liberation hermeneutics particularly demands sustained attention. This tension represents a fundamental debate about the very purpose of African biblical interpretation. Navigating this dialectic successfully will require maintaining the positive affirmation of cultural identity while simultaneously pursuing the prophetic confrontation of all oppressive structures. These structures may be inherited from colonial systems or embedded within African traditions themselves. This internal critique is a sign of health and maturity. It prevents any single approach from becoming hegemonic. It ensures that the paradigm remains dynamic and self-correcting.

Finally, African biblical hermeneutics is poised to make a confident contribution to the global theological conversation. For too long, the flow of theological knowledge has been predominantly one-way: from the Global North to the Global South. The "subject" paradigm, with its profound insights into the relationship between text, power, and context, its creative methodologies for reading with marginalized communities, and its deep struggle with the ambiguities of a sacred text, has much to offer. It stands as a powerful example of how to do theology that is both academically rigorous and existentially vital. It challenges the global church and academy to consider whose context is being centered, whose voices are being heard, and what the ultimate purpose of biblical interpretation truly is.

In conclusion, the hermeneutics of the African context as subject is more than a method. It is a theological and ethical stance. It is a declaration that the God of the Bible is not trapped in the ancient past or the seminar rooms of Europe. God is alive and active in the struggles and celebrations of the African continent. The critical task ahead, for African scholars and their global partners, is to continue refining this hermeneutic. They must ensure it remains a rigorous, self-critical, and ultimately transformative dialogue between an ancient text and a vibrant, struggling, and profoundly hopeful continent. This demands a delicate balance: honoring cultural heritage while pursuing liberation; maintaining scholarly rigor while serving community needs; and preserving theological identity while engaging global conversations. The pots and calabashes of Africa, as Masenya and Ngwa (2018, p. 125) remind us, are not mere vessels. They are active agents in the creation of meaning. Their voice in the global theological symphony is no longer a whisper, but a clear and indispensable melody.

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