

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

# CONTEXTUALISED READINGS AND TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

Ernst R. Wendland

## Introduction

It is interesting to observe at conferences that focus on such broad topics as African theology, contextualisation, and hermeneutics how very little is said about the fundamental basis for all such scholarly activity, namely, *Bible translation* and the different versions that we must use in order to do all our theologising, interpreting, inculturating, and the like. It would appear that this foundational enterprise is either taken for granted or assumed to be rather straightforward in actual practice: Translators simply transform or convert the words of God as recorded in the OT and NT Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek into the words of African language X, Y, or Z.

---

Ernst R. Wendland has a BA in Classics and Biblical languages from Northwestern College, an MA in Linguistics from University of Wisconsin, a PhD in African languages and literature from the University of Wisconsin and an MST from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In addition to teaching, he has been both a Translation Advisor, and a consultant, and has published many books in the area of Linguistics.

<sup>1</sup> The original form of this essay was presented (in part) as a response to a panel on Bible translation at the Post-Conference Meeting of the Society of New Testament Scholars (SNTS), which was held on August 9, 1999 at the Hammanskraal Campus of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It was later revised and published in *The Bible Translator* (52:1, January 2001, 132-144). The current article, slightly renamed, is a further revision of the latter publication, but I have retained the original focus upon the New Testament because certain translation projects still end when that portion of the Bible is done.

It is not quite so easy as that, however, and certain prominent controversies that have arisen in the West concerning the composition, transmission, interpretation, translation, and application of the Bible have inevitably found their way to this continent where they have complicated matters considerably. In short, given the obvious fact that any Bible translation inevitably involves both “interpretation” and “contextualisation,” how *far* can we go or how *free* may we be in this crucial operation?<sup>2</sup> In this article I would like to draw attention to several of the key hermeneutical issues involved as a stimulus to further thought and future interaction on a subject that has not always been given the scholarly consideration that it deserves in relation to its overall importance to the Christian community concerned, whether in Africa or anywhere else.

My remarks pertain to two closely related sets of observations. The first concerns a number of matters that arise in connection with the content and implications of the general theme given in the title above. Secondly, as a follow-up, I will offer a few suggestions regarding the challenge of how we might encourage a greater number of *doubly-contextualised* “African translations and readings” of the NT—that is, directing this process of culturally sensitive and sensitized hermeneutics to both the *source* language and culture as well as that of a particular *receptor* or user group. These comments would seem to apply then not only within the scholarly community or guild of biblical experts, but also where it really counts, namely, in the context of the various local communities where many of us live and work. My thoughts may be grouped into four general categories, which will be considered in reverse order of their occurrence in the introductory title, namely: Africa, New Testament, Reading & Translation, Contextualised.

---

<sup>2</sup> Take the Hebrew divine Tetragrammaton, for example, where we have a continuum of translational possibilities in most Bantu languages, ranging from the most literal transliteration, through various circumlocutions, to the use of a local cultural equivalent, e.g., Chichewa: *Yahve* or *Yehova* (“Yahweh” or “Jehovah”)—*Ambuye* or *Mfumu* (“[respected] Elder” or “Chief”)—*Ambuye Mulungu* (“Elder-God”)—*Chauta* (“Great-God-of-the-Bow,” an ancient title/name for the Supreme Chewa Deity).

## Africa

Why do we really need to specify “in Africa” at all? The obvious answer is that this continent (more specifically, the sub-Saharan region) is the distinct *locus* and hence also the *focus* of our hermeneutical activity of “contextualising”—that is, to situate some topic or issue in an appropriate, comprehensive communication setting, whether verbal or non-verbal. Thus the different types of religious “food” that we are preparing for a spiritually and physically “hungry” (sometimes “starving”) community of diverse groups and individuals must be “cooked in an African pot,” as one recent anthology on contextualisation has aptly put it.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this “cooking” process needs to be carried out using familiar African “seasoning,” that is, done from a decidedly local perspective and an indigenous background of experience.

Africa and its rich ethnic, cultural, and spiritual diversity has a vital contribution to blend in with the mass chorus of world Christianity, from minuscule Bubi on the west coast to the mega-lingua Swahili on the east.<sup>4</sup> Has her hermeneutical voice (or better, a resonant choir of mixed-voices) been sufficiently heard or seriously listened to? I think not, for one reason or another, not the least of these hindrances being linguistic: Some of Africa’s leading theologians and communicators, especially those who prefer to convey their messages orally, do not speak (or write) the “right” language, i.e., some major European (but also a former colonial!) lingua franca—English, French, or Portuguese. So how can her dynamic religious

---

<sup>3</sup> This helpful metaphor is taken from a special journal edition that deals with the subject of local contextualisation: *Theology Cooked in an African Pot* (ATISCA Bulletin no 5/6, 1996-97), K. Fiedler, P. Gundani & H. Mijoga (eds.), Zomba, Malawi: Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> “Contact with other cultures enlarges our understanding of the [biblical] text. It enables us to see facets of the truth to which we are blind because of our cultural limitations. It does not give us a different meaning to the text, but a fuller meaning”—M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1993, 96.

heritage, both ancient and modern, be made more audible, then amplified and transmitted, not only abroad but also within the continent itself? We are all aware of some of the formidable barriers that are being faced in this regard, such as: globalisation, multi- [or mono-]lingualism, regionalism, foreign cultural accommodation, factionalism, in certain areas oppressive militarism, and nowadays also the devastating, resource-depleting AIDS pandemic.

But a rather controversial question arises in this connection:<sup>5</sup> Can only an ethnic “African” exegete, contextualise, theologise, or translate in and for Africa? Or to put it another way, just exactly *who* constitutes an “African” in the subject under consideration here? Are we talking about criteria such as pure racial heritage, residency, mind-set, value system, or something else? May someone of “European” descent be considered an “African” if s/he was born and bred somewhere on the continent? How about an Egyptian (Copt), an Ethiopian, or a mulatto? Is it possible that a culturally-sympathetic “Africanised European” might be able to offer a more “African” understanding or contextualisation of the Scriptures than a “Westernised African”?<sup>6</sup> The Chewa people have a proverb that may be relevant here: *Mlendo amayenda ndi lumo lakuthwa* “A traveler moves about with sharp razor.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the alien outsider may at times be in a better position to provide a more discerning, balanced, impartial, or novel viewpoint on a particular issue than a cultural insider simply because s/he is looking at things either analytically or experientially with a completely different set of cognitive and emotive spectacles. But perhaps, speaking as an “African alien” myself (since 1962), I best leave the answer to this issue for national biblical scholars and critics to decide.

Secondly, we need to consider the significant diversity among the various black peoples of Africa. In addition to language (some 2000 in all, and not just “dialects”!), there are certain rather great differences in history, outlook, and custom, for example, between the matrilineal-matrilocal and

---

<sup>5</sup> Certain aspects of this controversy are debated with reference to South African biblical scholarship in a recent edition of *BOTSA (Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa)*, 12 (2002).

<sup>6</sup> This subject provoked quite a controversy in a recent edition of *Missionalia* (27/1, April 1999): “Theological Forum: A Debate on Attitudes to African Religion” (115-137).

<sup>7</sup> A Chinese (I think) proverb puts it more bluntly: “If you want to know what water is like, don’t ask a fish!”

the patrilineal-patrilocal societies of south-central Africa where I live. The same would hold true I suspect between the San peoples, whose traditional home is the Kalahari Desert, and the Pygmies of equatorial Africa. Socioculturally quite different then, do representatives of either of these ethnic groups provide us with a genuine “African reading” or translation merely because they happen to reside on this continent? What about those intellectuals living and working abroad “in the diaspora”—are their voices still current, accurate, and relevant?<sup>8</sup> Some scholars have been severely criticised in the past for presuming to write on the subject of “African traditional religion” or “African Christianity” when such references would include so many culturally disparate nationalities or so many distinct religious beliefs and rituals.

So what is “Africa”—one or many, a unity or diversity, a harmony or cacophony—and how does one defend one’s position on the matter? I think that a more helpful way perhaps to consider potentially contentious issues like this is in terms of *both-and* rather than either-or. We do not wish to focus overly much on either the “unity” aspect (thus blurring some significant distinctions) or on “diversity” (thus missing the great African forest because of all the different species of trees), but instead upon “unity in diversity.” The variegated readings and (back-) translations that emanate from Africa need to be collected, analyzed, published, and widely distributed in order to make its essential contribution, as a composite whole now, to the larger hermeneutical enterprise of world Christianity (“the big picture”). Will the results be complementary in nature—or supplementary, distinctive, exclusive, or “any of the above”? May we expect a uniquely “African” contextualised perspective on the New Testament and related studies to emerge with regard to theory and/or practice, that is, exegetically, homiletically, translationally, or in any other way? I do not think that we are as yet in a position to make such a judgment. Much more African-originated research on the subject first needs to be initiated, studied, assessed, and disseminated.

---

<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, this issue did not really come up for discussion during the recent 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the African Literature Association (April 3-7, 2002, University of California at San Diego), whose theme was “African Diasporas: Ancestors, Migrations and Boundaries.”

In recent years some great strides have been made in the area of popularising African scholars and African theology (whether Christian or indigenous), e.g., though major regional publishing houses like Africa Christian Press (Ghana), Kachere (Malawi), Mambo Press (Zimbabwe), Acton (Kenya), and Cluster Publications (South Africa). But clearly a great deal yet needs to be done to fill in the large communication blanks and research gaps that remain, also on a continental basis. Such a dual effort is particularly critical with regard to all the contextualising of the Word—whether well or poorly done—that is being carried out *orally* in rural areas, on the popular level, in the local vernaculars (including so-called “minority” languages), and by the oft unrecognised and unheralded corps of *lay* Christians (preachers, teachers, catechists, composers), including representatives also of the widespread and influential African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs).<sup>9</sup>

## **New Testament**

With regard to this second area of focus, I would first like to reinforce the hermeneutical principle that we all are well aware of, namely, that any valid interpretation of the New Testament must be founded upon and grow out of a thorough, perceptive *prior*-understanding of the *Old Testament* canon and related documents. I mention this simply because it seems to me that some scholars and commentators nowadays have a tendency to over-*Greco-Romanise* the NT writers and their respective situations (or rhetorical “exigencies”). Indeed, we should be grateful to Social-Scientific critics and members of the school of neo-Greco-Roman rhetoricians who have pointed out many features of the ancient, turn-of-the-millennium Mediterranean world and its verbal or symbolic art forms that may have influenced the biblical authors as they wrote, along with their addressees and other reader-hearers. But we ought not push this important insight too far, that is, at the expense of a biblical viewpoint that must have been profoundly shaped also by Semitic, specifically Old Testament, literature,

---

<sup>9</sup> For some recent information regarding the last two groups mentioned, see E. Wendland, *Preaching That “Grabs the Heart”: A Rhetorical-Stylistic Study of the Chichewa Revival Sermons of Shadrack Wame*, (Kachere Monograph Series No. 11), Blantyre, Malawi: CLAIM, 2000; also J. N. Amanze, “Theology Already Cooked in an African Pot,” in Fiedler, et.al. (eds.), q.v., 61-80.

culture, ethos, and religiosity—whether conveyed in the original Hebrew or more likely, via its translation into Greek (LXX).

Here too the issue noted above must have arisen: Just *who* constitutes a true “Jew”? How “Hellenised,” secularised, or displaced spatially did one have to become to fall outside the recognised orbit of Judaism? In any case, the point is that any valid reading of a New Testament book (Hebrews in particular), pericope, or passage should be holistic in nature. In other words, it must presuppose an accurately contextualised interpretation of any and all OT texts—both oral and written, textual as well as *extratextual* (situational)—that may have influenced it *intertextually* in a semantically significant way. The pertinent Greco-Roman background must then be carefully used to conceptually situate a given NT text within its proper historical setting, ecological environment, and sociocultural milieu.

Secondly, when we talk about “readings” of the NT, we need to ask ourselves: *Which text* are we reading? Is it the original Greek text or its translation into another language? If we are dealing with a vernacular version (as is normally the case in Africa), can this be considered a *valid* reading? Most would agree that the various interpretations that inevitably go into the production of any translation are indeed legitimate (if the translator/s is/are competent and all other factors being equal; e.g., no overt mechanical errors being present in the printed text). But the matter of *Scripture* translation raises some additional issues that concern our possible understanding of the biblical text. These are not often considered in discussions about African readings and the like, but certainly it would seem they deserve a greater measure of investigation in the form of directed market research and audience testing:

1. What effect does: (a) the *language* of translation—or (b) a particular *type* of translation have upon an individual or on communal Bible reading/understanding/interpretation/explanation?
  - a) What is the specific communicative outcome when a person or group must hear/read the NT in a language that is not his/her/their mother-tongue? How much conceptual skewing occurs? How much mis-information is conveyed? On the other hand, do some



people perhaps *choose* to access the biblical text in a different language due to its prestige value in the community or for some other sociolinguistic reason?

- b) There are different types of translation or degrees of contextualisation involved with this activity that diverge with respect to their relative intelligibility, informativity, interest, and impact according to such variables as:

i—the *style/method* of rendition where we have another continuum of possibilities, e.g., literal (NASB, NRSV), “middle-of-the-road” (NIV), idiomatic (GNB, CEV), paraphrase (LB, The Message), literary (REB, JB), and liturgical (Tanakh).

ii—the intended *receptor constituency*, whether the general population or some sub-domain, such as “new readers,” the youth, second-language speakers, specific minority interest or denominational groups.

iii—the amount (and kind) of *textual contextualisation* that is included in the form of explanatory footnotes, introductions, cross-references, maps, charts, sectional headings, a glossary, topical index, and so forth.

2. To what extent can: (a) the *language* of translation—or (b) a particular *type* of translation either hinder (stifle) or encourage (stimulate) a less/more *African* reading of the NT? How and why does this happen? What effect does the presence of an older, church-sponsored “missionary” version have on the interpretation as well as the production of a contemporary, meaning-based translation (e.g., with regard to style, key terms, etc—the venerable “KJV factor”)?
3. How is interpretation affected, both in general and with reference to specific NT passages, in cases where a translation of the *Old Testament* is not (yet) available or complete—or when a translation of the Bible (and its publication in a smaller “portion” form) begins with the OT rather than the NT—or when only selected books or texts are made available (e.g., the so-called “Jesus tradition” or a “shorter Bible”)?

4. How does the overall *extratextual* situation—the sociocultural context, indigenous tradition of religion, ecclesiastical history (possibly including current inter-denominational friction), ongoing alien religious, philosophical, and hermeneutical influence on the local church(es), etc.—have on contemporary African Christian communication (e.g., the outright condemnation by some mission agencies of the TEV and all TEV-related translations)?
5. What effect does the lack of functional *literacy* have on one's understanding of the Scriptures in relation to specific texts or books of the Bible? What is the communicative effect of providing at least some texts in a more audience-sensitive *medium* of message transmission, such as audio or video cassettes? Are such productions regarded by lay-people or church policy-makers as authentic "Scripture"?
6. What happens to a *new Bible translation* after it is published—how much/little is it used, in which socio-religious settings, for which purposes, and for what reasons? How does the new version relate to previously existing ones (e.g., complementation, supplementation, competition, or replacement), either in the same language or in the main *lingua franca*? To what extent have audience expectations been met? If not, what can be done about the situation (e.g., more promotion and accompanying instruction or a complete revision)?
7. What are the wider implications of this complex *interlingual factor* with respect to our concern for stimulating and promoting hermeneutically valid and viable African translations and readings along with subsequent applications of the New Testament? What then can be done by way of developing more effective follow-up communication strategies to remedy the outstanding lacks, limitations, obstacles, and deficiencies with regard to Scripture understanding and use?

These questions are merely suggestive of some of the important interpretive and communication-based issues that need to be raised when investigating the nature, extent, and results of the various formal and informal acts of

contextualising the Bible—the Old as well as New Testament—in a given African setting, society, and/or specific Christian sub-community.

## Reading & Translation

This double area of concern follows closely from the preceding discussion, and here is where I have my greatest problem in relation to the subject of hermeneutics and the contemporary practice of contextualisation in particular. I might begin by suggesting that the term “reading,” despite its popularity in some scholarly circles, is less than satisfactory. I assume that it is employed metaphorically in popular usage with respect to our diverse acts of textual engagement—interpretation—in one form or another, either oral or written. If so, then why not “*hearing*,” which would seem to be a much more appropriate analogy for the primary channel of message transmission on the African scene (and in many other world settings)?<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps we should just state more precisely what we mean—that is, African “interpretation,” “exegesis,” “understanding,” “commentary,” or “application.”

It may be that the term “reading” was chosen in order to better reflect the current in-vogue method of interpretation, namely, “reader-response” or “reception” theory. This critical school certainly does seem to be very popular in current hermeneutical literature. It is encouraging, at least for me, to note that most African biblical scholars and critics have not allowed this methodological preference to deteriorate into its subjectivistic, self-imploding cross-cousin, namely, the so-called “deconstructionist” school of postmodern criticism. This sub-midrashic approach leads to what Thistleton aptly terms “hermeneutical anarchy” and Vanhoozer, a “method for *undoing* interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> I would call it simply “Humpty-Dumpty

---

<sup>10</sup> In some Bantu languages, e.g., Chichewa, the word for “hear” (-*mva*) may also mean “understand,” whereas if someone does “not hear,” s/he does not understand what is being said. “Reading” (-*werenga*) on the other hand refers to a purely mechanical activity; it implies nothing at all about the relative degree of comprehension that is involved.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, I have lost the textual references for these two citations. However, Anthony Thistleton’s trenchant critique of unbounded reader-response and deconstructionist interpretation in relation to biblical hermeneutics may be found in the volume *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992, 84-141, 471-

hermeneutics,” after the words of the Egghead himself: “When I use [read] a word... it means what I choose it to mean—neither more, nor less.”<sup>12</sup> Thus meaning becomes completely moot, and assumed hermeneutical “freedom” becomes so great that it collapses under its own weight—hence also the possibility of erecting any sort of a collective or distinctive perspective such as an “African reading” (or “readings”) disappears.

There is another, related problem with many current approaches to biblical interpretation. A preoccupation with the present receptor community and its (or their individual) concerns may lead one to lose sight of the *source* (the presumed authorial “speaker”—whether “real,” “implied,” or “postulated”)<sup>13</sup> and also the original compositional or historical setting, including the political, ideological, sociological, economic, and ecological context. Any one or even all of these contextual facets may manifest certain significant differences from the corresponding field of a contemporary African society, e.g., with respect to geography, flora and fauna, family relationships, or beliefs about the after-life. In other words, a hermeneutical over-emphasis upon “reading” *in front of* the text will inevitably divert one’s attention away from the initial act of “writing” (or “speaking,” i.e., *reading behind the text*), and sometimes even from

---

555. Even more detailed criticisms of these approaches are available in Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s recent study, appropriately entitled *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Philadelphia PA: Winston, 1923 [reprint 1957], 213. Personally, I would respond to such a claim, along with Alice: “The question is... whether you *can* [legitimately] make words mean so many different things” (*loc. cit.*)—that is, totally disregarding the accepted senses or intentions which they have in the public lexical domain.

<sup>13</sup> I submit that there must be *someone*, a real human being (even if we do not know exactly *whom*) posited as the “author” (and crafter) of any text that is being analyzed, especially from a pragmatic, functional, or communicative perspective. Thus to me it is counterintuitive to claim that a literary composition simply “speaks” by, of, and for itself, as many contemporary critics would have it. This is just as naïve as to assert from a relativistic position that the reader (hearer) “creates” textual meaning—to each his/her own. Why do we even require or refer to an “original text” in such a case?

what has been actually written, namely, *within the text* of Scripture itself. Thus we may be so busy contextualising or applying its message to the urgent theological, spiritual, and moral concerns of the here-and-now that we have little or no time to make sure that we are validly pressing and proclaiming such issues—that is, on the basis of the right biblical texts or a reasonably correct exegesis of them.

This sort of a subjective, existential, de-historicised, and/or overly-relativised reading—if offered as a full exegesis or interpretation of the original message—is just as invalid, or we might say, dishonest, as one that significantly distorts or misconstrues the meaning of the source document. This is because it is incomplete and poorly founded, namely, with reference to relevant readings both “behind the text” and “within the text.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, such a reductive approach lacks the critical *controls* necessary (based on the original text and context) for a credible evaluation to be made of the particular interpretation that is being set forth as well as its analytical methodology.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, it severely limits the *potential* for hermeneutical growth and development, that is, the opportunity to enrich or enlarge upon our understanding of the biblical text by means of a distinctively African perspective and insight (e.g., with regard to tribal and familial genealogies found in Genesis and 1 Chronicles, the sacrificial, priestly outlook of the book of Hebrews, or the prophetic, visionary symbolism of Revelation).

As an older, more conservative, yet still viable, alternative, I would propose a return to or a re-emphasis upon the “two-horizon” concept in hermeneutics and a distinction between what may be termed “signification” and “significance.”<sup>16</sup> The practice of interpreting intended “meaning” according to such a scheme is a twofold and ordered exercise:

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study*, Pietermaritzburg, RSA: Cluster Publications, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Hence virtually “anything goes”—more or less, or as one title states it: *To Each Its Own Meaning* (S. L. McKenzie & S. R. Haynes, eds., Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation*, 31; cf. A. C. Thistleton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Descriptions*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980. This perspective is a modification of E. D. Hirsh, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago IL: U of Chicago Press, 1976, 2. See the incisive critical development of these notions by K. Vanhoozer in J. Green (ed.),

- (1) *Exegesis*—to accurately determine (as best we can on the basis of current linguistic and extralinguistic evidence) the manifold, overall *signification* (or text-signified cognitive and affective meaning, including the literary genre, artistry, rhetoric, implicatures, and interpersonal pragmatics, i.e., the encoded intentional “speech/text acts”) of a given biblical document. This dynamic, interactive (text context) procedure is carried out with reference to the work’s original setting and on the basis of the (implied) author’s distinctive goal-directed, textually-shaped selection and arrangement of both form and content throughout the discourse as a hierarchically-structured whole; and
- (2) *Application*—to draw out and develop the primary functional *significance*, relevance, or utility of that particular text/message (derived in step 1) in interaction with a specific target language community, environment, and situation—past, present, or future. Such a relational, practical application of meaning, either as a whole or with reference only to certain aspects of this, constitutes an essential element of the communicative exercise that we are calling “contextualisation” (usually termed “inculturation” by Catholic scholars). Such a process is often governed by a perception or actual expression of the “felt needs” of a given sociocultural community; however, one must not overlook their additional “actual needs,” determined in relation to their entire circumstantial setting and on the basis of “the whole [biblical] will of God” (Acts 20:27, NIV).

---

*Hearing the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995, 315; also Vanhoozer 1998, 74-81. Hirsch’s basic notions have been frequently criticised but in my opinion not convincingly refuted by modern literary analysts. The [implied] author’s communicative *intention* (important also in “Speech-Act” and more recent “Relevance Theory,” e.g., D. Sperber & D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1986, 49-54) is manifested *in* both the form and content of the original text and also *by* its extratextual, situational context. It therefore ought to be respected as the *virtual* point of view, from which all subsequent interpretation of his/her message must proceed and be evaluated.

An added problem in the past with regard to this endeavor, especially in relation to Bible translation, has often been the imposed influence of a *third* “horizon” or hermeneutical framework and context—namely, an intermediate alien, Western one. Thus, instead of:

$$[S1 \Rightarrow M1 \Leftarrow R1] \quad \{S2 \Rightarrow M2 \Leftarrow R2\}$$

where (1) represents the original biblical setting of communication and (2) the current African setting (also: S = source/author, M = message, R = receptor/respondent (an individual or a group),  $\Rightarrow$  = significant hermeneutical activity with regard to, and  $\Leftarrow$  = a shift in the overall communicative situation), we have the following scenario:<sup>17</sup>

$$[S1 \Rightarrow M1 \Leftarrow R1] \quad // \quad S2 \Rightarrow M2 \Leftarrow R2 // \quad \{S3 \Rightarrow M3 \Leftarrow R3\}$$

In this case (2) represents a Western-shaped setting, including language/text, interpreter, or transmitter, and (3) the African circumstances, in which the mother tongue translators (S3) cannot access the original Hebrew or Greek text. They thus become indirect “respondents” (R2) to the message of Scripture (M2) as it has been expressed and transmitted in English, French, Portuguese, or whatever.

Obviously, there is a need to eliminate, limit, or compensate somehow for the “foreignising” influence this intrusive number (2) stage in the

---

<sup>17</sup> This is a condensed and somewhat revised version of the discussion found in E. Wendland, *Buku Loyera: An Introduction to the New Chichewa Bible Translation* [Kachere Monograph No. 6], Blantyre, Malawi: CLAIM, 1998, 60-67. In this very simplified representation of the complex process of communication, notice that *both* of the ( $\Rightarrow$ ) arrows on either side of each Message symbol point towards it. This signifies that the “receptors” (readers/hearers) as well as the “source” play an active role in the overall procedure. Furthermore, any Message consists of a “text” composed of both linguistic form and content that is cognitive as well as affective in nature. The problem here is that the Message intended by the Source, especially one that involves an ancient written text, is never exactly the same as that which is apprehended by the Receptors due to differences in their physical environment, psychological setting, and/or social situation. In the practice of Scripture interpretation then, it is the communicative perspective and intentions of the original author (S1) that are taken to be preeminent and thus also authoritative.

overall communication process.<sup>18</sup> This can only be done by devoting extra attention to the context number (1), the original biblical dimension (language-history-culture-religion). Such a careful concern for understanding this SL setting must not be ignored, downplayed, or done away with simply because it is too difficult or time-consuming to master—or because we face certain areas of doubt and hence debate with regard to a number of important hermeneutical issues, e.g., the date of composition and authorship, or the intended audience, of several NT books.

Another potential danger in this regard is to facilely assume that the African setting (#2/3) is more or less equivalent (or at least “very similar” to) the biblical milieu (#1, especially in terms of the OT), as it is often claimed. Many significant correspondences certainly exist, but so do some equally important differences, e.g., with respect to a people’s conception of the “spirit world” and the degree of its impingement upon this present life; their perception of the “immanence” versus the “transcendence” of God; the ultimate source of “evil” in the world; the nature of “incarnation”; or the operation and purpose of religious “sacrifices.”<sup>19</sup>

The following example involving an important NT key term presents a serious intercultural translation problem in the Chichewa language of Malawi, one that has no single, clear-cut solution: Should πνευμα ακαθαρτον/δαιμονιον (ε.γ., Mk 1:27,34) be rendered as *chiwanda* “malevolent [ancestral] spirit” (a hyper-contextualised term), or *demoni* “demon” (loanword, under-contextualised), or *mzimu woipa* “evil [ancestral] spirit” (a partially-contextualised expression), or *wampweya woononga* “someone having/with a destructive breath” (neologism), or even *badi sipiriti* “bad spirit” (mere English transliteration)? Is there any other option, e.g., a combined descriptive phrase, such as *demoni yodwalitsa [munthu]* “the ‘demon’ that makes [a person] sick”? This and related

---

<sup>18</sup> I am using the term “foreignise” here in a rather different sense than L. Venuti does in his cultural-political approach to translation history and styles, i.e., what usually turns out to be a relatively *literal* technique (for a cogent critique, see D. Robinson, *What Is Translation? Centrifugal Theories, Critical Interventions*, Kent OH: Kent State UP, 1997, 97-112).

<sup>19</sup> See also “Ruth in Central Africa,” in E. Wendland, *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation* [UBS Monograph Series #2], New York NY: United Bible Societies, 1987, ch. 7.



conceptual difficulties that pertain to the process of contextualisation continually confront translators in any central African Bantu language.

In conclusion, I think that in order to avoid confusion the term “reading” is better employed with reference to the derivative task of *applied* interpretation (or “hermeneutics” in the narrow sense)—that is, ascertaining in a given RL the contextualised contemporary significance or relevance of some biblical concept. “Exegesis” then is *analytical* interpretation—in other words, discovering the text/context-based signified meaning of the original SL message. Accordingly, in terms of primacy and temporal priority, first comes the foundational practice of exegesis and its exercise, for example in Bible translation; then out of this source-text directed operation arise various acts of applied localised “reading.” In this connection it is also important to note, as Lamin Sanneh and others have pointed out,<sup>20</sup> that the activity of Bible translation itself generates significant indigenous church growth and at the same time greatly encourages various creative, contextualised readings of Scripture. This inevitably leads in turn to the development of African-based theological conceptualisation and creative religious verbalisation in the vernacular, where it really counts.

## Contextualised

This is the central concept of the theme that has guided our discussion, and I assume that its meaning is relatively familiar. In brief, to “contextualise” a biblical message is to communicate it via translation (+/- supplementary extra-textual helps), paraphrase, adaptation, or recreation in such a way that it is clear, meaningful, and relevant to a specific, intended audience (readership) in their current sociocultural setting and immediate religious circumstances. In this case, as was already observed, a “double contextualisation” is, or should be, involved—*first* (not to be ignored or downplayed) in terms of the SL message so that its sense, significance, and implications may be adequately understood in terms of the original situation; *secondly*, with similar scholarly respect and regard for the RL language and culture. Whether or not we agree on the details of this rather

---

<sup>20</sup> For example, L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989 (cf. also Wendland, *Buku Loyer*, ch. 7).

broad definition, we undoubtedly all affirm its overall importance to the worldwide mission of the Church, with particular reference to ecclesiastical development in Africa.

How then can we facilitate the next crucial step, that is, actually doing something tangible about the less-than-satisfactory situation that presently pertains on the continent with regard to both the immediate and also the long-term implementation of this essential exercise? In other words, what can we do to more actively and successfully encourage valid, contextualised readings and linguistically “domesticated” translations of the NT in Africa? I will conclude with seven brief and interrelated suggestions that occurred to me as I thought about this vital concern:

- 1) Support the production of twice “contextualised” *study Bibles* in all major African languages, that is, doubly analysed and described—initially in terms of the source/biblical language and culture, and then thoroughly also with regard to a particular receptor/African language-culture. The principal aim of such generously annotated versions is to bring situationally relevant, indigenously expressed biblical knowledge to many more members of the currently deprived grass roots of Christianity, their key communicators (local pastors, catechists, etc.) in particular. For example, it seems clear that it is necessary to adopt a “*narrative*” approach to the text, that is, by viewing and presenting the Scriptures as “*story*”—or better, as God’s *salvation history*. This would not only unify the various historical portions of the Bible, but it would also provide a “canonical” framework for and a facilitation of a contextualised explanation of other types of discourse too (hence incorporating the entire corpus from Genesis to Revelation). A related aim is to stimulate a healthy appreciation for the original context—namely, the biblical “horizon”—one that results in an acceptable “*transculturation*” (but not a distortion, depreciation, or denial) of the Scripture message, as evaluated by the African church in any local setting. Such a study Bible, subsidized so as to make it affordable, will not replace good commentaries, but it can serve as the next-best thing to meet current hermeneutical needs.

- 2) Produce similar, receptor-orientated *commentaries and other Scripture study aids*, such as, a basic Bible introduction (e.g., “What is the Bible?”), dictionary, concordance, cultural background encyclopedia, and the like in the principal African vernaculars—not only in printed form, but also via the more important *audio* medium, e.g., tape cassettes, radio broadcasts. These texts should ideally be written or recorded on at least three (and probably several more) educational levels, namely, that of: i– urban pastors, teachers, and theologians who have been trained, are competent, and minister in English (French);<sup>21</sup> ii- rural pastors and lay preachers who study and minister primarily in the local language; and iii- average (“ordinary”) lay people who wish to delve more deeply into the Scriptures. For best results, capable and influential representatives of the intended target constituencies need to be involved from the very beginning of the planning, production, and evaluation process.
  
- 3) Make it financially feasible (e.g., through scholarship grants) for deprived African students—women in particular—including Bible translators, to receive sufficient intermediate as well as *advanced* (including university) *training* with regard to the full range of biblical and related studies (languages, literature, setting, society, culture, etc.). Encourage such empowered individuals then to make use of their training in some concrete way in an actual Bible translation project (e.g., as an exegete or technical reviewer). One might go on to promote their authorship and publishing of contextualised Christian hermeneutical, homiletical, liturgical, catechetical, and meditational materials, both as individuals and in joint research projects, e.g., a set of NT commentaries or study guides written at a “basic” level to cater for the needs of targeted reader-groups living in a *specific region* and from their particular point of view. Involve as many experienced

---

<sup>21</sup> Even extensively educated pastors and teachers need to read and study in their mother-tongue so that they can fluently render complex theological concepts intelligibly when communicating with people in the vernacular. Just because a concept is well understood in one language does not necessarily mean that it can be conveyed equally well in another language, especially one that belongs to a different linguistic family and is normally spoken in a different sociocultural milieu. Such communication skills are not often taught in theological schools and seminaries, certainly not in those attended overseas.

African educators and communicators as are available in order to indigenise these different training and text-production programs.

- 4) Similarly, offer sufficient instruction in the *technical skills* of effective writing, mass-media methods, and the use of modern computerised text-processing tools (if desirable) to African scholars, communicators, and technicians. Would such an exercise weaken or even destroy their essential “African-ness” and competence in traditional verbal arts and via indigenous media (e.g., drama, folk narrative, praise poetry, choral composition)? This is a potential danger, but one that may have to be risked it seems in order to educate local theological experts and their collaborators with respect to the intricacies of modern communication technology and new media formats. Otherwise, the messages that they produce will still have to be “mediated” by a third party (whether African or some foreign “facilitator”) in order for it to be effectively and widely transmitted both at home and abroad. Ideally—for the good of the African church—the training required for the various activities outlined in #3-4 ought to be done in the communicators’ home countries using resident staff if possible.<sup>22</sup>
- 5) Such expanded research and development efforts should be carried out also at the *lay, communal level* of participation (e.g., in Zambia: the so-called “common man” or *bantunsi* “people of the soil”—Chitonga) as strongly encouraged (but not always so clearly delineated) in the “Reading With” volume of *Semeia* (73, 1996). The goal here is to stimulate non-professional, but no less profound, African theological reflection, religious experience and expression, as well as practical application in familiar settings (cf. also West, *Contextual Bible Study*). This would be done in the primary vernacular language(s) that will actually be used in personal and group ministry. To what extent has a *biblically* Christian “oral tradition” (or distinct “traditions”) of theology developed (e.g., as manifested in the popular public preaching of NT texts) that needs to be recorded, analyzed, evaluated, and encouraged? Which specific hermeneutical problems, controversies, or

---

<sup>22</sup> For some helpful thoughts on this important subject, see K. Fiedler, “Cook First, Then Publish,” in Fiedler, Gundani, & Mijoga (eds.), q.v., 165-180.

even (perish the term!) heresies have arisen in this regard (how, why, and with what outcome and/or possible resolution)?

- 6) Disseminate mature, well-conceived, received, and recognised *African examples* of skillfully contextualised communication (e.g., by preachers, teachers, writers, poets, painters, carvers, musicians) to a wider audience through appropriate and affordable mass-media methods (e.g., radio [again—I wish to emphasise its importance, especially FM], cassette tapes, but also in the form of inexpensive, “reader/listener-friendly” literature).<sup>23</sup> More fully utilise indigenous communication techniques/tools (genres and styles) as primary or secondary modes of transmission in this procedure (e.g., stories, riddles, panegyric poetry, proverbs, dramatic plays, traditional instruction, artwork, various familiar song types, drumming and other forms of musical accompaniment).
  
- 7) Sponsor the translation and comparative study of locally produced *Bible translations* (complete Bibles, testaments, and portions) in as many African language communities as possible. The ideal is to make available several Scripture versions for various situational *uses* (e.g., idiomatic/liturgical/literary) and personal *users* (e.g., versions for women, comics for youth, selections for the socio-economically deprived, physically disadvantaged, etc.). This would include as a priority the production of reliable (i.e., exegetically faithful [SL-focus]), reader-formatted and hearer-attuned (i.e., maximally legible and aurally intelligible), functionally-equivalent,<sup>24</sup> meaning-oriented

---

<sup>23</sup> A good example of such expert vernacular communication is documented in *Preaching That Grabs the Heart*. Other gifted popular preachers abound in Africa. How can such individuals be brought together to interact for mutual encouragement and instruction among themselves? Furthermore, how can their distinctive homiletical style and theological insights be conveyed to those who do not speak their language—or how can they in turn be given a credible forum for communicating with the “outside world”?

<sup>24</sup> On this translation method, see Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986. The notion of functional equivalence has been redefined and extended to include relevant correspondence also in a literary (or oratorical) sense (see T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, Manchester: St. Jerome, 2002, ch. 2, 6-7).

(i.e., stylistically clear and natural [RL-focus]) translations in all the major vernaculars of Africa. Such versions in turn could well serve as *models* (translation base texts) in related languages—that is, rather than, or in addition to, the standard European Bibles. Such “African prototype” versions would be especially helpful as translation guides in situations where the local projects concerned do not have the required level of staff expertise or financial support to do the job alone.<sup>25</sup>

There are undoubtedly other—perhaps quite different—approaches that need to be investigated and tried out in order to foster a more situation-specific, *African* processed and promoted manner of communicating the many diverse messages of the Scriptures to a correspondingly wide range of target communities in every geographical region. There are currently a number of media and methods available, that is, via translation, adaptation, and even text-creation, i.e., local Bible-based fictional literary composition, including popular musical renditions. The main thing is to get started with some concrete action, sooner rather than later, perhaps in the seminaries and theological colleges that are present in virtually every country. Otherwise, suggestions such as those expressed above (limited though they may be by a single perspective) will soon be forgotten or swallowed up in the pressing demands and urgent responsibilities of the present-day church. The preceding list merely outlines some of the many possible options and opportunities that concern what is undoubtedly a very challenging, but at the same time most exciting and rewarding, exercise in the ongoing, continent-wide transformation and transmission of the living, life-giving Word. It is certainly time for the dynamic voice of African Christianity to be heard more loudly and clearly within its own setting—and also in the world at large.

---

<sup>25</sup> The identification and interlingual utilization of such African “model” versions is one of the primary aims of the jointly sponsored SIL-UBS “Bantu Initiative,” which is being developed as a wide-ranging strategy for combining financial and human resources in the cause of a more efficient and productive overall translation program. Another crucial component in this cooperative venture is the implementation of more effective translator-training techniques (cf. “Interim Report on the Bantu Initiative—Working Draft,” by Roger Van Otterloo [December 22, 1999]).