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II. MAPPING CHAPTER: 30 YEARS OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S BIBLICAL STUDIES

Alice Yafeh-Deigh

Introduction

In recent decades, research in the field of biblical studies has expanded rapidly because of the emergence of new methodological paradigms to research in biblical studies. The new methodological approaches have significantly broadened the scope of biblical interpretation to include interpreters' voices from many social locations. The proliferation of these new interpretive methods has driven the final nail in the coffin of scientific objectivity assumed in white, hegemonic, Eurocentric paradigms for biblical interpretation. For too long, the field of biblical studies has been structured and controlled by the historical-critical paradigms. As R. S. Sugirtharajah rightfully notes, "the discipline is strongly marked by paradigms set by a few Western scholars, paradigms that are limited by their biases."¹ The historical-critical reading strategies are rooted in enlightenment ideologies; they are based on white-male Eurocentric scholars' values and views, the power holders."² The frameworks emphasise disinterested objectivity in the reading and interpretive process while muting that the interpretive process is not neutral but feeds into particular ideologies.

By striving for scientific objectivity and assuming that a disinterested inquiry was possible, dominant male Eurocentric interpreters were

¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (New York, Maryknoll, 2006), 494.

² Shelby F. Lewis, "Africana Feminism: An Alternative Paradigm for Black Women in the Academy," in *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* (ed. Lois Benjamin; Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 49.

able to “keep the marginalised in their allocated places, with the master supplying the labels.”³ The power-holders often assess and conclude that most emergent approaches to biblical interpretation are subjective. Such appraisal leads to “the practice of treating American and European interpretation as the interpretation and labelling the enterprise of others ‘Asian,’ ‘African,’ and so on, or of using gender or ethnic terms persists.”⁴ The new evaluative paradigms are already demolishing the centre itself—historical-critical methods—and re-drawing biblical interpretation parameters.⁵

To be sure, newer methods or perspectives are conscious of the current commonplace assumption that biblical interpretation is a located practice that “cannot avoid particular location, interest and perspectives, and interpretive construct.”⁶ New Testament scholarship now employs a variety of approaches, including the contextual approach. The contextual approach is conceptually incorporated under the broader cross-disciplinary framework of cultural studies models. The Cultural studies model provides an overall, comprehensive critical perspective “from which to look not only at the production of meaning in the past but also at ways the Bible and contemporary culture mutually influence each other.”⁷

The cultural studies model encompasses a diverse range of hermeneutical frameworks.⁸ A crucial presupposition of cultural studies is

³ Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 4.

⁴ Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 1.

⁵ Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 9.

⁶ Richard Horsley, *Paul, and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 13. See also Rudolf Bultmann et al., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller; New York: Harper, 1961), 191. cf. Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 172.

⁷ J.C. Exum and S.D. Moore, *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOT Sup 266; Gender, Culture, Theory 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 19.

⁸ Cf. J.C. Anderson and S.D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 181.

that social location helps readers read the Bible a certain way; hence, diversity in interpretation derives from the difference in social location.⁹ Consequently, "it is in the nature of cultural studies to resist and critique the imposition of a single, fixed, authoritative meaning and to favor multiple hermeneutical approaches to texts and multiple meanings."¹⁰ The model is explicitly counter-hegemonic in orientation based on its heightened emphasis on the situatedness of its activities. Scientific objectivity or neutrality is not the ideal or telos in a cultural studies approach. The fact that it stresses the significance and importance of social location on the interpretive process implies that it does not claim to be immune to being subjective. Cultural Studies practitioners admit that the interpretive process is a dialogical negotiation process, a process of consent and resistance, appropriation, and distancing.¹¹ Readers or interpreters of the Bible are not merely passively receiving and appropriating meaning from the biblical texts; they construct and make meaning from the texts as the texts are re-read and recontextualised within distinct social locations. Thus, an essential task of contextual biblical interpretation, a distinctive approach within the broad ambit of cultural studies methodologies, is to underline the constant dynamic interplay between text and interpretive context. From thence, the diversity of approaches validates hermeneutical subjectivity and finds value in the experiences of women and people of color (ethnic minorities) within academia. Far from merely according to preponderance or importance to each reader's cultural and social location, contextual biblical interpretation

⁹ Cf. Fernando Sergovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic," in *Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2008), 33-44.

¹⁰ Alice Yafeh-Deigh, Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics in 1 Corinthians 7: An African-Cameroonian Perspective (Bible and Theology in Africa; New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2015), 3.

¹¹ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics* 11 (trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 133.

equally stresses the need for dialogue among interpreters from diverse social locations.¹²

Fundamentally, therefore, contextual approaches to biblical interpretation encourage reading practices profoundly rooted in readers' lived experiences. Then,

What also needs to take place is the recognition that context is a necessary interpretative ingredient that should be consciously explored and promoted so that not only the contextual influences and strategies of mainline scholars are accepted as legitimate contextual by-products of the investigative enterprise, but also that the contextual perspectives of marginalised communities be recognised as appropriate interpersonal determinants of and challenges to text interpretation.¹³

It is within a very broad spectrum of cultural studies that African women Biblical Studies should be understood (hereafter, AWBS). AWBS is part of the new wave of approaches to biblical interpretation. More significantly, it is part of a growing body of gender-centric practices that are consciously entrenched in decolonising and deconstructive rereading and reinterpretation of the Bible. AWBS created a conscious paradigm shift in biblical interpretation by privileging the experiences of the women on whose behalf they are interpreting the

¹² Vernon Robbins succinctly summarises this need for a dialogic approach to biblical interpretation: "We must engage in dialogical interpretations that include disenfranchised voices, marginalised voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully located voices. We must learn how to embed our oppositional strategies in many forms and styles of rhetoric so that we enable free and open discussion and controversy in an environment where we keep our colleagues on an equal playing field and keep the issues in an arena of specificity rather than staging them as typical actions to be attacked. Moving forward, spiraling, stepping in place, turning around, and changing venue, we explore with each other, debate with one another, and disagree with each other as equals, inviting other voices into the dialogue in a manner that makes a rhetorical full-turn through scientific, humanist, mainstream, feminist, ethnic, geographical, racial, economic, and social arenas of disputation, dialogue, and commentary" (Robbins, "The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation: Reconfiguring Rhetorical-Political Analysis," in Stanley Porter (ed.), *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 58-59.

¹³ Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 85.

biblical texts. They place African women lived experiences at the centre of their analysis. In doing so, they decentre and decolonise Eurocentric, masculinist perspectives on the Bible. AWBS has adopted a wide range of heuristic tools shaped not out of the world of scholarship alone, but out of the political, social, spiritual, cultural, and multiplex realities that define the African woman's experiences. The premise that undergirds AWBS works is that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to beat him at his own game temporarily, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."¹⁴ Lorde's claims resonate deeply with AWBS' struggles within the field of biblical studies, an area that is still deeply entrenched in white Eurocentric epistemologies, policies, and beliefs. AWBS did not find particularly the historical-critical method a viable option in their struggles to problematise, destabilise, and dismantle the master's house to make room for silenced or erased voices of minoritised groups. Therefore, to erect the distinctive kind of house that critically engage African women's lived cultural and religious realities, AWBS forged different contextual tools and promoted different biblical interpretative paradigms.

Another guiding principle is that differences among African women are essential strengths.¹⁵ By interlacing *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life with distinctive forms of cultural hermeneutics, AWBS can challenge the boundaries that impede them from genuinely positioning their interpretive paradigm in relation to the respective social location that provides them a distinctive vantage point of reading the Bible. This unique stance helped fuel AWBS's advocacy stance and commitment to pursue social transformation, promote human flourishing, and enhance African women and their communities' quality of life.

This chapter's overall objective is to map the development of AWBS within the last three decades since the creation of the Circle of Con-

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing, 1984), 112.

¹⁵ Cf. Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," 111.

cerned African Women Theologians (the Circle, hereafter). The mapping here will be done by assessing the variety of contextual approaches African women scholars use to investigate the Bible. The fundamental goals here are fourfold. First, the paper will broadly contextualise the emergence of AWBS within the Circle and uncover the methodological perspectives adopted by AWBS since the inception of the Circle. The paper will show that the launching of the Circle was a momentous event with disruptive power aimed at building and fostering an allied organisation essential for fighting against social, religious, economic, and political barriers to women's empowerment. Second, the paper will use "inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics" as broad umbrellas for exploring several contextual approaches used in AWBS. Third, the paper will offer illustrative examples of how the various methods opened new avenues for contextual biblical interpretation in Africa. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the mapping for the future of AWBS. A few caveats are in order. This paper takes on the complex and delicate task of mapping scholarly work that has been done by African women in the field of biblical studies since the emergence of the Circle. The scholarship of AWBS is far too extensive to be treated adequately in a limited number of pages. As a result, as with all mapping or surveys, the paper will merely be touching on the tip of the iceberg without fully engaging the various works critically.

1. The Context of African Women Biblical Studies: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Before charting the field of AWBS during the last three decades, the paper begins by contextualising the history of AWBS within the Circle. Unfortunately, an in-depth discussion of the history and work of the Circle is well beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁶ In the following,

¹⁶ For a helpful discussion of the origin and development of the Circle, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Story of a Circle," *The Ecumenical Review* 53 (2001), 99; Nyambura Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium: A Conclusion," in

the paper summarises salient features relevant to the development of the fields of AWBS. Many important events contributed to the launch of the Circle.¹⁷ However, the watershed moment came when Mercy Amba Oduyoye and some eighty women inaugurated the Circle in Accra, Ghana, in 1989. The historic event of the Circle brought together and intertwined women's experiences from diverse geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious, theological and linguistic backgrounds. Dube's definition captures the very essence of the Circle:

"A 'circle of women' describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnected-ness of life. It signifies life as a continuous flowing force, which must continue to be nur-

Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women, (eds. N.J. Njoroge & M.W. Dube; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 245-259; idem., "The Missing Voice: African Women Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77-83; Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 68-76; Musimbi Kanyoro "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, D.B. Govinden & S. Nadar; New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 15-38; Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Gender Equity and Empowerment in African Public Theology: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" (lecture, the Annual Hendrik Kraemer Lectures, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015); Teresia M. Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18 (2002): 79-86; Mercy A. Oduyoye and Virginia Fabella (eds.), *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Teresa Okure, "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns," *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 14 (2003): 71-95.

¹⁷ Cf. Sarojini Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012); Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women* (Genève: WCC Publications, 1990); idem., "Gender and Theology in Africa Today," *Mother Pelican* 6, no. 12 (Dec. 2010), available online at: <http://www.pelicanweb.org/solisustv06n12page3mercypduyoye.html> (20 July 2020).

tured at all times. A circle of women pursuing theology together in different African contexts is an approach that insists that African women are also a part of creation: they are in the Circle of creation.”¹⁸

The quotation from Dube shows that the history-changing, momentous occasion allowed women to connect while empowering them to redress deep-seated gender-based cultural and religious barriers to economic, political, religious, and social participation. The pan-African Circle forged “a space that is open to dialogue across women’s different experiences and standpoints, a space where a multiplicity of women’s voices are granted equal air time.”¹⁹ There are fundamental points of similarity between African women; they come from cultures that support, reinforce, and promote patriarchy’s ideology. Yet, there are some significant differences in expectations and experiences due to major contextual variables. Audre Lorde so appropriately captures the point. Circle women “are not one great vat of homogenised chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other to work together.”²⁰ Accordingly, Circle forebears created a space for women with diverse lived experiences and distinctive perspectives. It is an open, honest space where “critical dialogues can take place between individuals who have not traditionally been compelled...to speak with one another”²¹ Thus, the Circle space functions for women as a space of resistance and a critical site of radical

¹⁸ Dube, “Introduction: ‘Little Girl, Get Up!’” in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (ed. Musa W. Dube, and Nyambura J. Njoroge; Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001), 11.

¹⁹ Abigail Brooks, “Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women’s Lived Experience,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (eds. by Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 75.

²⁰ Audre Lorde, “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organising Across Sexualities,” in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 19.

²¹ Bell hooks, “Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical Intervention,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press), pp. 123–133, 133.

possibilities.²² As Dube correctly points out, the Circle “symbolises our space of transformative power of reinterpretation; of our intellectual invigoration and creative energy; of our talking and thinking among us selves in a friendly a life-affirming space.”²³

The safe and life-enhancing space of the Circle provided women moral motivation and commitment needed to become active and positive agents of social change and emancipatory transformation. This radical emancipatory vision connects all African women. The Circle provided women an avenue to form a common front to confront the invisible pandemic of patriarchy, androcentrism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, and other identity markers. The women come from varied backgrounds, are affected by a complex set of contextual factors, and are differentially constrained by patriarchal gender discrimination.

The Circle's conveners' primary goal has always been to provide a safe, positive, supportive, and affirming environment where African women can come together, reflect, engage in open and honest dialogues with each other and thrive. Circle women come together in lucid and critical socio-political consciousness of gender inequities. The Circle reinvigorates and motivates African women to become more active in the collective struggle to improve women's lived experiences. Circle women took on the monumental task of addressing and dismantling the deeply rooted patriarchal gender-based discriminations at local, national, continental, and global levels.

The Circle became a community of shared support with a commitment to making African women lived experiences salient in Circle members' struggle for gender justice in society, in the Bible, and in biblical interpretations. The locus classicus of Circle women's approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible is the social, cultural, religious, and economic conditions of African women. The Circle fos-

²² Bell hooks, “Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness,” in *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Political and intellectual controversies* (ed. Sandra Harding; New York: Routledge, 2004), 156.

²³ Dube, “Circle Reading of the Bible,” *Scriptoratures/Alternation Special Edition 2* (2005): 125.

tered, promoted, and nourished interdependency among and between women from different backgrounds and cultures. One of the Circle's distinctive features is to promote academic research that pursues social transformation and engages in emancipatory practices for African women's lives in the church and society. Musimbi Kanyoro articulates this overarching mission of the Circle thus:

The main objective of the Circle women is to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent. Research and writing for publication is our target and sole reason for being. Thus, we are an academic group. We want to fill a gap in African women's profile and theological writings from Africa.²⁴

The Circle provided a radically inclusive and empowering space of possibilities for African women theologians and biblical scholars in the academy and church. It created a space that helped women stand together to challenge patriarchal social structures oppressive to women. Communal dialogue and collaborative work among Circle members have fostered a heightened consciousness among African women. Circle women do activist work and provide practical solutions within religious, institutional and community settings where women "are dealing with today's life-threatening/destroying and life-giving/affirming issues." For Circle women, "doing theology means wrestling with God's Word as [they] confront the powers and principalities of this world."²⁵ Although the Circle comprises pastor and scholars across diverse- theological disciplines, a common denominator is that their theology is constructed from the grassroots up. As such, most Circle women are scholar-activist who do praxis-oriented research. Many women embrace the Bible as a text of liberation that enhances the quality of their lives. They view the world through the

²⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Celebrating God's transforming power," in *Transforming power: Women in the household of God* (ed. M.A. Oduyoye; Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 1997), 11.

²⁵ Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing in Labour Pains," in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (eds. Kanyoro and Njoroge; Acton Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya, 1996), 3.

lens of their Christian faith. Bridget Marie Monohan appropriately notes that faith is central, not peripheral to Circle women's vision:

Members of the Circle assess their experience of culture, religion, biblical interpretation, and social responsibility from a faith perspective. They tell of their pain and their triumph. They speak of their frustration in encounters with Western misinterpretation, negligence, and ignorance of the African female experience. Listening to the Circle is not a passive activity. They write to promote action and to participate in it. Theology, for them, is meaningless unless it is lived.²⁶

Before the Circle, only a few women overcame the barriers to women's upward mobility in the academia. The Circle raised greater awareness and exposed the invisibility or underrepresentation of African women at the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Before the inception of the Circle, a significant number of African women have been silent, absent, misrepresented and excluded, and their unique potentials and viewpoints not valued or respected.²⁷ The Circle's transformation of women's invisibility resonates with Lorde's clarion call that "where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives."²⁸ The Circle gave women the necessary space to speak and develop a critical consciousness that would allow them to interrogate, analyse, and dismantle patriarchy and privilege.

In the small action taken by Oduyoye and others, real change for African women theologians and biblical scholars began. Over the last three decades, African women's consciousness has expanded, and more women can break through the glass ceiling of academia. African

²⁶ Bridget Marie Monohan, "Writing, Sharing, Doing: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" (BA Honors thesis, Boston College, 2004), 2.

²⁷ Cf. Musimbi Kanyoro, "Inculturation and the Mission of the Church," in *Inculturation and the Mission of the Church in Nigeria: The Third CIWA Theology Week 4th–8th May 1992* (eds. J. Brookman-Amisshah and J.E. Anyanwu et al.; Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 1992), 28.

²⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, Berkeley, CA, 1984), 43.

women biblical scholars have been progressively integrated into the guild of biblical scholarship, and their scholarships are valued and recognised. Increasing numbers of African women have entered the traditional Euro-centric male fields of biblical studies and have become professionally trained biblical scholars with many earning PhDs in the field. The Circle's liberatory impulse has equally prompted women to develop new ways of reading the Bible, with the African women's lived experiences as the interpretive starting point.

The formation of the Circle is thus one of the most significant moments that marked the emergence of AWBS. It constitutes a significant starting point in the development of the field of African women's biblical studies. The Circle provides the structures within which AWBS is organised and thrive. AWBS is dedicated to the Circle core mission of promoting and participating in transformative research and publication. Accordingly, research and publication are the central tenets of AWBS. In the last three decades, the Circle has provided a rich platform for collaborative research projects that have further empowered Circle women to transgress gender and racial boundaries in academic and ministerial settings.

Therefore, it is fair to say that since the launching of the Circle, African women's biblical interpretation has increased both nationally and internationally. The formation of the Circle represents an essential point in the academic maturation of the field of AWBS. Since the Circle's inception, African women biblical scholars are welcome partners in the guild of biblical scholarship, participating fully in the SBL along with their Euro-American counterparts. The annual SBL conferences and mini-conferences have become vital sites for African women scholars to meet, present their research, and breed new ideas and new directions for AWBS. The meetings provided academic legitimisation for AWBS. These conferences spurred the growth of AWBS and provided African women scholars with attractive outlets for presenting and publishing their work. African women's biblical scholarship is now an active, recognised, and respected discipline represented in the Society of Biblical Literature's core research journals and books.

Ultimately, therefore, the diversity of African women's biblical interpretations that have proliferated in recent years is the result of the Circle. The awareness created by the Circle has prompted women to

develop new ways of reading the Bible, with the African women's lived experiences as the starting point of the interpretive enterprise. Circle women have been engaged in discussing a range of biblical interpretative issues related to African women's lived realities from diverse perspectives and using different methodological approaches. Emergent approaches in AWBS responded to concerns raised by the Circle. The approaches privilege the voices, experiences, and concerns of African women in alignment with the Circle's themes. The umbrella conceptual frameworks of "inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics" are used to frame and organise the scope and diversity of approaches in African women's biblical studies. They will show how the field the AWBS has developed over the last three decades.

2. African Women's Biblical Studies: A Review of Scholarship since the inception of the Circle

This section highlights significant methodological frameworks engendered by African women in their reading and interpretation of the Bible since the birth of the Circle. More specifically, I contextualise the diverse approaches in AWBS as responding, explicitly and implicitly, to the fundamental goals of the Circle. As noted above, although there is much to be gained by reviewing individual contributions, it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of the scholarship done by AWBS in the past three decades. On a broad scale, I must stress the various methodological approaches—"inculturated feminist hermeneutics," "feminist cultural hermeneutics," and "postcolonial feminist hermeneutics"—ally themselves with or are forms of contextual interpretations.²⁹ This means that the frameworks will provide a stable platform for understanding and discussing

²⁹ By the use of the adjective "feminist," I am inferring Alice Ogden Bellis' broad definition of the term. She rightly states, "feminism has a long history. No one definition would satisfy all feminists; rather, a range of understandings is needed. Nevertheless, feminism may be broadly defined as a point of view in which

fundamental interpretive theories and positions that have been put forward by AWBS. More generally, however, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is undoubtedly the thread that weaves the diverse approaches together and gives Circle women's work its distinctive emphasis.

3. Current Trends in the Field of African Women Biblical Scholarship

A. *Talitha Cum* Hermeneutics of Liberation

This mapping does not determine which approaches best reconfigure and recontextualise biblical interpretation within African women's lived experiences and social locations. The working assumption here is that the diverse approaches are shaped by a strong commitment to social change in alignment with the Circle's missional imperatives. The Circle strives, among other things, to address the unique realities of African women in their distinctive social locations. It is precisely the emphasis on women's lived experiences that generate overlapping reading strategies. The approaches are integrative. They have common attributes and transformative potentials, but they effectively and appropriately address their distinct communities. Given the intricacies of African women's social experiences of inequalities, AWBS cannot use a silo approach as an interpretive framework. It would dangerously essentialise African women and ignore their differences. AWBS reading paradigms purposefully illuminate or spotlight cultural and gender features of the biblical texts that address the unique problems they face. Obviously, in accentuating certain features, they equally ignore other elements. Therefore, to explore and grasp the full range of the meaning potential of any text, a wide range of reading paradigms are necessary. Ultimately, then, AWBS eschews a one-size-

women are understood to be fully human and entitled to equal rights and privileges" (Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 6).

fits-all approach that does not take readers' context into consideration. Instead of a single-axis, it employs multiple-axes frameworks for re-reading and re-interpreting biblical texts.

Since the Circle's establishment, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation has been an essential theoretical and liberative lens that has guided Circle women's diverse hermeneutical practices.³⁰ The foundational biblical text that underpins the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics is the intertwined stories of the woman who suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years and the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus in Mark 5:21-43.³¹ The twelve years in the two distinctive accounts have correlative symbolism and meanings with a restorative justice emphasis. The intercalated stories highlight the celebration of healing and life. The stories invite all women to get up and right the wrongs of erasure, invisibility, powerlessness, incredibility, and other interlocking forms of life-denying oppressions. Like the haemorrhage sister and the little girl, contemporary African women must rise from "the death of living under various colonising powers, of living under various patriarchal powers, of living under poverty, disease, war."³²

In making *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation central to African women's gender-centric frameworks, AWBS strives to build dimensions of representational unity across differences. A central tenet of *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is Interconnectedness and interdependence through liberative praxis. Therefore, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics focuses on interrupting and dislodging religious, traditional, and cultural practices that have been instrumentalised to create, maintain, perpetuate, normalise, and legitimise discriminatory policies and practices against women. Stressing the liberative emphasis of *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of life, Oduyoye exclaims, "from the raising of Jairus' daughter, Circle women remind themselves again and again that silence can be read as death; from the woman who

³⁰ Cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women. Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube, eds., *Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

³¹ Cf. Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise*.

³² Dube, "Talitha Cum! A Postcolonial Feminist & HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark," 92.

‘touched’ Jesus, Circle women have learnt to create space for themselves, even in places where traditional taboos forbid them to be.”³³

Congruent with *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life, the inaugural Circle conference in Accra, Ghana, invited the women of Africa to wake up, arise,³⁴ and to speak “loudly and clearly against various manifestations of violence in the contemporary African context, particularly violence against women.”³⁵ Since the Circle’s launching, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life has become the quintessential clarion call for African gender justice and women’s awakening. It invites African women to arise, interrupt, problematise, dismantle, and eliminate entrenched social and religious systems of gender inequities. The call has not gone unnoticed or unheeded. Circle women heeded the call to rise from death; they accepted “the invitation to walk in hope in the face stark hopelessness.”³⁶ They made their voices heard in a variety of ways.

Oduyoye, Njoroge, Dube, and Tshehla have explicitly and consistently used *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation to underpin and structure their analysis of the Bible.³⁷ These women unequivocally engage

³³ Oduyoye, “Rereading the Bible from where we have been placed: African women’s voices on some Biblical texts,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10 (2007): 4.

³⁴ Cf. Kanyoro “Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle,” in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 24. Dube, “Talitha Cum! Some African Women’s Ways of Reading the Bible,” pp. 133-146. In *Semeia Studies: Twenty-Five Years of Liberation Theology* (eds. Botha; Atlanta: SBL, 2009) at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327751706> (20 June, 2020); Teresa Okure, “The Will to Arise: Reflections 8:40-56,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (eds. Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 221-30.

³⁵ Teresia M. Hinga, “African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18 (2002): 82.

³⁶ Dube, “Talitha Cum! A Postcolonial Feminist & HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark,” 83.

³⁷ Oduyoye, & Kanyoro, (eds.), *Talitha Qumi*, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, (Daystar, Ibadan, 1990); Njoroge, “Talitha Cum! to the

critical forms of resistance, reclaiming life-giving and life-enhancing strategies that confront and dismantle cultural and religious institutions that collectively promote and uphold discriminatory policies and practices against women and girls. As Dube puts it, "African women's *Talitha cum* hermeneutics means living and insisting on staying alive, even when confronted with oppressive powers that crush. One dares to rise."³⁸ The common thread in *Talitha cum* mode of analysis is an unwavering commitment to fight against "life-denying forces" in powerful hegemonic cultural and religious institutions and traditions. These "life-denying forces" likewise reinforce and perpetuate exclusionary, androcentric interpretations of the Bible. Thus, *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of life underscore African women's liberating struggles and shared concern to address the multifaceted and interlocking discriminations that women confront daily. Accordingly, Oduyoye insists forcefully,

Our story is one of letting it be known that African women are awake. They have heard Jesus say 'Talitha cum' (Mark 5:41). Cultural expectations that kept us 'behind the curtain' are being exposed. Disempowering religious teachings are being challenged. We are awake to our responsibility as creative beings made in the image of God. The Circle has motivated African theologians to pay more attention to what culture and religion do in women's lives.³⁹

The *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation woke up Circle women to a lifelong collective commitment to engage in gender justice-oriented interrogation and dismantling patriarchal social and religious structures oppressive to women. Given that religion is one of the strongest social institutions that create and justify patriarchal hierarchies, and

New Millennium," 245–259; Maarman S. Tshehla, 2019, "Gendered African (biblical) scholarship: An ode to Talitha," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5294. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5294>

³⁸ Dube, "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," 18; Dube, "Talitha Cum: A Postcolonial Feminist and HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark 5:21-43," in *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* (eds. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), 115-40.

³⁹ Oduyoye, "The Story of a Circle," *The Ecumenical Review* (2001), 99; Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium," 99.

that it is an essential shaper of attitudes in African societies, *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation is rooted in women's faith experiences. *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation immensely help women forge new ways of being and living as women of faith. It functions as an emancipatory social transformation of beliefs and practices within and outside religious, cultural, social, and political structures in diverse contemporary contexts in Africa. Overall, emancipatory healing from entrenched life-denying structures is "healing from colonial, patriarchal, physical oppression, or basically everything that is oppressive."⁴⁰ Such holistic healing is critical and essential to ensuring that African women have voice and agency. Consequently, the *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life foregrounds, connects, and reinforces African women's interpretive strategies.

B. Inculturated Feminist Hermeneutics

The assumption that women's lived experiences have a central place in the interpretive process has obtained widespread currency in AWBS. I mentioned earlier that contextual biblical interpretation provides context and a starting framework in which the diverse *Talitha cum* oriented gender-centric and liberationist methods and theories used in AWBS operate. It is important to note that the gender-centric frameworks are not entirely reinventing the wheels. Most of them are using existing theories or theologies but putting their spin on the already existing approaches. Examples of such theories or theologies are inculturation and liberation theologies, to name a few. Both theologies provide the background to Oduyoye's feminist inculturation theology. As is the case for feminist cultural hermeneutics, inculturation feminist hermeneutics draws from inculturation and liberation theologies. It is grounded methodologically on a gender-centric analytical framework. African inculturation and liberation theologies emerged in the 1960s. They focused almost exclusively on culture,

⁴⁰ Dube, "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," 20.

class, economic, and political questions primarily from an androcentric perspective while ignoring or treating gender issues as aides. Liberation and inculturation theologies converge in that they both emerged as a response to “a certain dissatisfaction with the traditional theological model which has proved unable to address some of today’s problems, and from the growing awareness that theological elaborations always address problems within a certain cultural context.”⁴¹ The various modes of inculturation and liberation theological probing “subscribe to the imperative of contextualisation, according to which theologies are formulated to respond to different cultural contexts.”⁴² They equally operate “from the common recognition that part of colonial oppression was the belittling of African cultural values and systems.”⁴³

As a result, proponents of inculturation modes of theologising strive “to ‘Africanise’ in the sense of affirming African culture and positioning it as the basis for developing African liberation theology.”⁴⁴ Inculturation methodologies foreground African religion and culture, and reconfigure and recontextualise Scripture and Christian traditions within African culture and traditions.⁴⁵ As Justin Upkong states, “in inculturation hermeneutics, the past collapses into the present, and

⁴¹ Justin S. Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1984), 5; *idem.*, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 14.

⁴² Simeon O. Ilesanmi, “Inculturation and Liberation: Christian Social Ethics and the African Theology Project,” *The Annals of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 15 (1995): 50.

⁴³ Ilesanmi, “Inculturation and Liberation,” 51.

⁴⁴ Kanyoro. “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century,” in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 167.

⁴⁵ Ary Roest Crollius maintains, “the purpose of inculturation is not to salvage a traditional culture, but rather to render present the galloping process of change which affects all cultures in the light and life of the Gospel, so that each culture may come a worthy “habitat” of God’s pilgrim people — a tent rather than a fortress — and an irradiating light that adds to the splendour of the entire cosmos” (“Inculturation and the Meaning of Culture,” *Gregorianum* [1980], 273).

exegesis fuses with hermeneutics.”⁴⁶ They operate from thoroughgoing contextual emphasises. Accordingly, the African context is centralised as the subject of theological and cultural reflections.⁴⁷ The theological emphasis of inculturation theology is on contextualising the Gospel’s emancipatory message within different cultural contexts; in other words, the methodology stresses the need for the Christian faith and God’s living word to take flesh in specific cultures and communities. Even the catholic pontiff, Pope Paul VI, recognised the importance of a decentralised and contextualised application of the Bible. In an apostolic letter in 1971 titled “*Octagesima Adveniens*,” he acknowledges that the biblical message is not timeless nor transcultural, and insist, “in the face of such widely varying situations, it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze the situation with objectivity proper to their own country.”⁴⁸

Like inculturation forms of theologising, African liberation theologies equally contextualised Christian theologies with a specific focus on social change and transformation from the African people’s unjust economic, political, and social conditions. Liberation theologies carried on a frontal attack against social injustice and systemic oppression, particularly economic injustice of all kinds. The theologies emphasise socio-political and economic structural and systemic reforms and transformation. Dube notes, “liberation theology rose from a context of resisting both imperial oppression and deformation of people through exploitation, racism, and dispossession.”⁴⁹ Its struggles for

⁴⁶ Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to Biblical interpretation” in *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (eds. D. Walter & L. Ulrich; William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 18.

⁴⁷ Cf. Loreen Maseno, “Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of Three African Women Theologians’ Entry into the Inculturation Scene,” *Norwegian Journal for Missions* 4 (2004): 225.

⁴⁸ Pope Paul VI, “Octogesima Adveniens,” section 4, May, 1971 <http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html> (21 June 2020).

⁴⁹ Dube, “Postcolonialism & Liberation,” in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (ed. Miguel A. De La Torre; St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 291.

liberation correlates with the decolonising vision of postcolonial biblical interpretation. While inculturation theologies took roots or became primarily established in eastern and western African countries, liberation theologies were particularly prominent in South Africa, where black South Africans were engaged in liberative struggles against the repressive, discriminatory, and dehumanising systems of apartheid.

The fundamental problem with African liberation and inculturation theologies is that they side-tracked or failed to acknowledge and redress gender imbalances or historic power differentials between men and women in both religion and society. Both theologies' theological activities did not address structures of gender inequities or oppressive traditions, beliefs, and practices within the African patriarchal and religious cultures. Since gender concerns were peripheral to the discussions of inculturation and liberation, women were left in the shadows of the methodologies. As a direct response, gender justice became the cornerstone of feminist inculturation theological efforts.

Oduyoye, the leading practitioner of feminist inculturation and liberation theology, shows a clear continuity with the inculturation and liberation paradigms in that her mode of analysis is likewise contextually grounded; however, it thoroughly interrogates and contests discriminatory cultural and religious traditions, beliefs and practices from the perspectives of African women's lived realities.⁵⁰ Oduyoye is emphatic that "no Christianity that ignores the oppression of women should be made at home in Africa as Christ cannot be at home in a domination-riddled Christianity."⁵¹ The different forms of feminist inculturation theologies, such as those used by Oduyoye, Kanyoro, and Loreen Maseno, aim to interrogate and dismantle oppressive and

⁵⁰ Cf. Oduyoye, *Hearing, and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986).

⁵¹ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1995), 87.

dehumanising patriarchal structures of African societies and religion.⁵² They take seriously the reality that men and women are differently positioned within cultural, social, religious, economic and political hierarchies that disproportionately affect their lives. Ultimately, feminist inculturation theologies have a robust commitment and determination to resist and challenge cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices that reinforce women's social and religious subordination. Feminist inculturation theologies note that it has been more difficult for women to receive theological education and hold significant leadership positions throughout history. Yet, women's involvement and participation in Christian religious practices are disproportionately greater than men's. Oduyoye further observed that within the African patriarchal cultural and religious systems, "women's experience of being persons primarily in relation to others—as mother or wife—predominates in Africa. A woman's social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own."⁵³ Therefore, feminist inculturation theologies are determined on "incorporating women's cultural experience and including a commitment to the emancipation of women into inculturation."⁵⁴ The gender-transformative emphasis is substantiated because inculturation male theological and liberative struggles are geared toward "the liberation of only half of the African people if they overlook the abject poverty of women."⁵⁵ Kanyoro most forcefully and unabashedly expresses

⁵² Cf. Oduyoye, & Kanyoro, (eds.), *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* (Daystar, Ibadan, 1990); Loreen Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of Three African Women Theologians' Entry into the Inculturation Scene," *Norwegian Journal for Missions* 4 (2004); Kanyoro. "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century," in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001); Njoroge, "Talitha Cum! to the New Millennium"; Tshehla, "Gendered African (biblical) scholarship."

⁵³ Oduyoye, *Hearing, and Knowing*, 122.

⁵⁴ Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 226. Cf. See Oduyoye, "Violence against women: window on Africa," *Voices from the Third World* 18 (1995): 168–76.

⁵⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, "Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004), 10.

her disappointment with inculturation theology as articulated by African male theologians. She states, "While affirming the need for reclaiming culture through the theology of inculturation, we African women theologians claim that inculturation is not sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analyzed and are deemed worthy regarding promoting justice and support for life and the dignity of women."⁵⁶ Usually, Circle women highlight the positive and empowering features of the African culture while critiquing cultural norms that contribute to the reproduction, legitimation, and perpetuation of existing multifaceted inequalities and guarantee the maintenance of power in men's hands. Kanyoro appropriately asserts that to right the wrongs of inculturation theologies, African women must continue the Christian faith/African cultural integrative and transformative work through a gender-centred feminist approach. Maseno insists that gendering or gender-centric inculturated investigation is essential because it integrates "a strategic and social understanding of women as a distinct group, thereby incorporating women's cultural experiences and including a commitment to the emancipation of women into inculturation."⁵⁷ A gender-centric perspective is required to ensure that the multiple struggles of women are addressed. Oduyoye straightforwardly challenged male theologians to critical reflections on gender bias and the resultant subordinated positions of African women in religion and society. Circle women recognise that African women have many male allies who have publicly stood up in emancipatory solidarity with African women in their struggles for gender justice and transformative patriarchal cultural and religious praxis. African Women theologians have equally made "overt efforts to promote collaboration with African male theologians."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kanyoro, *Introducing feminist cultural Hermeneutics: An African perspective* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 2002), 167.

⁵⁷ Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 226.

⁵⁸ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989–2008)," *International Review of Mission* 98 (2009):117.

C. Feminist Cultural-contextual Hermeneutics

An essential tenet of Feminist cultural hermeneutics is its analytical focus on African culture, religion, practices, and traditions. It has an unapologetically gender-sensitive and thoroughgoing contextual emphasis. It takes on the monumental task of dismantling deeply rooted patriarchal cultural, religious, and gender oppressions. In many ways, inculturated feminist and cultural hermeneutics reveal a shared vision. The approaches seek to provide a corrective to the androcentric dimensions of traditional inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. They interrogate and challenge inculturation and liberation theological processes that, while highlighting their marginality, uphold the patriarchal status quo to the point they transmit cultural and religious ideologies that reinforces and legitimate structures of oppression against women. Inculturated feminist and cultural hermeneutics engage African religious and cultural beliefs and practices with hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. Their central vision is to forge a holistic gender-centre analysis of culture and religion that acknowledges and builds on inculturation and liberation theologies. The approaches share a strong commitment to unmasking facets of culture and religious practices that do not promote women's liberation. However, they do not only engage in suspicious hermeneutics or simply claim the mantle of opposition; inculturated and feminist cultural hermeneutics equally retrieve cultural and religious traditions and practices that engender liberation and transformation. Kanyoro, feminist cultural hermeneutics' paradigm pioneering leader, calls attention to the fact that "female genital mutilation, early betrothal and marriages, and the stigmatisation of single women, barren women and widows are not liberating to women."⁵⁹ Kanyoro's quote crystallises the underlying principle that not all cultural and religious practices are liberative or transformative. Accordingly, feminist cultural hermeneutics scrutinise religious-cultural beliefs and traditional practices that shape biblical and African contexts.

⁵⁹ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 15.

Kanyoro elucidates the need for a paradigm shift to establish effective gender justice strategies:

The patriarchal nature and context of the Bible complicate its function as a primary resource in African women's struggle against the subjugation and domination of women. African women theologians have developed cultural hermeneutics as an important tool that enables women to interpret their experiences and realities in their contexts. These cultural hermeneutics involves critical analysis and a hermeneutic of suspicion of both the context of the Bible and the contemporary cultural contexts in which interpretation occurs. Therefore, African feminist biblical studies, with necessity, involves cultural hermeneutics as an important first step.
60

While Kanyoro concedes that inculturation and liberation hermeneutics are valid approaches in that they take the African lived realities as an essential starting point for their theological and hermeneutical analyses, she censures both methods for the lack of committed attention to existing gender inequalities in religion and culture. In so doing, the approaches unavoidably reinforce male privilege and do nothing to change women's situations. Feminist cultural hermeneutics is committed to prioritising liberation and gender justice concerns, and, consequently, it places African women experiences at the centre of its investigation. As Dora Mbuwayesango states, feminist "cultural hermeneutics are an essential hermeneutic of liberation for African women who experience multiple cultures and multiple oppressions."⁶¹ The approach provides a more in-depth conceptual framework for contextualising African women's lived experiences.

Congruent to Oduyoye's inculturated feminist approach, Kanyoro further stresses that gender-centric frameworks are indispensable for foregrounding the gender dimensions of inculturation and liberation

⁶⁰ Kanyoro, "Biblical hermeneutics: ancient Palestine and the contemporary world," *RevExp* 94 (1997): 364; cf. in Dora Mbuwayesango, *Feminist Biblical studies in Africa*, in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 79.

⁶¹ Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 79.

struggles. She upholds oduyoye's book, *Daughters of Anowa*, as an excellent example of engendered cultural hermeneutics because she takes the contextual perspectives of African women and their communities, particularly the Akan community, as a crucial starting point for her hermeneutical forays.⁶²

Feminist cultural hermeneutics approaches biblical texts as both cultural and religious texts that need cultural recontextualisation; as such, Kanyoro asserts, "the book of Ruth is loved because it has something for everyone in Africa. Africans read this book in a context in which famine, refugee status, tribal or ethnic loyalties, levirate marriages, and polygamy are not ancient biblical practices but the everyday realities of today."⁶³ Feminist contextual or cultural hermeneutical practices value multivalent interpretations given that interpreters read from multiple social locations and subject positions. The approach is a useful tool for the African social location because it is an integrative, culturally grounded framework suitable for addressing the complexities of African women's diverse lived experiences.

Although there are some fundamental commonalities and similarities in patriarchal structures across different African societies that allow for generalisations regarding women's experiences, how women experience patriarchy and gender injustices differs depending on women's various positions within patriarchal institutional and social structures. Put differently, while acknowledging the interconnected gender injustices experienced by African women, discrimination is experienced differently by women of different ethnic and religious groups, cultures, and socio-economic classes. A case in point is that African women scholars' positional and social vulnerabilities to gender discrimination are quite different from those of grassroots women. Therefore, African women intellectuals must reflexively analyze their positionality in terms of power and privilege, so they are not re-inscribing hierarchical, elitist intra-gender behaviour rather than

⁶² Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 19; *idem.*, "Reading the Bible from an African Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 51 (1999):19.

⁶³ Kanyoro, "Reading the Bible from an African Perspective," 22.

free from it. Recognising and acknowledging differential social vulnerabilities and differential institutional and structural obstacles among African women is essential to forging authentic solidarity among women without erasing or muting their unique vulnerabilities.

To avoid some of the pitfalls of decontextualising African women's experiences, Circle women biblical scholars and theologians have engaged in wide-ranging modes of contextual interpretations that offer context-specific responses to women's concerns. Each hermeneut comes to the interpretive process with context-specific questions and concerns and uses a contextual method of analysis adapted and appropriate for that context. Consequently, because of the uniqueness of the interpretive situation, the conclusions are substantially different.⁶⁴ Apart from the shared *Talitha cum* emancipatory orientation of their work, African women do not have an umbrella concept that aptly describes and captures the contextual, multifaceted nature of their approaches. Therefore, Mbuwayesango is right when she notes, "Usually, the African women's interpretation method is not specified. It is only the location of the person doing the interpretation that is particularised either by country or ethnicity."⁶⁵ Space constraints do not permit me to present a detailed description of the different feminist cultural hermeneutical approaches developed and implemented by Circle women. I will briefly highlight a few, but I will not discuss them in detail. Hence, I apologise in advance if I overlook vital contributions to the richness of African feminist or gender-centric cultural hermeneutics.

The various forms of feminist cultural hermeneutics discussed here examine the Bible's specific cultural, economic and political context and the social location from which they reread and recontextualise biblical texts. Kanyoro, rereading the book of Ruth with the rural

⁶⁴ Cf. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*, 175–76.

⁶⁵ Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 74.

women of Bware through the lens of their lived experiences and realities, allows her and Bware women to reclaim the Bible as a source of liberation and a guide for combating gender oppression. Kanyoro uses a storytelling approach to serve as the Bware women's communal theological mode par excellence because it fits the women's conceptual framework.⁶⁶ Sarojini Nadar investigates representations of sexuality, gender expectations, and demands in the book of Ruth and Esther. Her contextual investigation utilises a South African-Indian Womanist/ feminist body hermeneutical lenses. Her contextual feminist approach highlights female body abuse issues, sexual violence and erasure within the post-apartheid, postcolonial South-African context.⁶⁷ Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate works on proverbs and the notion of cultural grafting. She uses the "hermeneutic of grafting" to talk about the intersections of Proverbs 25:1-29:27 and the Ghanaian folk proverbs, precisely the Ewe folk proverbs, and the possibility of grafting the Ghanaian and the biblical book of proverbs. Her contextual reading allows the Bible, particularly the book of Proverbs, to become a relevant and transformative word of God within the Ghanaian social locations.⁶⁸ Funlola Olojede employs the Yoruba woman as a contextual interpretive lens through which she reassesses Deborah (Gen. 35:8) and Sheerah characters (First Chron. 7:24). Olojede's contextual hermeneutics broadens the semantic range of the word "wisdom" to include marginal characters like Deborah and Sheerah in the category "Woman Wisdom." Through her contextual rereading of the

⁶⁶ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 23.

⁶⁷ Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian womanist reading of the character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa w. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 159-75; idem., "Texts of Terror -The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2. 1-18," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri & Sarojini Nadar; New York. 2006), 77-95. For other African women who have written on the Book of Ruth, Cf. Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africans: Reflections of an African Mordecai," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2001), 237-251.

⁶⁸ Dorothy Bea Akoto-Abutiate, *Proverbs, and the African Tree of Life: Grafting Biblical Proverbs onto Ghanaian Eve Folk Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill 2014).

book of Proverbs and Yoruba texts that exhibits the most important interpretive parallels —Yorùbá proverbs and Ìjálá chant —, Olojede interrogates and disrupt the widespread androcentric and patriarchal power relations that foster depreciatory representations of the Yoruba woman in literary, cultural texts.⁶⁹ Dora Mbuwayesango reads the stories of Sarah and Hagar from a Zimbabwean woman's perspective.⁷⁰ Like Mbuwayesango, Nicoletta Gatti reexamines the theme of childlessness and infertility in the Hebrew Bible, with particular reference Isaiah 56:1-8. She reconceptualises and recontextualises the themes within a Ghanaian, Krobo social location.⁷¹ Alice Yafeh-Deigh employs a tri-polar "Afro-feminist-womanist" paradigm to reassess the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon's policy on pre-conversion polygyny and its practical implications on women and children. Yafeh-Deigh situational ethics draws on Paul's theology of marriage and sexuality in 1 Corinthians 7. Yafeh-Deigh argues that although "polygynous relationships cannot fully embody mutual and reciprocal self-giving because the relationships operate within deep-rooted cultural presuppositions that are oppressive and asymmetrical,"⁷² ethicists and policy-makers cannot be the only decision-making authorities in the matter. The decision-making process must involve all stakeholders, including women and children. Furthermore, the decision reached should be

⁶⁹ Funlola Olojede, "Unsung heroines of the Hebrew Bible: A contextual theological reading from the perspective of Woman Wisdom," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, 2011; "Being wise and being female in Old Testament and Africa: Old Testament wisdom, human dignity and the poor," *Scriptura* 111 (2012): 472-479; Olojede and Masenya, "Sex and Power(lessness) in Selected Northern Sotho and Yorùbá Proverbs: An Intertextual Reading of Proverbs 5-7," in *Reading Proverbs intertextually* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 217-30.

⁷⁰ Mbuwayesango, "childlessness and woman-to-woman relationships in Genesis and in African Patriarchal society: a Zimbabwean woman's Perspective (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:8-21)," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 27-36

⁷¹ Nicoletta Gatti, "The Drama of Infertility: Reading Isa 56:1-8 From A Krobo Perspective," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018): 115-141; "Toward a Dialogic Hermeneutics: Reading Gen. 4: 1-16 with Akan Eyes," *Horizons in biblical theology* 39 (2017): 46-67

⁷² Yafeh-Deigh, *Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics*, 202.

“oriented towards positive and substantive change in the lives of women and children.”⁷³

Madipoane Masenya offers another approach to reading and interpreting the Bible contextually. She reconceptualises the African inculturation hermeneutics within a gender-centric framework labeled *bosadi* (Womanhood) biblical hermeneutics. There is an increasing use of Masenya’s *bosadi* hermeneutics as an important context hermeneutical model. The trailblazing *bosadi* hermeneutics is a praxis-oriented approach geared towards liberative and trans-formative inculturated biblical interpretations. Masenya has used the approach to engage in inculturated liberationist rereading of the book and Esther⁷⁴ and the book of Ruth,⁷⁵ to name a few. To contextualise the *bosadi* approach, Masenya prioritises the lived realities of grassroots African women of Northern Sotho. She argues that the women’s context is “characterised by sexism, post-apartheid racism, and classism, among other facts.”⁷⁶ Crucially, the approach “highlights the significance of the element of faith in the life of an African woman in her encounter with the Bible. It also acknowledges the common points between the worldviews of Africans and those of the Israelites.”⁷⁷ Masenya’s articulation of the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of African-South-African women. This explains why, faithful to her specific social location, she uses distinctive experiences the women as the hermeneutical lens to engage in a *bosadi* interpretation

⁷³ Yafeh-Deigh, *Paul’s Sexual and Marital Ethics*, 202.

⁷⁴ Masenya, “Esther and Northern Sotho stories: An African-South African Woman’s Commentary,” in *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible* (ed. M.W. Dube; SBL, Atlanta, 2001), 27-49.

⁷⁵ Masenya, “Ruth,” in *The Global Bible Commentary* (ed. Daniel Patte; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 86-91;

⁷⁶ Masenya, “Esther and Northern Sotho stories.”

⁷⁷ Masenya, “Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: reading for the liberation of African (northern Sotho) women,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 55-68; “Reading the Bible the Bosadi (Womanhood) Way,” *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 4 (1997): 15-16.

⁷⁷ Madipoane, “Their Hermeneutics was Strange,” 184.

of the Bible. Masenya insists that the gender-focused *bosadi* approach “is an attempt to resuscitate the African culture from the ashes into which it was thrown; it does not idolise that culture.”⁷⁸ As such, the *bosadi* gender-conscious framework is not an uncritical rephrasing of inculturation hermeneutics less it threatens to make similar mistakes of upholding and reproducing gender inequalities.

Another important strand of feminist cultural hermeneutics is a dynamic and dialogic engagement between women in the academy and laywomen at the local community level. This cultural hermeneutical strand is called reading the Bible with non-academic readers. The reading strategy aims at fostering the Circle's grassroots advocacy goals. Teresa Okure succinctly summaries the importance of reading biblical texts in dialogue with non-academic readers:

Our greatest, but not yet fully tapped resources, are these so-called ordinary women. They are close to life at the grassroots; they see themselves in the texts of scripture and respect them as God's abiding word, sometimes too literally and in ways that oppress than liberate them. The professionally trained African women theologians, on the other hand, can be tempted to subscribe to abstract ways of theologising in order to find acceptance in the field. Thus, they can lose focus on life, or seek answers to hermeneutical questions put by others, instead of identifying and addressing their own questions. The sisterhood in reading is needed by all.⁷⁹

Most African Christian women see the Bible as a powerful tool for social transformation that promotes human flourishing and enhances the quality of life. Reading the Bible with non-academic readers goes beyond traditional, devotional Bible study. Reading with non-academic readers is a dialogic approach that uses the powerful tool of storytelling to give laywomen voice and agency. The dialogic method employs an afro-centric gender lens to contextualise and localise biblical narratives within Africa's patriarchal power structures. It encour-

⁷⁸ Madipoane, "Struggling to Find 'Africa' in South Africa: The Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach to the Bible," *SBL Forum*, n.p. <<https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=402>> (2 June 2020).

⁷⁹ Okure, "Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns," *AJBS* 19 (2003): 74

ages laywomen, especially those at the peripheries, to use their diverse daily-lived realities as the primary entry point to reading and interpreting the Bible. It also invites them to be actively involved and engaged in the hermeneutical process through group discussions. In this context, the goal of reading the Bible with non-academic readers is to provide an empowering space where laywomen can share their experiences to raise awareness about androcentric presuppositions undergirding biblical and cultural portrayals and representations of women. The reading strategy allows women to verbalise or share their experiences, support each other, build solidarity strategies, forge a sense of sisterhood, and work collectively toward social change and transformation propelled by local realities. These various forms of communal readings of the Bible from the margins energise laywomen to “recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith.”⁸⁰ As Beverly Haddad puts it, the “experiences of survival shape the lives of ordinary African women each day. And, for these women, each day God is with them in their ‘wilderness experience,’ a situation of near destruction when survival becomes paramount.”⁸¹

The women’s shared experiences become an empowering tool that equips them to interrogate the various, taken-for-granted understanding of their marginalised and stigmatised social conditions. The community of non-academic readers functions powerfully as agents of transformative praxis. Social transformative goals constitute the essential point of departure for the hermeneutical practice.

⁸⁰ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); *idem.*, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xvi.

⁸¹ Beverley G. Haddad, “Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context: The Necessity of a Critical Engagement Between Postmodern and Liberation Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998), 11.

Several Circle women have engaged in this hermeneutical practice. These include Kanyoro,⁸² Nadar,⁸³ Haddad,⁸⁴ Okure,⁸⁵ Plaatjie,⁸⁶ Dube,⁸⁷ Anderson,⁸⁸ Olojede,⁸⁹ and many others. These Circle women see “no opposition between being academic and working at the grassroots.”⁹⁰ Dube concurs and adds, “If all reading is socially conditioned, academic interpretations may be no ‘better’ than readings of untrained readers.”⁹¹ These reading models have opened up a new praxis-oriented hermeneutical space in the context of grassroots women’s communities. Okure insists, “The African women’s approach is inclusive of scholars and non-scholars, the rich and the poor; it is inclusive of the “scientific,” the creative and the popular methods.”⁹²

⁸² Musimbi Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology,” 175.

⁸³ Sarojini Nadar, *Gender, Power, Ideology, and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Interpretations of the Book of Esther* (PhD diss., University of Natal, South Africa, 2003), 184;

⁸⁴ Beverly Haddad, “Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context.”

⁸⁵ Teresa Okure, “Invitation to African Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns.”

⁸⁶ Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, “Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible: A Case of Luke 2:36–38,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001):114-142.

⁸⁷ Musa W. Dube, “An introduction: How we came to “Read With,” *Semeia* 73 (1996):7–17.

⁸⁸ Cheryl B. Anderson, “Lessons of Healing from Naaman (2 Kings 5; 1–27): An African-American Perspective,” in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (ed. I. Phiri, B. Haddad, and M. Masenya; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 23-43.

⁸⁹ Funlola Olojede, “Women and the Cry for Justice in Old Testament Court Narratives: An African Reflection,” *Old Testament Essays* 26 (2013):761-772; “Storytelling as an Indigenous Resource in the Interpretation of Old Testament Ethics and Religion,” *Scriptura* 113 (2014):1-9.

⁹⁰ Oduyoye & Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise*, 15.

⁹¹ Dube, *Grant me Justice*, 50.

⁹² Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures A Feminist Introduction* (ed. Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993), 77.

Another related contextual approach that is similarly community and praxis-oriented is reading the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. The contemporary situation that elicited this hermeneutical practice is the global HIV/AIDS Pandemic. In other words, the methodological approach emerges out of the context of the devastating global crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The HIV pandemic caused a shift in research foci and emphasis. The urgency of the HIV/AIDS pandemic compelled the Circle's third Pan-African conference held in Addis Ababa in 2002 to address the epidemic. The theme of the meeting, "Sex, Stigma, and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices," captured the gender-centric nature of the epidemic.⁹³ One of the Circle's fundamental goals is to connect theory to praxis. Accordingly, the pandemic compelled Circle women to engage in a more activist scholarship to produce impactful, transformative works that are read beyond academic spaces. Circle women mounted collective emergency responses as efforts to address the pandemic. Dube powerfully reconfigured and recontextualised Matthew 25:42-43 as a scathing indictment of the church's handling of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She provocatively laments,

I can hear Jesus saying to us: I was sick with AIDS, and you did not visit me. You did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine to manage my opportunistic infections. I was stigmatised, isolated, and rejected because of HIV/AIDS, and you did not welcome me. I was hungry, thirsty, and naked, completely dispossessed by HIV/AIDS and globalisation in my house and family and you did not give me food, water or any clothing. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not come to my rescue. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan and you did not meet my needs.⁹⁴

HIV and AIDS biblical hermeneutics is, by necessity, activist in orientation. It offers a lens through which Circle women can investigate how other forms of discrimination that African women face intersect significantly to create a situation of women's vulnerability to

⁹³ Nadar and Phiri, eds. "HIV Research, Gender and Religion Studies" In *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa* (Regnum Books, Oxford: Great Britain), 632-639;

⁹⁴ Dube, "Theological Challenges."

HIV/AIDS. Identity markers such as gender, class, ability, socio-economic status, religion are woven into the fabric of women's distinctive disenfranchisement. As such, women living with HIV experience insurmountable barriers and more significant gender-based inequities. Many Circle women have done pioneering work on HIV and AIDS biblical hermeneutics and have contributed substantially to emancipatory readings of the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. Examples of pioneering works that read the Bible through the prism of the HIV/AIDS hermeneutics are Nadar,⁹⁵ Phiri,⁹⁶ Dube,⁹⁷ Mbuwayesango,⁹⁸ Kgalemang⁹⁹ Kubai, Mwaura and Ayanga,¹⁰⁰ and Masenya,¹⁰¹ and that is just to name a few. Many of these Circle

⁹⁵ Nadar, "'Barak God and Die!' Women, HIV and a Theology of Suffering," in *Grant Me justice: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. Kanyoro; Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 2004), 60-79.

⁹⁶ Phiri, and Nadar, "Talking Back to Religion and HIV & AIDS Using an African Feminist Missiological Framework: Sketching the Contours of the Conversation" (paper read at the Ph.D. Seminar, University of Oslo, 2010).

⁹⁷ Dube, "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalisation Era," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities* (eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele; Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003), 71-93; "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era," *International Review of Mission* 91: 2002, 535-549; Dube, & Kanyoro, *Grant me justice! HIV/AIDS & gender readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004); "HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum; Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS," in *Theological Programmes* (Geneva, 2003).

⁹⁸ Mbuwayesango, "Women, poverty, and HIV in Zimbabwe: an exploration of inequalities in health care," *African women, religion, and health* (2006):173-186; "Levirate marriage and HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe: the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)," *Journal of constructive theology* 13 (2007): 5-15.

⁹⁹ Malebogo Kgalemang, "Deconstructing the HIV/AIDS Stigma," in *Grant Me justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* (eds. Dube and Kanyoro; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004), 141-168.

¹⁰⁰ Kubai, Mwaura and Ayanga, eds, *Women, Religion, and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Masenya, "The Bible, HIV/AIDS and South African women: a bosadi (womanhood) perspective," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 31 (2005): 87-201; idem., Phiri, Isabel, Madipoane Masenya, and Beverley Haddad, eds., *African Women*,

women organised at the grassroots level to provide localised survival strategies and solutions to women's interconnected discriminatory practices. They engaged in resistance readings or readings that disrupt the status quo with a social justice orientation centred on improving the quality lives of persons living with HIV and AIDS. The various socially engaged and transformative scholarship focused on dismantling systemic structures of gender inequality.

D. Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Postcolonial biblical hermeneutics have thrived as an interdisciplinary approach to studying colonial and imperial power structures in recent years.¹⁰² Postcolonial biblical interpretation clusters around questions of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture. African postcolonial feminist interpretation is similar to and is in clear continuity with the feminist cultural or contextual hermeneutical paradigm. Like feminist cultural hermeneutics, postcolonial feminist interpretation prioritises the African socio-cultural context as a hermeneutical starting point. However, postcolonial feminist interpretation warrants a separate discussion because it adds an entirely different dimension to biblical interpretation. Postcolonial feminist scholarship directs attention to colonial histories and imperial power relations, which informed women's representations in the Bible.

HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003).

¹⁰² Cf. Andrew Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2017): 164; Lazare S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading," *HTS* 64 (2008): 339-351; Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003): 59-85; Why not Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in Southern Africa: Stating the Obvious or Looking for the Impossible?" *Scriptura* 91 (2006): 63-82.

Postcolonial feminist interpretation operates from an anti-colonialist resistance standpoint. It is an appositional paradigm that interrogates, problematises, and subverts conventionally established modes of biblical interpretation, especially those with no bearings on readers' lived experiences. The inspiration behind the surge of interest in African postcolonial feminist interpretation in recent years is Musa Dube. Dube is arguably the most renowned and leading postcolonial African feminist scholar whose work is internationally well known, especially among mainstream feminist scholars.¹⁰³ Dube's work is paradigmatic of African feminist postcolonial biblical interpretation. She claims that "postcolonial African women, together with their men, are facing a higher enemy flying high above them: the former colonisers who now wear the gowns of neo-colonialism and globalisation."¹⁰⁴ In her landmark, provocative book, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube deploys the postcolonial feminist interpretive lens to investigate, challenge and dismantle entrenched ideologies in the biblical text and interpretations that reinforce and perpetuate colonialist, imperialist, or hegemonic structures and practices. Hers is a robust emancipatory framework that is pivotal for decolonising and depatriarchalising texts and interpretations.

In advocating a decolonising reading of the Bible, Dube compellingly shows why the postcolonial approach is vital:

Postcolonial readings of the Bible must seek to decolonise the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions, and seek ways of reading for liberating interdependence. Liberating dependence here entails a two-fold willingness on the part of readers: first, to propound biblical readings that decolonise imperialistic tendencies and other narrative designs; second, to propound readings that seek to highlight the biblical texts and Jesus as undoubtedly important cultures, which are nonetheless, not above all, but among the many important cultures of the world.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Mbuwayesango, "Feminist Biblical studies in Africa," 84.

¹⁰⁴ Dube, "Searching for the Lost Needle," 213

¹⁰⁵ Dube, "Talitha Cum Hermeneutics: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (eds. Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango, SBLGPS 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 24.

Dube adeptly reiterates that the purpose of reading for deconstruction is reading to subvert or challenge imperial and patriarchal traditions and ideologies. She maintains, “decolonising feminist biblical practices describes the commitment and the methods of reading the Bible that resist both patriarchal and imperial oppression in order to cultivate a space of liberating interdependence between nations, genders, races, ethnicities, the environment, [etc].”¹⁰⁶

Dube’s proposed method’s distinct advantage is that it interweaves postcolonial and African feminist hermeneutical lenses to foster a decolonising, deconstructive reading of the Bible. In direct correlation with Circle goes, Dube’s approach takes contemporary readers’ social location seriously. She insists that “postcolonial is not a discourse of historical accusations, but a committed search and struggle for decolonisation and liberation of the oppressed.”¹⁰⁷ The decolonising stance requires a thoroughgoing interrogation of the power configurations embedded in the biblical texts and the African cultures. Indeed, Dube argues quite emphatically that,

Reading the Bible and other cultural texts for decolonisation is imperative for those committed to the struggle for liberation. Simultaneously, the Bible is a usable text in imperial projects, how it should be read in the light of its role are central questions to decolonisation and the struggle for liberation. As a Motswana woman of Southern Africa, my reading for decolonisation arises from the historical encounter of Christian texts functioning as the ‘talisman’ in imperial possession of foreign places and people.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 111; *idem.*, “Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonisation & Postcolonial African Feminisms.” *Studies in World Christianity* 5 (1999): 213-228; “Reading for Decolonisation,” in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power* (eds. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley; New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 51-75; “Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (eds. S. Schroers, S. Bietenhard; *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement series* 374, Sheffield 2003), 60-76.

¹⁰⁷ Dube, “Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 14.

¹⁰⁸ Dube, “Reading for Decolonisation,” 60.

Dube further contends that imperial values and assumptions are inscribed into the biblical text. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression by powerful and privileged elites. Therefore, viewed through the post-colonial lens, the Bible's complicated and complicit relationship with imperial history must be recognised. A case in point, missionary work was coupled with the imperial expansion, and they both formed an interdependent relationship. Dube maintains that "by implicating the Bible in the taking of the African black lands, biblical texts are marked as powerful rhetorical instruments of imperialism."¹⁰⁹ Consequently, Dube powerfully insists, "to divorce biblical interpretation from current international relations, or to discuss it primarily as an ancient text, becomes another western ideological stance that hides its direct impact on the postcolonial world and maintains its imperial domination of Two-Thirds World countries."¹¹⁰ Conversely, the Bible has equally been used as a force for liberation and empowerment by the marginalised and disenfranchised. The Bible becomes thus a site for oppression and a site for resistance. African women have historically used the Bible as a tool for liberation and hope in situations of oppression.

Congruent with the emancipatory focus of her work, Dube decries the continued dominance of the historical-critical interpretive paradigm. She points out that the various iterations of historical-critical methods are defined and shaped by dominant European-American cultural assumptions and ideologies. The method is laden with Eurocentric presuppositions, values, biases, and promotes hegemonic interpretations of the Bible that serves the political and ideological interests of Euro-American power holders.

Dube's postcolonial feminist biblical hermeneutics continues to be a significant work in African biblical studies. Since her ground-breaking book, there has been increased interest in postcolonial hermeneutics.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 16.

¹¹⁰ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 20.

¹¹¹ Cf. Mbuwayesango, "How Local Divine Powers Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (eds.

Conclusion and Future Directions of African Women Biblical Studies

I began the paper by noting that the Circle facilitated African women's coming and helped them organise as a powerful force for social change and transformation. For more than 30 years, the Circle has transformed social and religious institutions that perpetuate structural, institutional, and systemic discrimination against women in multiple forms. The paper also underlined that African women's biblical scholarship took roots and spread within varied ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts. The article further noted the explosion of methods and hermeneutical frameworks that have surfaced in AWBS since the creation of the Circle. African women scholars have used these wide varieties of methodologies and perspectives to disrupt, deconstruct, and decolonise dominant Eurocentric interpretations of the Bible.

The paper's fundamental commitment was to provide a framework for mapping the work done by African women biblical studies since the inception of the Circle. It organised the mapping using the main interpretive models currently used in AWBS. It identified three main theoretical frameworks, highlighting the historical locations and goals of each of the frameworks. It observed that the theoretical foundations underpinning the different interpretive strategies used in AWBS are inculturated feminist hermeneutics, feminist cultural hermeneutics, and postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation. It showed that different interpretive strategies could be used within the same theoretical framework. For example, it noted that several scholars used the same general lens of the feminist cultural hermeneutical approach, yet each framework is contextually adapted to address specific contextually shaped and dependent questions. A common thread

Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 63–77; Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani, "Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setwana Bible," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (eds. Dube, Mbuvi, Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 78–97.

runs through all the diverse approaches. It makes them all hang together—the radical prioritisation of African socio-cultural contexts as a crucial hermeneutical starting point for biblical interpretation.

As the paper has shown, another common thread that unites African women's biblical scholars is their shared gender justice concerns and experiences of patriarchal social norms and customary practices that reproduce gender inequity. Yet, notwithstanding the commonalities, AWBS acknowledges the wealth of diversity of experiences among Circle women. It also observes that African women hold multiple oppressive statuses; the statuses can better be understood and explained through the prism of intersectionality. As such, AWBS cannot foster a single hermeneutical approach to address African women's questions, concerns, and challenges. It takes seriously the diverse daily struggles faced by African women in marginalised communities. Though construed and applied differently by different cultures and communities, the distinct lived realities are grounded in androcentric, patriarchal assumptions and ideologies. Therefore, African women chose methodologies that best suit their social location and interpretive goals. Additionally, all the works show a strong commitment to liberation and social transformation.

What further binds approaches together is their appeal to the *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation and life as a compelling call to action and guiding principle. *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics of liberation equally calls for solidarity and collective action among African women. This *Talitha Cum* consciousness facilitated a sense of solidarity among women in the academy and grassroots women and communities.

Finally, in terms of research and publications, the paper noted that, for African women biblical scholars, the past three decades have been prolific even though much remains to be done. African women scholars have also been productive contributors to the success of the SBL. Despite this, the poignant question that Nadar asked during the SBL

2006 session remains a lingering question: “Who, within global scholarship read(s) Circle works?”¹¹² Nadar notes that “Musimbi Kanyoro’s feminist cultural hermeneutics, or Musa Dube’s postcolonial feminist hermeneutics [. . .] still remains on the margins, and is scarcely even quoted within male liberation discourses let alone used as sources for their reflections.”¹¹³ To date, this remains an important unanswered question. However, Masenya attempts to address Nadar’s concerns when she states, “choosing not to mimic mainstream gender-sensitive frameworks but to develop own home-grown, home-friendly frameworks, ones which would first give priority to the needs of local women, will naturally come with a price, a price so high that one might struggle to gain upward academic mobility.”¹¹⁴

While the question Nadar poses may remain a perennial problem, nevertheless, AWBS has become and will remain a force to contend with in the guild of biblical scholarship. Although there is still a paucity of African women biblical scholars, an international or global African women’s scholarly presence has finally crystallised. African women have contributed in increasing numbers to critical biblical scholarship. They have done ground-breaking innovative research that has become increasingly vital in global biblical scholarship. Additionally, African women biblical scholars have improved their impact and are no longer marginalised by the broader international academic community. African women’s scholarly works are regularly presented at annual regional and annual academic conferences. They have also published scores of articles in highly respected, internationally reputed peer-reviewed journals. African women equally occupy high positions in the society of Biblical Literature. Undeniably, therefore, AWBS publications have a broad and growing influence in the global academic circles.

¹¹² Masenya, “For Ever Trapped?” 193.

¹¹³ Nadar, “Changing the World: The Task of Feminist Biblical Scholars,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25 (Fall 2009), 140.

¹¹⁴ Masenya, “For Ever Trapped? An African Voice on Insider/Outsider Dynamics within South African Old Testament Gender-Sensitive Frameworks,” *OTE* 27 (2014): 201.

As we advance, to enable the field's growth, AWBS must build on, sustain, and foster the momentum it has generated. AWBS have to continue to foster transnational professional networks and communities with their global counterparts. To preserve its vitality, AWBS should be willing to engage in collaborative dialogue and research partnerships with others in the guild of biblical scholarship. AWBS' commitment to working in collaboration with colleagues across the biblical studies guild—not just colleagues from other minoritised groups—could help raise critical awareness of the deeply entrenched gender and racial inequities that persist in the guild. It could also become an avenue for greater dissemination of AWBS' publications to a broader readership. African women biblical scholars have made significant strides in the last three decades to work collaboratively on writing projects to promote collective growth in research and publications. Just as important, moving forward, African women scholars need to be intentional about supporting each other's work. This support can be accomplished by reading and disseminating each other scholarship, scholarship of well-established scholars, and the burgeoning scholarship of emergent scholars.

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