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Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove? : Reconsidering Methodology for African Biblical Hermeneutics

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### 3 Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove?

#### Reconsidering Methodology for *African Biblical Hermeneutics*

##### *Abstract*

The search for an *African Biblical Hermeneutic* (ABH) has come a long way and has grown into an established discipline. In the enterprise, several methodologies and African resources have been employed and deployed to develop an ABH that is adequately African. While acknowledging the contributions of other scholars to ABH, e.g. E. Mburu's *African Hermeneutics* using the imagery of a four-legged stool, this paper, however, approaches ABH significantly differently. Using a "new" imagery of a three-stone cooking stove to describe the form and function as well as the tasks involved in ABH, the present study proposes an alternative methodology that involves three broad tasks and eight specific tasks of ABH. In this analogy, stone 1 is the analytical tasks of ABH; stone 2 is the performative tasks; and stone 3 is the transformative tasks. In this way, this paper contributes, methodologically, in the conversation towards finding an ABH that is truly African and truly biblical.

**Keywords:** *Africa, Hermeneutics, Bible, Context, Transformation*

### 1. An Overview of *African Biblical Hermeneutics* (ABH)

Different scholars use different nomenclature to describe the enterprise of interpreting and appropriating the Bible in African contexts. For example, while Adamo calls it *African Biblical Hermeneutics* (Adamo, 2015), Mbuvi calls it *African Biblical Studies* (Mbuvi, 2023), and others call it Af

*rican Biblical Interpretation*. Ukpong describes the specific task of interpreting the Bible in African contexts as “inculturation hermeneutics” (Ukpong, 1995) while Dube describes it as “decolonization” (Dube, 2000; Abogunrin, 2005). West sums up the entire enterprise of engaging with (including interpreting and applying) the Bible in African contexts as a hyphenated “post-colonial” project because “the presence of the hyphen is a reminder of Africa’s entangled time, allowing for a pause between terms and historical moments” (West, 2018, p. 247). While each of these nomenclatures can express certain nuances that the others may not, it seems they are used differently but mean the same thing or have the same goal, namely, to carve out a way of reading biblical texts in African contexts that is, to a considerable extent, African in terms of method, content, and topics addressed. However, in this chapter, *African Biblical Hermeneutics* (ABH) will be used to represent the various nomenclatures, except for direct quotations where each author’s nomenclature will be retained.

Noting that ABH is both innovative and reactionary, Mbuvi argues that “a genuine ABS is therefore an amalgamation of multiple interpretive methods, approaches and foci that reflect a creative engagement of the African cosmological reality and the Bible” (Mbuvi, 2017, p. 149; Mbuvi, 2023, pp. 105–107). West advocates for a distinctive ABH that is significantly different from the Western approaches that have been mainly shaped by grammatical-historical approaches. However, he further notes that even if ABH engages historical-critical approaches, they are to do so creatively rather than prescriptively (West, 1997, p. 10; Mbuvi, 2017, p. 152). West proposes that in ABS, unlike in the West, the expert reader or scholar reads “with the ordinary reader” and not “on behalf of the ordinary reader” (West, 2004; Loba-Mkole & Wendland, pp. 12–13; Mbuvi, 2017, p. 154), being accountable more to the African context than to the guild of biblical studies (West, 2018, p. 259).

Adamo attempts to tackle the issue of defining a distinctive ABH headlong with his 2015 paper entitled “What is African Biblical Hermeneutics?” (Adamo, 2015, pp. 59–72), which is an updated version of his numerous presentations and publications on the subject matter (Adamo, 2001). Adamo defines ABH as:

“a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting

the effect of the cultural, ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation. It is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective. African biblical hermeneutics is contextual since interpretation is always done in a particular context. Specifically, it means that the analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of an African world-view and culture.” (Adamo, 2015, p. 59).

An important word that Adamo does not include in the definition above but which plays a vital role in his construal of ABH is “transformation.” He sees ABH as primarily a principle of interpreting the Bible for transformation in or of Africa (Adamo, 2015, p. 62). Adamo describes the enterprise of distinctively interpreting the Bible in Africa as African biblical hermeneutics, African biblical transformational hermeneutics, or African biblical studies (Adamo, 2015, p. 62).<sup>1</sup> According to Adamo, ABH has three main characteristics: it is “liberational, transformational and culturally sensitive” (Adamo, 2015, p. 64). Similarly, West describes ABH as not only post-colonial and a site of struggle, but also as tri-polar in the sense that it involves the African context as one pole, the biblical context as another pole, and the appropriation pole, referring to the dialogical or intermediating processes between the first two poles (West, 2018).

While the majority of scholars adhere to the common features of the ABS that fronts or foregrounds African realities, others are critical. Byang Kato, for example, criticizes ABS of over-exulting African culture, religion and philosophy beyond proportion (Kato, 1975, pp. 53–54, see also Tienou, 1984, pp. 151–165). Even though Adamo takes a relatively “safe” posture of humility when he acknowledges that ABH, like any other hermeneutic, is not 100 percent objective (Adamo, 2015, p. 64), Kato’s critique applies to what Adamo sees as the purpose of ABH, namely, “to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed” (Adamo, 2015, p. 63). Such a “reactionary” and sometimes “militant” approach (as Adamo’s and similar ones) to ABH is, in my opinion, counter-productive for three reasons: first, it comes from a competitive rather than collaborative approach to biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Adamo notes further that ABH is related to, though not the same as, the following terms: inculturation hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics, contextual hermeneutics, Africentric hermeneutics and vernacular hermeneutics.

interpretation that meaningfully engages and benefits from different contexts. Secondly, its tendency to blame any misinterpretation and/or misapplication of biblical texts in Africa to Eurocentric methodologies provides a fertile ground for romanticizing the African culture, religion, philosophy, and ABH itself, therefore not critiquing its own inherent weaknesses that could hinder human flourishing within its own corridors. Thirdly, it lends itself more to a retrogressive rather than a progressive methodology in the sense that it focuses more on what “has been done to Africans” and misses out on the most important question of how the Bible can genuinely transform Africans and Africa in view of our history and the inherent weaknesses of our own culture and traditions. A transformative methodology needs to be more forward than backward looking. Elizabeth Mburu’s hermeneutics (Mburu, 2019), from a distinctively evangelical orientation, is an example of a more forward-looking African biblical hermeneutics. In what follows, I summarize Mburu’s Four-Legged Stool hermeneutical steps, then present my own Three-Stone Cooking Stove hermeneutical model as an alternative methodology for ABH. By engaging more with Mburu’s distinctively evangelical hermeneutics instead of other recent proposals for ABH such as Mbuvi’s (Mbuvi, 2023), the present study acknowledges its evangelical presupposition, therefore situating the discourse within evangelical biblical hermeneutics in African contexts.<sup>2</sup> Four evangelical presuppositions with which the approach of Mburu and the present study come to the biblical text are: a hermeneutic of trust; a commitment to being accountable to both the biblical text and African context; a commitment to the author’s intended meaning of the text but different applications; and commitment to the transformative power of the Bible in the African context, despite its entangled history with colonialism and patriarchy.

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<sup>2</sup> It may seem problematic to isolate a distinctively evangelical hermeneutics within the broader ABH, but it is necessary because it clarifies the specific presupposition with which the biblical text is approached. For the sake of clarity, the evangelical presupposition is namely that of a hermeneutic of trust rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion. This, nevertheless, does not in any way imply that the African context is taken lightly or at secondary importance. Instead, the African reality or context is awarded the same importance and analytical rigor as the biblical context.

## 2. Engaging Elizabeth Mburu's African Hermeneutics

Elizabeth Mburu's Four-Legged Stool methodology for ABH is currently one of the most elaborate discourses on ABH. Mburu notes that the source and nature of the problem of a shallow Christianity in Africa is a dichotomy of faith and everyday life, indicating that our Christian faith has not been internalized due to the Western tradition of interpretation that we have imbibed without contextualizing our interpretation (Mburu, 2019, p. 5). According to Mburu, the solution to the dichotomy problem is a contextualized hermeneutic, hence her proposal for an African hermeneutic (Mburu, 2019, p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

Noting that hermeneutic must be linked to a particular geographical place, Mburu argues that "we need an African hermeneutic, one that raises questions that a hermeneutic from a different environment would not" (Mburu, 2019, pp. 5–6). An African hermeneutic is one which draws on aspects of "African culture that facilitates our understanding of the practical implications of the Bible" (Mburu, 2019, p. 6). Mburu's aim is to develop "a hermeneutical model that works for us as African readers of Scripture" (Mburu, 2019, p. 65). She uses the metaphor of a four-legged stool, which she describes as a "model," to describe a method that works well in interpreting Scripture in Africa.

Mburu's four legs of African hermeneutics include: Leg 1: parallel to the African context. Leg 2: the theological context. Leg 3: the literary context. Leg 4: the historical context. The fifth model is the seat, supported by the legs, which is the application to an African context (Mburu, 2019, pp. 65–66).

Similar to what Grant Osborne (Osborn, 2010) describes as the hermeneutical spiral, Mburu notes how her method is not entirely linear but circular, noting that

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<sup>3</sup> Wessel has rightly observed that Mburu fails to recognise that when she proposes that a Western tradition of interpretation is responsible for dichotomised lives in Africa, it equally implies that Christians in the West who already have a Western contextualized interpretation do not live dichotomised lives (Wessels, 2020, p. 361). This, however, is not the case because living a dichotomized Christian life is as much a problem in the West as it is in Africa, if not even more.

“the legs are not independent of each other and we will find that we will be moving back and forth between them as we try to find the right balance. Each leg affects the other, and we will be making constant adjustments as we gain greater understanding of the passage we are considering.” (Mburu, 2019, p. 66).

## 2.1 In Search for Metaphors: Four-Legged Stool and Three-Stone Cooking Stove

Before engaging Mburu’s African hermeneutic further, a brief engagement with her Four-Legged Stool metaphor is helpful. One good reason for Mburu’s use of the Four-Legged Stool metaphor is that it is a familiar object both in the past and present Africa (Mburu, 2019, p. 65). While familiarity in the past and present Africa is a good argument for using the four-legged stool, it needs to be noted that it does not adequately serve her goal of presenting a uniquely African hermeneutic. If the goal is to produce an African Hermeneutic that “raises questions that a hermeneutic from a different environment would not” (Mburu, 2019, pp. 5–6), then a more uniquely African metaphor than a four-legged stool would be more suitable, seeing that a four-legged stool is a universal object that is familiar in both the Global South and the Global North. Nevertheless, as a heuristic tool, Mburu’s Four-Legged Stool metaphor successfully and helpfully represents her five hermeneutical models.

The present study presents an alternative hermeneutic that focuses on reading and discovering the meaning of specific biblical texts, using an alternative metaphor of a Three-Stone Cooking Stove. While it can be argued that a Three-Stone Cooking Stove is also not peculiar to Africa as it is still in use in other parts of the Global South (after all, a lot of African culture is similar to other parts of the Global South), it at least serves the purpose of uniqueness, which is important for ABH (Mbuvi, 2023, pp. 105–106), compared to a universally familiar four-legged stool, since it is extremely rare to find a Three-Stone Cooking Stove used in today’s Western world.

Moreover, the metaphor of a Three-Stone Cooking Stove conveys the nuance of something being prepared to be consumed or eaten, with the extended nuance of it satisfying one’s hunger (for freedom, for transfor-

mation, for truth, for the word of God, and so on). This metaphor, therefore, creates a vivid expectation on the reader of some concrete “spiritual” meal at the end of the interpretation of the Bible, which would therefore satisfy the spiritual hunger of Christians in Africa. Furthermore, the Three-Stone Cooking Stove metaphor helpfully conveys the nuance of ‘communal’ participation in the interpretive process, since cooking in Africa is primarily a communal activity as much as eating is.

For a Three-Stone Cooking Stove to perform its function, it requires the collaboration of all members of the household, just as biblical interpretation in African contexts involves every member of the church, what West calls “ordinary readers” or non-scholarly readers (West, 1995, pp. 60–69) and Mbuvi calls grassroots readers (Mbuvi, 2023, 107). At least in the culture of the Zaar people in Nigeria, cooking is a collaborative activity as it pertains to providing what is cooked (such as meat from hunting or grains from farming, mostly by the men of the family), bringing (and breaking) the firewood (done by men and women of the family), picking up fire from the neighbors (mostly done by a child), adjusting the burning firewood to be sure the fire does not die down (mostly done by male and female children in the family), applying the ingredients and supervising the entire cooking process (mostly done by the mothers or women of the house), and the communal eating of the prepared meal that involves every member of the family, guests, or neighbors. The fact that the firewood has to be carefully observed and adjusted to keep burning and cooking the meal represents the importance of biblical interpreters always observing the appropriateness and impact of their interpretation and making the necessary adjustments to ensure an accountable interpretation.

At a more specific level, just as the pieces of firewood from the three angles of the Three-Stone Cooking Stove meet in the middle and together burn and cook the meal, so also the eight specific interpretative tasks in the present hermeneutic overlap and together deliver a comprehensive interpretation of a biblical text. However, whether one uses the Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove imagery, Kügler’s caution needs to be taken to avoid using African metaphors that regard the Bible as a magical tool rather than literature (Kügler, 2013, pp. 184–217). The present methodology, therefore, approaches the Bible as literature to be read,

analyzed, and applied to/in African contexts. We shall, however, first summarize and engage with Mburu's four legs of African (biblical) hermeneutics before presenting the exegetics hermeneutics or methodology of the present study.

Before turning to engaging with Mburu's four legs of ABH, it is worth noting that the major point of difference between the ABH of the present study and that of Mburu is in the sequence of the tasks involved in ABH rather than in the content or substance of her approach. Hence, this study seeks to advance the discourse on ABH from an evangelical standpoint from where Mburu stops. In so doing, the weaknesses and strengths of Mburu's methodology will be highlighted.

## **2.2 Problematizing the Argument for Drawing Parallels with the African Contexts**

While agreeing with Mburu on starting with an African context, the major disagreement between the Three-Stone Cooking Stove methodology of the present research and Mburu's Four-Legged Stool methodology is in her proposal to start by drawing parallels between the African context and biblical context. It is worth presenting her two reasons for starting with the African context in her own words before responding to it:

“One, it enables us to begin to understand the biblical text from a familiar position. This is important because hermeneutics involves moving from the known to the unknown. Two, examining our own worldview and context puts us in a position to recognize where our assumptions do not fit with the text. If we do not know what we are assuming, how will we even recognize when our assumptions are wrong?” (Mburu, 2019, p. 67)

Conceding that it is not always easy to fully analyze the African context and worldview at this early stage in the hermeneutical process, Mburu still argues that these parallels help us to acknowledge our worldviews as valid resources for meaning, as well as make the parallels begin to be familiar to the reader (Mburu, 2019, p. 69).

A number of problems, however, arise from Mburu's arguments for starting with drawing parallels between the African context and biblical context. First, her statement that starting with the African context “enables us to begin to understand the biblical text from a familiar position” (Mburu, 2019, p. 67) is based on an assumption or speculation of what the biblical

text says without first analyzing it. Mburu's argument for starting with analyzing the African context or worldview is acceptable, but her argument for drawing parallels between the African context and the biblical context at this early stage in the hermeneutical process before analyzing the biblical text is premature. How can parallels be established to the extent of stating whether the African context fits or agrees with the biblical context or not without first analyzing the biblical text to come to an accountable conclusion as to what it says or means? The exegetics methodology below separates the analysis of African context and the analysis of a biblical text as different tasks, while an analysis of the similarities and differences (parallels) of these two contexts is also a separate model in the hermeneutical process.

Even though Mburu says at this stage we "begin to understand" the parallels between the African context and biblical context, thereby deferring the full understanding to a later stage (after other legs are completed), another problem arises. What we are "beginning to understand" already lays the foundation and possibly shapes our view of the text such that even subsequent legs (e.g. historical, literary, and theological contexts) would be understood in light of the initial premature understanding of the text that we thought we had. The fact that at this point the text has not been analyzed to come to an accountable conclusion as to its meaning makes establishing any parallel between the African context and biblical text premature, unaccountable, and standing on a faulty ground. It is like building a house on a weak and sandy foundation that one is not sure can hold the entire four-story building, with the expectation that when the building is completed and it is seen that the foundation cannot hold the entire building, the foundation can be strengthened afterwards to be able to hold the entire building. In other words, while starting with the African context is appropriate, Mburu's proposal for establishing a parallel between the African context and biblical text at this stage is significantly problematic to biblical the interpretive fidelity that Mburu seeks to promote (Mburu, 2019).

The second problem with Mburu's proposal of starting with the African context is that of ambiguity of the subject matter on the part of the biblical text. In the second reason, Mburu says "examining our own worldview and context puts us in a position to recognize where our assumptions do

not fit with the text”. The question, however, is, at this stage, which specific biblical text, worldview or context do those African worldviews need to fit with?

Hence, starting with an African context in the present study means starting with identifying or naming an existential (theological or ethical) question, concern, or a worldview in Africa to which the interpreter seeks to relate with the Bible, then undertaking cultural analysis of the identified question, concern or worldview. For example, an existential problem of a widow’s in-laws dispossessing her of every possession and subjecting her to some humiliating rituals (such as shaving her hair) on the accusation that she killed her husband is a starting point for African biblical hermeneutics. The interpreter(s), whether an individual or community, therefore, analyses this cultural practice by way of describing its features, rationale, and impact. After this step comes the selection and analysis of a relevant biblical text that can speak to the specific African culture under consideration. In the case of the cultural treatment of widows, texts such as 1 Timothy 5:3–15 or James 1:27 could be relevant biblical texts.

Why an interpreter or group of interpreters go to a particular biblical text could be based on their present or previous reading (mostly through translated Bibles in English, French, Portuguese, or some African languages), sermon, or teaching that they had heard on the text that seems to resonate, rightly or wrongly, with the existential problem with which they are confronted. This knowledge or idea that they have of the text is, whether correct or incorrect, however, subjected to analysis of the text to ascertain what it meant within its ancient socio-historical context. Only thereafter can any attempt be made to draw parallels with the African context in the next steps of the hermeneutics. The exegetics methodology below will clarify the processes involved therein.

A brief example using Matthew 18:15–17 as a pericope will suffice. I was drawn to this text when a dispute arose in our church denomination regarding the number of times a pastor is to be placed on church discipline before he is dismissed from the pastoral ministry of the church. One group that advocated for three times before a pastor is expelled made explicit references to Jesus’ statement to “treat them [the offenders] as you would a pagan and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). The topic or subject

matter of Matthew 18:15–17 is disputed between those who see the subject matter as “church discipline” (disciplinary view) and those who see it as “reconciliation in interpersonal relationship” (interpersonal reconciliatory view) (Manomi, 2023, 93). Going by Mburu’s proposal to draw parallels as the first step in the hermeneutical process, one can ask, are the parallels to be drawn between church discipline or interpersonal reconciliation and similar practices in African contexts? Unless one does a full study of this passage to decide on which subject matter it addresses, one does not know the specific theme with which to draw parallels with the African context. As will be seen below, a careful exegetical analysis of the text situates the text within the theme of reconciliation in interpersonal relationship rather than church discipline (Manomi, 2023). Hence, interpersonal reconciliation is the theme analyzed and on which parallels are drawn between the biblical and African contexts.

### **2.3 Problematizing the Theological Context**

Mburu’s theological context focuses more on general theological contexts rather than specific contexts of passages or pericopes that are under study. However, in most cases, the majority of people who read the Bible in Africa read specific passages rather than the whole passage, and they focus more on the theology of those specific passages rather than the theology of the whole book. Mburu’s reference to the theology of the Gospel of Mark as primarily focused on Jesus as the Son of God rather than focusing on Jesus Christ as the Messiah is good. However, Mark’s gospel is a narrative, therefore, it is relatively easy to locate its broad theological emphasis or theme(s). Other books of the New Testament, however, may contain multiple rather than a single theological emphasis. In this case, the theological context should be more passage-specific (in agreement with the way many Africans read biblical texts) than whole book-specific as is the case in Mburu’s hermeneutics.

Another problem of sequence in Mburu’s methodology regards the sequence between analyzing the theological context on the one hand and the historical-cultural context on the other hand. Mburu states that her reason for starting with the theological context rather than the historical and cultural context of the biblical text is that, in both historical and con-

temporary Africa, most readers of the Bible first pay attention to the theological emphasis of the text before anything else, and their understanding of the theological emphasis normally determines their interpretation of the text (Mburu, 2019, p. 70). By focusing on theological emphasis, Mburu means that Africans are prone to look for issues that relate to God, faith, and how that affects their everyday life when they read a biblical text. Caution (as Mburu herself acknowledges), however, needs to be taken when considering the theological context of a text, referring to both the theological context of production of the text and the theology that can be discerned within the text. In Mburu's words, "At this level, therefore, some tentative points of application will already begin to present themselves. But we must allow ourselves to go through the entire process, examining all four legs of the hermeneutical stool, so that our application is informed by thorough analysis" of the text (Mburu, 2019, p. 70).

Mburu seems to be aware of the potential interpretive error in starting with the theological context before the historical or cultural context of the text, when she notes that "this approach is harmful to interpretation because we are ignoring the context of the Bible and prioritizing our own context" (Mburu, 2019, p. 71). Similarly, she cautions thus: "It is important to be very careful when examining this second leg of the hermeneutical stool. We must not allow premature conclusions about the theological emphases of the text to dictate how we understand the other legs" (Mburu, 2019, p. 72). Despite noting these pitfalls, Mburu still proposes that we start with the theological context before the literary and historical contexts because that is how Africans read the Bible. One would then ask, if this is a premature conclusion that is "harmful to interpretation," as Mburu said, is this approach still to be adopted or corrected? Should we build an entire hermeneutical step (leg 2) on premature assumptions regarding the theological context of a text or defer the theological context to a later stage, after the literary, historical and cultural contexts of the biblical text have been analyzed? If any, a valid argument for starting with the theological context would have been that the theological context helps, contributes to, or lays a foundation for understanding the literary, historical and cultural contexts of the text. However, Mburu does not make this argument, neither does she show how starting with the theological context

helps in correctly understanding the literary, historical and cultural contexts.

Moreover, is the way Africans read by focusing on the theological context fixed or correctable? Is such a reading to be encouraged or discouraged and corrected? Again, the same critique of leg one applies to leg 2 (theological context), namely, the sequence which leads to tentative findings and premature conclusions pending the subsequent legs. It is generally true that the hermeneutical process is not linear but circular or a spiral, but it is not helpful to intentionally reach premature conclusions based on speculations and expect the subsequent steps to correct the previous assumptions. Such assumptions have a potential to determine instead of correct the remaining hermeneutical processes. The exegethics methodology incorporates the theological emphasis of the text in the textual analysis, grounding the theological emphasis on the grammatico-historical analysis of the text.

## **2.4 Problematising Mburu's Literary Context**

Mburu's leg 3 is the literary context, which involves studying the genre of the specific passage under consideration, the literary techniques used therein, grammatical and syntactical analysis of the passage, and the literary context of the passage as it relates to what comes before and after it. Mburu expects that this step will modify and clarify the tentative interpretive assumptions reached in the first two legs (African context and theological context, respectively) (Mburu, 2019, p. 73). However, as argued above, the issue here is the ordering of the legs rather than the content thereof, even though the ordering has implications for the content. Mburu's leg 3 (literary analysis) ought to have come before one aspect of her leg 1 (parallels to the African context) and leg 2 (theological context), because the conclusions in those legs are premature and tentative, awaiting the literary analysis, and because there is no satisfactory justification for starting with drawing parallels between African context and biblical context and analyzing the theological context before the literary context of the text.

Generally, one important hermeneutical feature that is crucially missing in Mburu's hermeneutical steps is the fact that she does not show how the first two legs help in getting the third leg correctly. In other words, while

Mburu shows how understanding the literary context of the text helps in correcting the premature conclusions reached in leg 1 and 2 (parallels to the African context and the theological context) respectively, she does not show how starting with parallels to the African context and theological context help in understanding the literary context of the text. If the literary context of the text is so important in correcting the premature conclusions reached regarding the parallels to the African and the theological contexts, and analyzing the parallels to the African context and theological contexts do not play a role in understanding the literary context, then starting with the literary context before analyzing parallels to the African context and theological contexts provides a more logical and interpretive flow, therefore more helpful.

## 2.5 Problematizing Mburu's Historical Context

In the historical and cultural context (leg 4), Mburu rightly notes how studying the socio-cultural, political and economic circumstances in which the text emerged helps in understanding the text. The problem here, in line with my critique above, is that of order or sequence. To defer historical and cultural analysis of biblical texts to the last step in the hermeneutical process is to create room for the entire hermeneutic to be based on premature assumptions as to the meaning of selected biblical texts rather than accountable exegetical analysis.

Again, while Mburu notes how the fourth leg (historical and cultural context) helps in refining the tentative application points noted in the previous legs (parallels to the African context, theological context, and literary context), she does not show how the initial first two steps starting with the parallels to the African context and theological contexts (leg 1 and 2 respectively) contribute to an accountable understanding of the literary, historical and cultural contexts (leg 3 and 4 respectively). Moreover, Mburu notes how the last two legs help to correct the premature conclusions reached in the first two legs. This, therefore, suggests the importance of starting with the literary, historical and cultural contexts of the biblical text to avoid arriving at premature conclusions when studying the theological context and drawing parallels with the African context.

Mburu's hermeneutical approach is rightly informed by her idea of moving from the known to the unknown, as noted above. Mburu, however,

does not demonstrate how the so-called “known” (African context) helps in arriving at the “unknown” (biblical context), thereby weakening her argument. As far as the hermeneutical processes are concerned, it seems, therefore, that after the African cultural analysis, starting with the third and fourth legs (literary and historical contexts) is more meaningful because it provides the basis for discovering the theological context of the text and for drawing parallels with the African context.

Hence, if I were to re-order Mburu’s Four-Legged Stool, it would be in this order: Leg 1 is the African cultural context. Leg 2 is the literary and theological context of the biblical text; leg 3 is the historical and cultural context of the text; and leg 4 is the parallels between the African context and the biblical context. Application to the African context, being the seat, stays where Mburu placed it, after the four legs.

## **2.6 The Seat of the Four-Legged Stool: Application**

The application to the contemporary situation is the fifth stage in Mburu’s hermeneutical process, and one that binds all the four legs together and refines the tentative applications in the previous steps. She rightly notes that throughout the hermeneutics processes, application is taking place subconsciously. However, it is at this stage that the right way to apply the text in our current context is confirmed (Mburu, 2019, p. 84). Mburu, unlike many postmodern approaches, rightly affirms that each text can only have one meaning – the one intended by its author. “Meaning is therefore understood to be single and determined by the author of the text.” (Mburu, 2019, p. 85).

There is a difference between meaning and application. Mburu rightly notes that a text has one meaning but multiple applications, when we understand application as referring to the “significance of the text for a modern audience” (Mburu, 2019, p. 85). Moreover, Mburu notes the difference between culture-bound truths that do not allow for direct application today (e.g. wearing clothes made of wool and linen woven together in Deuteronomy 22:11) and trans-contextual truth, meaning absolute truth that applies to any culture at any time, such as in Exodus 20:1–17. In culture-bound or relative truth, we seek for the principle behind it, e.g. holiness (Mburu, 2019, p. 87). Noteworthy, however, is that, while trans-contextual

truth applies to all cultures, the specific way it applies may vary. For example, the command to honor one's parents in Exodus 20:12 applies to all cultures, but the specific ways such honor is shown will vary from culture to culture, thus, needing an application in each context (Mburu, 2019, p. 87).

Mburu provides a helpful practical way to apply trans-contextual or non-cultural biblical truths in African contexts, following three steps. Firstly, identify trans-contextual content of Christianity and the way it has been formed and expressed in Africa. Secondly, dis-engage the trans-contextual from the culture-bound aspects of the text or subject matter. Thirdly, re-frame the transcultural truths in ways that are consonant with African cultural expressions. Using the example of the command to honor one's parents, Mburu notes that, unlike the way that honor was expressed in the Jewish culture by a girl accepting her parent's choice of a husband for her, such honor can be expressed in modern Africa where girls of marriageable age choose their husbands but follow the prescribed cultural procedures like paying a bride-price before getting married (Mburu, 2019, pp. 87–88).

### **3. Three-Stone Cooking Stove: A Methodology for African Biblical Hermeneutics**

Here I present my own African Biblical Hermeneutic, using the imagery of a Three-Stone Cooking Stove. As argued above, the imagery of a Three-Stone Cooking Stove is appropriate to African biblical hermeneutics. A cooking stove represents a bubbling, lively, and aromatic scene that holds hope and promise of a delicious meal, in this case, a biblical message of “good news” to the hungry, marginalized, terrorized, and colonized African people. The contributions of ABH to liberating Africa spiritually, socially, economically, politically, and so on cannot afford to assume a sitting and restful posture. Such an enterprise requires a lively and bubbling posture that a Three-Stone Cooking Stove represents. The imagery of a cooking pot resonates with Masenya and Ngwa's description of ABH using the imagery of “cooking pots and calabashes” (Masenya & Ngwa, 2018). Nevertheless, it is helpful to clarify that the real issue here is not that of which metaphor is better – that would be too light a topic to address. What is at

stake is that of the viability of the hermeneutical model, as it relates to its potency to provide an ABH that diligently and accountably interprets Scripture and appropriates it in ways that result in positive transformation of African persons, institutions, churches, and society at large. To this noble task we turn.

I refer to my ABH as exegethics (Manomi, 2020; Manomi, 2021) – comprising the words exegesis and ethics, due to my specific focus on “ethics” (human behavior and the evaluation thereof) rather than “theology” of biblical texts. Nevertheless, the exegethics methodology applies to all aspects of the text. A caveat needs to be stated here, however, that this distinction is only heuristic, as ethics is inherently embedded in theology, and theology is inherently ethical.

This methodology involves three broad tasks that represent the Three-Stone Cooking Stove and eight overlapping specific tasks that represent the fire-woods that burn and cook the food in the pot between the three stones. Stone 1 is the Analytical Tasks; Stone 2 is the Performative Tasks; and Stone 3 is the Transformative Tasks. Under each of these broad tasks are specific tasks that form the fire-woods. Analytical Tasks include: Task 1 – Cultural Analysis; Task 2 – Textual Analysis; Task 3 – Synthetic Analysis; and Task 4 – Appropriative Analysis. Performative Tasks include: Tasks 5 – Scriptural Performance; and Task 6 – Performance Evaluation. Transformative Tasks include: Task 7 – Identification and Description of Transformation; and Task 8 – Description of Interpretive Risks.

A brief description of the eight tasks in the Exegethics methodology will be presented here.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1 Analytical Tasks

*Task 1 – Cultural Analysis:* This task identifies and analyzes a specific existential or theological topic, question, concern, or worldview in any given

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<sup>4</sup> The Exegethics methodology is in the process of development, with a book length presentation and application of the methodology in the process. The Exegethics methodology has undergone and is still undergoing modifications, as evident in several of my previous publications. I hope that presenting it in this publication generates conversations that will further enrich the methodology before the book is out.

African context (e.g. cultural practice, politics, church, marriage). Undertaking cultural analysis of an African ethical reality is based on the recognition that African ethics is or should no longer be regarded as “the cradle” and “experimental space” (Ngwa, 2017, p. 1) of ethics but a developed ethical space with its complete resources, which can be subjected to critical analysis, thereby offering valid ethical reasoning to global ethical discourse.

Cultural analysis is vital to hermeneutics because cultures are the “*loci theologici* that provide the specific languages it needs to be able to formulate the Gospel in its inescapable culturality” (Gruber, 2017, p. 42). Similar to Mburu’s proposal for considering traditional and modern African reality in African hermeneutics (Mburu, 2019, pp. 45–64), cultural analysis here includes the analysis of both the historical and current (popular) aspects of African culture as it relates to the specific theme under consideration. Considering both historical and contemporary African culture is important because some contemporary cultural practices, even if modified, can be traced to historical or traditional African realities. Understanding the historical and traditional background, therefore, gives a clearer understanding of the form and function of the cultural phenomenon under consideration. Cultural analysis is necessary at the initial stage because appropriating or constructing an African biblical ethics or theology requires understanding African Traditional Religion (ATR), culture and ethics in their pre-colonial, pre-Christian or pre-Islamic conceptions and how those historical conceptions continue to influence contemporary African culture.

Due to the multiplicity of African contexts, the specific African context needs to be defined. The present study argues that the nature of the specific audience an interpreter has in mind determines what aspects of African culture is to be analyzed – whether the historical, traditional, or contemporary African culture. For example, within the context of a rural and homogenous local church congregation where most of the members are from the same ethnic group and language, cultural analysis will take the form of analyzing the traditional culture as it relates to the issue or theme under consideration. For a cosmopolitan urban audience, however, cultural analysis will take the form of analyzing contemporary (popular) culture. For a youthful urban audience, cultural analysis will take the form of

analyzing African popular or even hip-hop culture as it relates to the theme or issue under consideration. Whether the audience are women, men, leaders, students, etc., cultural analysis is audience-focused.

### **3.2 FARI Methodology: A Methodology for African Cultural Analysis**

The logical question that follows the proposal to undertake cultural analysis is that of methodology. What specific methodology will guide the cultural analysis? To this, the present study proposes four steps in doing cultural analysis, which includes analyzing the Features, Agents, Rationale, and Impact (FARI). Whatever cultural practice or worldview one picks and whichever aspect the focus is on (whether the historical, traditional, or contemporary form and function of such a cultural import), when the features, agents (actors), rationale (justification), and impact of such a cultural practice are identified and described, we can say that the specific cultural practice or worldview has been analyzed. In this context, features of the culture refer to the nature, symbols, and activities involved in a specific cultural phenomenon. Agents here refers to the people, actors, or recipients (active or passive, including victims) involved in such a cultural phenomenon. Rationale refers to the cultural justification or planation for such a cultural practice. Impact refers to the specific impact of the specific cultural practice or worldview on individuals, institutions, church, and society.

An illustration of cultural analyse of interpersonal reconciliation within the context of an ethnic homogenous rural audience will help. From my emic observation of the contemporary Zaar culture (with the influence of Christianity, Islam and Westernization), which is primarily an oral culture still, three features of interpersonal relationships can be identified: (1) the burden for reconciliation and the efforts thereof lie primarily with the offender, who is expected to go to the offended person, show remorse, apologize, and seek for forgiveness and reconciliation, usually with a commitment to not repeat it again; (2) however, if the offended person decides to initiate reconciliation, even though not required, it is appreciated as an act of magnanimity and generosity of spirit; (3) depending on the gravity of the offence, in the traditional Zaar culture, the offender may be expected to retribute or offer an object to indicate repentance. The agents involved

in interpersonal reconciliation are (1) the offender, (2) the offended, and (3) any third party such as older family members, parents, or the local chief, especially if the two persons are not able to resolve the problem. The rationale for encouraging interpersonal reconciliation is its importance for harmonious communal life in Zaar family or community, seeing that peaceful communal living attracts blessings from God and ancestors. The impact of interpersonal reconciliation is that it strengthens relationships and gives good reputation to the individuals involved and promotes harmonious living in the family and community at large, and attracts blessings from God and ancestors.

*Task 2 – Textual Analysis:* As the second step in the hermeneutical process, textual analysis involves, primarily, historical-critical, linguistic, literary, rhetorical, and theological analyses of a selected biblical text or passage that is considered relevant to the African context, to understand the text, co-texts, and contexts in which it was written, the message it sought to convey, and the effect or impact it sought to have. This task is what Verhey describes as interpreting Scripture as “scripted”, meaning as an object and a written text that can be located in specific time, history and context (Verhey, 2007, pp. 20–25).

Bearing in mind the fact that in Africa, the biblical scholar, theologian, and ‘ordinary’ readers are all stakeholders in biblical interpretation, consulting a reliable but accessible commentary or summary of the meaning of a selected passage may suffice for textual analysis, especially for non-scholarly interpreters.

For example, the exegetical analysis of Matthew 18:15–17 (Manomi, 2023, pp. 95–99; France, 2008, pp. 10–14), as briefly presented above, leads us to the conclusion that the theme of the passage is reconciliation in interpersonal relationships. Under this theme, we discover the meaning or message of the text, which can be summarized in four points: (1) reconciliation among followers of Christ is needful; (2) the burden for reconciliation and the efforts thereof lie primarily with the offended; (3) third party involvement in reconciliation is encouraged if the two parties are not able to resolve the problem and reconcile between them alone; (4) to treat the offender who refuses to reconcile as an unbeliever and tax collector means the offended person should lower his expectation on the offender and start afresh with the basic strategy of “winning him over” with love and the

message of the gospel, as exemplified by Jesus Christ in his relationship with tax collectors and unbelievers. With this textual analysis, we can proceed to the next task of synthetic analysis of the biblical context and the cultural context in tasks 1 and 2 respectively.

*Task 3 – Synthetic Analysis:* At this level, the task is synthetic in the sense that it synthesizes the results of the first and second tasks above by drawing parallels, identifying points of correlation and disparity, or tandems and tensions between the biblical perspective and African perspective on the theme or text under consideration. The guiding question for this task is, what aspects of the two “perspectives/views” (the biblical view and African views) are in tandem or tension with each other? Identifying and describing the tensions and/or tandems enables the interpreter of the Bible to appropriate the message of the text accountably. Using the theme of interpersonal reconciliation, this task draws out the similarities and differences between interpersonal reconciliation in contemporary Zair culture and in Matthew 18:15–17 as an example. While the similarities are synthesized at this stage of the hermeneutics, the differences will be appropriated in the next stage. The similarities between the Zair cultural perspective to interpersonal reconciliation and interpersonal reconciliation in Matthew 18:15–17 can be summarized as follows: (1) both perspectives agree on the need for interpersonal reconciliation for harmonious living in a community; (2) third party involvement in the reconciliation process is regarded as important if the two parties are not able to reconcile themselves; (3) both perspectives do not give a limit to the number of attempts at reconciliation. The differences between the two perspectives are: (1) while the biblical perspective places the burden and efforts for reconciliation primarily on the offended, the Zair culture places it primarily on the offender; (2) while the biblical perspective does not require offering any material object as a symbol of repentance or reconciliation, the Zair culture does, especially if the offence is grievous. With this, we can move to the next task to see how these differences can be negotiated and appropriated.

*Task 4 – Appropriative Analysis:* This task bridges the gaps between the analytical tasks and the performative tasks below. It seeks to reconcile or harmonize the tensions or differences identified from Task 3, namely, the points of departure between African perspectives or practices and biblical

worldviews and practices. With specific reference to ethics as an example, the task here involves identifying what negotiations, concessions or appropriations need to be made in order to arrive at an ethic that is biblically accountable and relevantly African. Being accountable to the biblical text here means being able to explain how we arrive at the conclusion regarding the intended meaning of the text in view of its historical and literary context. In other words, being accountable to the biblical text here means extracting the meaning of the text from the text, with a clear methodology of how we do that, instead of inserting our own meaning that cannot be accounted for from the historical and literary context of the text. Being relevant to African context, on the other hand, involves appropriating the message of the biblical text in a way that it speaks to an African reality, leading to positive transformation.

In the case of interpersonal relationships in Matthew 18:15–17, the appropriate task involves appropriating the biblical perspective on interpersonal reconciliation into an African perspective. For example, in some African contexts such as the Zaar culture, depending on the gravity of the offence, the condition for reconciliation is that the offender seeks for pardon from the offended person, and sometimes has to bring an object in form of a cola or chicken to seal the interpersonal reconciliation. However, such a condition would need to be compromised to the biblical perspective of interpersonal reconciliation that does not require an apology from the offender as a condition for forgiveness and reconciliation. Instead, the offended (innocent) is the one who takes the initiative and follows through with the reconciliation processes, agreeing with a broader biblical theology of reconciliation where it places the burden of reconciliation on the innocent rather than the guilty. This was the basis on which God, the innocent, initiated the process of reconciliation with the guilty humans, leading even to the incarnation of the sinless Jesus Christ to save sinful humanity. Indeed, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for the us” (Romans 5:8). Such an appropriation of interpersonal reconciliation transforms the African cultural conditions and practice of reconciliation, leading to more peaceful interpersonal relationships and co-existence.

In summary, with reference to the Zaar culture, we can appropriate an African biblical ethics of interpersonal reconciliation with four points as follows: (1) interpersonal reconciliation is essential for harmony in the

community; (2) the burden and efforts for reconciliation hang on both the offended and the offender because it takes the two parties to reconcile. Whoever between the two initiates reconciliation, the other party is obliged to cooperate towards reconciliation; (3) if reconciliatory efforts fail between the two, any or both the parties are encouraged to involve a third party, be it an individual or an institution; (4) any offering of an object such as cola, chicken, or ram in the reconciliatory process should only be symbolic and voluntary rather than a necessity or condition for reconciliation. Even if symbolic, the item should not be so expensive that it becomes a burden to the person seeking reconciliation, so as not to set a new norm that makes reconciliation materially expensive. It is noteworthy that, even though the context of Matthew 18:15–17 is that of interpersonal reconciliation, it can be appropriated in the context of group reconciliation, such as between ethnic groups, religious groups, or communities that are not living in peace with one another.

### 3.3 Performative Tasks

We now turn to the performative tasks, which build on the analytical tasks described above.

*Task 5 – Performance of Scripture:* This fifth task is descriptive in the way that it says that the text has been performed by scholarly and non-scholarly users of the Bible in the African context. There are myriad media printed with Scripture and thus performing Scriptural interpretation by means of their movement and interaction in embedded African contexts. Here, the African biblical interpreter identifies and describes specific ways in which a given biblical text or theme has been performed in a given or defined context, such as in communal worship, liturgy, songs, and prayer, but also films, podcasts, devotional books, hashtags, captions, or slogans on clothes, hand bands, emblems, cards, inscriptions on cars, buildings, cups and plates, jewelries, and the like.

Using Matthew 18:15–17 as an example, I have seen at least three ways that this text has been performed in Nigeria (Manomi, 2023, pp. 95–99): first, I have heard someone preach about it, saying that if after three attempts to reconcile one party refuses, such a person should be “treated as a pagan and tax collector”, implying that he should be rejected or excommunicated. Similarly, it is a common saying among Christians, at least in

Nigeria, to hear someone say ‘treat him as an unbeliever and tax collector’ when they are talking about the need to cut off ties with a person who seems to be offending them often. Second, our church denomination set up a committee to advise on the number of times a pastor may be placed under church discipline for an offence before he is expelled completely from the pastoral ministry. In our committee meeting, some of the members referred to this text as a model to propose 3 times of church discipline before expulsion. Third, I was asked to examine a thesis that a Master of Theology student had written on this text. He had interpreted it in the context of church discipline rather than interpersonal reconciliation, and had drawn parallels between this text and the practice of church discipline in his denomination. Based on his analysis following interpretations as that of Osborne (Osborne, 2010, pp. 683–687), the theme of the passage is church discipline rather than reconciliation in interpersonal relationships. Clearly noting and describing how a given biblical passage has been performed provides the interpreter a good basis to evaluate the performance in the next hermeneutical task.

*Task 6 – Performance Evaluation:* This task is both evaluative and prescriptive as it pertains to performance of Scripture as described in Task 5 above. Like any art, theology in general, and biblical exegesis in particular, has to be deliberately open to self-criticism, self-evaluation, and criticism from the church and society. It must always be ready to return to the drawing board, review, reformulate, re-strategize, and present its content to the performing community (church and society) in a way that addresses current concerns.

Regarding the evaluative aspect of this task, my evaluation of the three performances of Matthew 18:5–19 in African contexts is that the text was wrongly performed in the way that (1) it encouraged excommunication of a fellow after three attempts at reconciliation; and (2) the text was situated in the context of church discipline rather than interpersonal reconciliation. Moreover, my observation is that the message of that text has not been adequately performed in both print and non-print media in Africa.

Regarding the prescriptive aspect of this task, the message of Matthew 18:15–17 can be performed in an African church community by preaching or teaching it in the church, writing songs or stories emphasizing that the

biblical pattern of reconciliation places the burden of reconciliation primarily on the offended person (presumably the innocent) and the need for both the offender and the offended to cooperate towards reconciliation. The prescriptive task involves proposing specific examples of how a given text can or should be performed in view of a specific audience within the African context. Hence, the ethics of interpersonal reconciliation in Matthew 18:5–19 can be performed among the youths by writing short social media captions like: The Offended is the Reconciler; The Guilt of the Innocent is to Refuse Reconciliation; Reconciliation is Worth Every Effort, and so on, with Matthew 18:15–17 in brackets. Such captions can be printed in shirts, caps, hand bands, stickers on cars, cards, emblems, mugs, jewelries, and the like. Moreover, with an urban youthful audience in mind, such a message can be creatively performed or disseminated in print and non-print media such as songs, drama, podcasts, devotional books, hashtags, and the like. In these ways, the message will spread and stick in the target African community or group.

### **3.4 Transformative Tasks**

While the performative tasks described and prescribed specific ways a text has been and can be performed by non-scholarly and scholarly users of the Bible in Africa, the transformative tasks seek to identify and describe the specific impact of interpreted and applied texts and the potential future impact they have on individuals, institutions and the society.

*Task 7 – Identification and Description of Transformation:* In this task, the African biblical interpreter identifies, names, and describes specific negative and positive evidences of transformation that result from the interpretation and performance of the Bible in African contexts. In other words, this task particularly looks for evidence demonstrating the concrete impact of exegesis, hermeneutics, and homiletics.

Moreover, it looks out for the vivid impact of the performance of Scripture in worship, liturgy, prayer, and so on. In this task, both positive and negative impact of the interpretation and performance of the Bible in African contexts is described. On the positive side, such concrete impact could be qualitatively assessed, depending on the topic and text, in the form of spiritual growth, more commitment to Christian faith and praxis, more knowledge of Scripture, more peaceful co-existence in homes and society,

and the like. It could also be quantitatively measured in the form of numerical growth of the church, creativity and initiation of new life-transforming church programs, mission strategy, and so on. On the negative side, such concrete impact could be qualitatively assessed in the form of lack of spiritual growth, poor commitment to the Christian faith and praxis, ignorance of the message of the Scripture, disharmony in interpersonal relationships within the community, gender discrimination, tribalism, sectionalism, child-abuse, sexual exploitation, and the like. It could also be quantitatively assessed in the form of numerical decline in church attendance, fewer initiatives for community engagement, and the like. The transforming effect of biblical exegesis and application is to be observed and evaluated at three levels: personal, institutional, and societal levels.

In Tasks 5 and 6 above, we described and evaluated how Matthew 18:15–17 has been performed and proposed how it can be more meaningfully performed to foster interpersonal reconciliation in African contexts. Here, we will describe the specific negative and/or positive impact of such performances at personal (including the interpreter), institutional (marriage, family, church) and societal levels. Sharing my personal experience, from the day I studied and understood this text clearly, I repented of waiting for my offenders to ask me for forgiveness, made efforts to reach out to a few people that I know our relationship had suffered some problems even though I felt they offended me, and I made efforts to reconcile. Hence, the interpretation and application of this text has had a positive transformative effect on my relationship with the few people with whom I have now reconciled and restored our interpersonal relationships. At the institutional level, it can be observed that interpreting this text in the context of church discipline instead of its contextually-accountable interpersonal reconciliation has perpetuated the cultural practice of placing the burden of reconciliation on the offender only, therefore missing out on the transformative power that lies in the offended person(s) initiating and pursuing reconciliation. The negative impact of such an interpretation and performance of the text can be seen in the wider society as well, where interpersonal reconciliation is seen as the burden of the offender rather than

both the offended and the offender. Such a view hinders or delays interpersonal reconciliation, thereby promoting disharmony that upsets African communal living.

*Task 8 – Identifying Interpretive Risks:* This final task is about the “unknown” future task of today’s interpretive endeavors. African biblical interpretation recognizes that our scholarly endeavors today have future impact beyond our generation. While we can identify, describe, correct, and even control the impact of our biblical interpretation on individuals, institutions, cultures, and societies, we have little to no control on what the future generations may do with the work we produce or how they will use our scholarly work in interpreting Scripture. Therefore, this task involves identifying potentials for extremist or “wrong” interpretations of a given text and consciously noting not only what the text means, but what it does not mean.

The scholar at this point is at liberty to even describe the interpretive risks of the text being interpreted, to guide and prevent future readers from fundamentalist or extremist readings of biblical texts that could hinder human flourishing, as seen in the way some Christians in Africa justify and participate in killing suspected witches and wizards in Africa, justifying their actions on the interpretation of texts like Exodus 22:18 and Leviticus 20:27. Such texts, whose meaning seem to be oppressive to individuals in the African society, are to be re-read carefully and from the theological lens of God’s redemptive plan for human flourishing of every member of the society. Hence, it needs to be clearly stated that, even though these texts have interpretive risks in African contexts because they mention the word “witch” and witchcraft is a delicate and ongoing problem in many African communities, the contextual interpretation of the text (Bretherton, 2005) does not instruct anyone to kill people suspected of witchcraft.

In regard to Matthew 18:15–17, the interpretive risk is that if Jesus’s command to “treat as a pagan and tax collector”, is taken literally outside its context, it could easily be connected to the way Jesus chased out money changers in the temple (Matthew 12:12–13) and, therefore, suggest a “violent” rejection or disconnection of any ties with a person who refuses to reconcile after three attempts. The mention of tax collectors in Matthew 18:15–17 and money-changers in Matthew 12:12–13 could be regarded as

a connection or an explication of what Jesus meant by “treat as a pagan and tax collector”. So, this interpretive risk needs to be clearly identified and prevented by saying that Jesus’s statement is in a different context from his action of chasing out temple marketers. While Matthew 12:12–13 is about people turning the Temple into a market place, Matthew 18:15–17 is about the ethics of interpersonal reconciliation among Jesus’s followers. To understand what Jesus meant by “treat as a tax collector and sinner”, we should ask how he himself treated such people like Levi, Zacchaeus, and the woman caught in adultery. He treated them with love, went to them, ate with them at the risk of being declared a sinner, and in doing so, won their hearts and made them his disciples. This is what our text expects of the offended person to do to the offender.

## 4. Conclusion

Engaging primarily with Elizabeth Mburu’s African biblical hermeneutical models which she represents with the imagery of a Four-Legged Stool, this chapter has challenged mainly the sequencing or ordering of her hermeneutical procedure, arguing that it is counter-productive. Instead, the chapter presents an alternative African biblical hermeneutical model using the imagery of a Three-Stone Cooking Stove that involves three broad tasks and eight specific tasks, resulting in a more accountable, contextual and transformative biblical interpretation and appropriation in African contexts.

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