

Forging Tools, Framing Theory, for Faithful African Interpretations

A Response to Judith McKinlay

Gerald O. West, University of KwaZulu-Natal

In conversation

I am doubly fortunate, having recently spent sabbatical time at the University of Otago, Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand in conversation with, among others, Judith McKinlay, and having been invited to participate in this conversation with her reflections on “the critical matter of interpretation.” The tone of Judith McKinlay’s article encourages conversation. Instead of holding the reader at bay, she invites us to gather around and reflect together. Notice the many occasions in which she ends a sentence with a question. I am grateful to be invited into a conversation shaped by collaborative questions. My engagement will be from the perspective of my location within African biblical studies.

In crisis

I would hope that the “African” in the term “African biblical studies” contributes to the belief some biblical scholars have that “the field of biblical studies is in crisis” (Fuchs 2016, 6). McKinlay cites this assessment by Esther Fuchs, and goes on to reflect that this sense of crisis probably “has to do with the [different] questions we ask of the texts” and the different “critical moves” and “tools” we construct in order to ask these questions of biblical texts (2019, 1-2).

If “the field of biblical studies” is “in crisis” this is only because we have inherited or imagined something that is stable. African forms of biblical scholarship have, hopefully, destabilized the dominant received dimensions of “biblical studies.” Furthermore, hopefully we have gone further, destabilizing even the acceptable range of “differences” tolerated by those on the borders of the institutionally established discipline of “biblical studies” (Fuchs 2016, 6-8; Brenner-Idan 2016).

What is perhaps most unsettling among the many moves African biblical scholars make (Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango 2012; Mbuvi 2017; West 2018a; Masenya and Ngwa 2018) is our collaboration with local communities of African Bible readers/users (West and Dube 1996; West 2007). McKinlay would seem to embrace our refusal to be “dispassionate,” our commitment to creativity and “engagement” (2018, 1-2). Indeed, one would imagine that feminist biblical interpretation must include among its “multiple perspectives” and “various methodological approaches” (Edelman 2014, xiii; cited by McKinlay 2019, 2) actual engagement with the gendered realities of life, particularly in contexts where an alliance among colonial, indigenous, and biblical hetero-patriarchies predominantly shape that lived reality (Dube 2001).

In community

For Fuchs and those whom she cites (2016, 6-8), what is unsettling about the community-based moves many African biblical scholars make is that it involves reading with those for whom reading the Bible is related to religious faith. However, we should pause before we too quickly stigmatize certain forms of biblical interpretation as “confessional” (Fuchs 2016, 8). For among African biblical scholarship and (I hesitate to add) African theology there is considerable critical reflection, in the manner advocated for by McKinlay (2019), of what it means for Africans “to have the Bible.” As Tinyiko Maluleke observes:

When White people came to our country they had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. They said, “let us pray,” and we closed our eyes to pray. At the end of the prayer, they (Whites) had the land and we had the Bible. (Maluleke 1998, 60)

This gender-inclusive version of the well-known African anecdote is used by Maluleke to pose the question of what it might mean for Africans to “have” the Bible, a task, he goes on to argue, which requires South African Black Theology “to observe and analyse the manner in which African Christians ‘read’ and view the Bible” (1996, 15). We should not be misled, Maluleke argues, by the public discourse of Africans about the Bible, for “on the whole, and in practice, African Christians are far more innovative and subversive in their appropriation of the Bible than they appear” (1997, 14-15). While they “may mouth the Bible-is-equal-to-the-Word-of-God formula, they are actually creatively pragmatic and selective in their use of the Bible so that the Bible may enhance rather than frustrate their life struggles” (1996, 13).

As Maluleke makes clear, the task of how Africans actually use the Bible is a critical task worthy of African biblical studies. And so too is the related task of working with the mass of ordinary Africans who use the Bible to facilitate interpretations of what is now an African Bible (West 2016) so that it becomes another resource in African struggles for life rather than for death.

Much of my own work over the past three decades has been to reflect on the critical contours of such facilitation. What does it mean not only to have the Bible as Africans, but for African biblical scholars to redeploy their critical “biblical studies” tools (McKinlay 2019) alongside the “reading” resources ordinary Africans already use for the purpose of systemic social change? As McKinley (2019) astutely recognizes, these tasks require not only the forging of particular methodological tools, but also the theoretical framing of these tools. Such has been my work, constructing an ideologically overt back-and-forth movement between the increasingly diverse domain of “biblical studies” and the particular terrains of African contexts (West 2013a, 2018b).

In practice

The work I do with the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research is located within liberation praxis, recognizing the epistemological privilege of the poor and marginalized (West 2013b).¹ So we prefer to work with organized communities of the poor and marginalized who invite us to collaborate with them

¹ See <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>.

on particular projects they consider critical to systemic social change. As I write this, the Ujamaa Centre has been invited by Abahlali baseMjondolo,² the shack-dwellers movement in South Africa, together with other formations of the poor and working-class, to facilitate a “Contextual Bible Study” on “Unemployment, Gender, and Land” (on 7 November 2018). “Contextual Bible Study” is the theoretical and methodological process we use to work critically with the Bible in such collaborative endeavours (West 2015). The forthcoming workshop within which the Ujamaa Centre will facilitate the Contextual Bible Study process runs for three days, and we have been invited to use the morning of the middle day for a critical re-reading of the Bible that may offer resources for the intersection of unemployment, gender, and land. Other forms of critical reflection and activism will make up and take up the rest of the workshop, but the Bible has a place among the other practices.

Being tasked with constructing a Contextual Bible Study for this workshop, I have turned to South African Makhosazana Nzimande’s intersectional postcolonial feminist liberation interpretation of 1 Kgs 21:1-16, the story of Naboth’s vineyard (Nzimande 2005, 2008).³ Her *imbokodo* (grinding stone)⁴ hermeneutic draws deeply on Itumeleng Mosala’s work, seeking to locate the struggles of “the oppressed and exploited in the text” (Nzimande 2008, 230), and taking up Mosala’s challenge of what it requires hermeneutically to use the Bible to get the land back (Mosala 1989, 153).

Nzimande’s contribution to the post-apartheid land restitution project is to bring her South African context into dialogue with kindred struggles “over stolen lands” in the biblical text (Nzimande 2008, 234). Her first interpretive move follows Mosala, using historical-critical resources to locate the biblical text (1 Kgs 21:1-16) historically. But her next move is not a Marxist materialist sociological analysis of this period; instead, she draws on feminist literary analysis in order to provide a detailed characterization of the leading female character (Queen Jezebel). The sociological contribution, using postcolonial theory, comes in her next move, where she locates the text within its imperial setting (Phoenician imperialism), giving attention to both the literary-narrative imperial setting and the socio-historical imperial setting. She follows Mosala’s economic emphasis in her final interpretive move, which is to delineate the class relations within this imperial context (including Jezebel as part of a royal household) (Nzimande 2008, 234-7).

Nzimande then brings this text and her set of (*imbokodo*) critical interpretive resources into dialogue with a critical analysis of the South African context, recovering the identity and agency of African queen-mothers in their governance of African land. The postcolonial recovery of African culture and/as religion as envisaged by South African Black Theology is apparent here. But she does not conclude her work with this religio-cultural recovery. She pushes the boundaries of feminist postcolonial criticism to include matters of class, recovering the “voices” of “those at the receiving end of the Queens’ and Queen Mothers’ policies” (Nzimande 2008, 243). She uses her *imbokodo* hermeneutic “to read with sensitivity towards the marginalised and dispossessed,” the South African equivalents of Naboth’s wife (Nzimande 2008, 246-8), recognizing that “the beneficiaries” of such indigenous

² See <http://abahlali.org>.

³ One of Nzimande’s dialogue partners is Judith McKinlay (Nzimande 2008, 245, McKinlay 2004)

⁴ *Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo* (“You strike a woman, you strike a grinding stone”).

elites, including indigenous queens and queen-mothers, “are themselves and their sons, rather than the general grassroots populace they are expected to represent by virtue of their royal privileges” (Nzimande 2008, 243).

I am working on how to frame these resources within a Contextual Bible Study process; how to facilitate a participatory process in which the diverse detail of this biblical text becomes a resource for collaborative change. We have done work on other biblical texts in the context of South Africa’s land struggles, but the potential intersection of economics, land, and gender in a postcolonial context that this text offers are significant.

In conclusion

Reading Judith McKinlay’s article with her interest in Huldah (2 Kings 22-23) and working towards a Contextual Bible Study on 1 Kgs 21:1-16 has generated an unexpected intertextual resonance. Both texts intersect an economic narrative and a religious narrative. Indeed, such intersections, and the preponderance of the religious over the economic, is a feature of Kings. I give my students 1 Kgs 11:26-13:33 and ask them to identify the religious and economic narratives, respectively, that account for the division of Israel and Judah. My point is ideological. I want them to recognize that the Bible is a site of struggle with contending “voices.” That the Bible is itself, intrinsically and inherently, a site of struggle is a key critical contribution of South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala (1989, 32-3). The systemic economic account of the division of the united monarchy in 1 Kgs 12:1-14, 16-18 is framed by a religious narrative and internally subverted (12:15) by a religious narrative.

Religious narratives are privileged in the biblical text and in the South African theological context. Consequently, much of my current work is on recovering notions of “the Bible as a site of struggle,” thirty years after Mosala’s pioneering work (1989). I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to present a series of public lectures on “The Bible as a Site of Struggle” as part of the University of Otago’s De Carle Distinguished Lectureship (February-April 2017),⁵ and doubly fortunate in having Judith McKinlay as a dialogue partner during these lectures. Now, through her article (2019), she has offered me Huldah. What, I wonder, is the place of the economic fragment found in 2 Kgs 22:3-7? How does this relate to the predominant emphasis on a religious narrative, with Huldah as its central (narrative) source?

Clearly further conversation is required.

Reference List

- Brenner-Idan, Athalya. 2016. “So Where Are We? Some Reflections on Contextual Interpretation as Practiced.” In *Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies from the Four Corners of the World*, edited by Yonsei University, n.p. Seoul: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Dube, Musa W., ed. 2001. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

⁵ <https://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/projects/west.html>

- Dube, Musa W., Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango. 2012. *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Edelman, Diana V. 2014. "Introduction." In *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana V. Edelman, xiii-xx. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 456. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Fuchs, Esther. 2016. *Feminist Theory and the Bible: Interrogating the Sources*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S. 1996. "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order: A Time to Drink from Our Own Wells." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96: 3-19.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S. 1997. "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99: 4-23.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S. 1998. "Black Theology as Public Discourse." In *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers*, edited by James R. Cochrane, 60-2. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Masenya, Madipoane Ngwan'a Mphahlele, and Kenneth N. Ngwa, eds. 2018. *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from Our Pots and Our Calabashes*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Mbuvi, Andrew M. 2017. "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline." *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2):149-78.
- McKinlay, Judith. 2019. "The Critical Matter of Interpretation, with a Sideways Glance at Huldah and Josiah." *Bible and Critical Theory* 15 (1): 1-9.
- McKinlay, Judith E. 2004. *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J. 1989. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Nzimande, Makhosazana K. 2005. "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The *gebirah* in the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Queen Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel." PhD dissertation, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University.
- Nzimande, Makhosazana K. 2008. "Reconfiguring Jezebel: A Postcolonial *imbokodo* Reading of the Story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16)." In *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*, edited by Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West, 223-58. Leiden: Brill.
- West, Gerald O., ed. 2007. *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*. Semeia Studies 62. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill.
- West, Gerald O. 2013a. "Deploying the Literary Detail of a Biblical Text (2 Samuel 13:1-22) in Search of Redemptive Masculinities." In *Interested Readers: Essays*
-

- on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Clines*, edited by James K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier, 297-312. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- West, Gerald O. 2013b. "Liberation Hermeneutics." In *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Steven L. McKenzie, 507-15. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- West, Gerald O. 2015. "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised: The Value/s of Contextual Bible Reading." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1 (2): 235-61.
- West, Gerald O. 2016. *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*. Leiden: Brill; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- West, Gerald O. 2018a. "African Biblical Scholarship as Tri-Polar, Post-Colonial, and a Site-of-Struggle." In *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Benny Tat-siong Liew, 240-73. Leiden: Brill.
- West, Gerald O. 2018b. "Facilitating Interpretive Resilience: The Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Site of Struggle." *Acta Theologica* Supplement 26: 17-37.
- West, Gerald O., and Musa W. Dube, eds. 1996. "*Reading With*": *African Overtures*. *Semeia* 73. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)