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The promise of attending to literary context for contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa¹

ABSTRACT

For important reasons, African contextual hermeneutics raises the main question: "What does the Scripture mean to us and our community?". This article asserts that the reader-centred approach tends to allow the voice of the community to ring louder than the voice of Scripture. Repercussions can include a limited role of Jesus Christ and a heightened role of material prosperity in some African expressions of Christian faith. The article argues that contextual hermeneutics needs to make room for the inductive analysis of biblical texts, especially their literary contexts. The heart of a combined inductive and contextual approach is inviting readers to a dialogue between text and context, asking questions that help them use literary context to observe the main aims, themes, and lines of thought of passages of Scripture, and that foster a deep identification between biblical texts and the readers' context.



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1. INTRODUCTION: “THE BIBLE MEANS WHAT IT MEANS TO US AND OUR COMMUNITY”

This article is about discerning a preferred method of interpreting the Bible, especially for the context of sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2010, I arrived in Zambia to teach biblical interpretation, after having trained as a pastor and New Testament scholar in the USA. The first thing I noticed as we studied the Bible at Justo Mwale University was the constant use of the words “context” (not the literary or historical kind) and “contextual”.² I kept hearing: What does the text mean for our context, and was this or that interpretation contextual, or not?

One day, there was a faculty panel and an exciting student debate on the prosperity gospel. As I remember, it included the following. A few students seemed convinced that there were solid arguments for the notion that God promises financial prosperity in this lifetime to those who trust and follow God’s ways. Perhaps a faculty member or two agreed. I offered a leading question along the lines of: “What happens when you run the prosperity gospel through the reality of the death of Jesus on the cross, which fills the New Testament and shapes how the biblical writers understand the Christian life?”. After someone commented that my question came from a theoretical perspective, one of my African colleagues politely but in a straightforward manner set me straight: “The Bible means what it means to us and our community.” I looked around, and it seemed as if nearly everyone took this statement not as a polemic, but as a given. At that point, I knew I was among people with a different model of interpretation than that of my own training, which prioritised trying to say what the original authors were trying to say (Rowe 2016:8).

1.1 African contextual biblical hermeneutics

The word “contextual” in this approach to the interpretation of the Bible describes the reality that the method raises the following question above other priorities: “What does the Scripture mean to our community?” Ukpong (2002:28), who calls the approach biblical inculturation hermeneutics, observes: “Methodological priority is given to the context of the readers.” Precedence goes to the world in front of the text – the experiences and needs of the readers.

2 Prior to teaching in Zambia, I also taught the Bible for five years at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo. I observed in that vastly different context that Christians surrounded by Muslims tended to give relatively higher priority to the written text (or the world within the text, as opposed to the world in front of the text).

Several terms are used, and different authors at times mean slightly different things (Adamo 2015:31), but they all refer to an approach that places African readers at the centre of interpretation. In South Africa, it is associated with liberation theology. According to West (2014:2), “Contextual Bible Study is a form of liberation hermeneutics”. For him, the heart of contextual hermeneutics is reading the Bible in a way that puts the poor and those at the margins of society at the generating centre of the process of interpretation. West champions a particular approach (note his capital letters) that is a form of liberation hermeneutics, but it would be difficult to say that his specific method is similar to the broadly audience-centred hermeneutic which I have experienced in Zambia. I encountered hardly any liberation theology, unless it somehow lies behind the preachers’ agenda to use the Bible to encourage entrepreneurship. It may be safest to say that the context-oriented approach has surfaced throughout post-colonial Africa, far beyond the reach of liberation hermeneutics. Dada (2010:164) surveys several emerging approaches to biblical hermeneutics in Africa and observes that what they hold in common

is that they arise from and aim to address a particular or specific context. Their contextual character, therefore, makes it easier for them to be classified as contextual biblical hermeneutics.

Although approaches to biblical interpretation are highly varied and in constant flux (Bockmuehl 2006:30-67), it seems safe to say that the contextual interpretation, which Dada describes, holds sway in Africa (Ukpong 2001:147, 149). Perhaps the best phrase for the approach is “African contextual biblical hermeneutics”.

Contextual biblical interpretation in Africa means need-driven interpretation for the sake of ordinary Africans. Ukpong (2001:162) asks:

What sort of issues and interpretive interests shape our scholarship
– those of the guild or the ordinary readers of our communities?

Ukpong and other African scholars answer clearly: those of ordinary people. Ukpong (2001:148) states:

The concern of the contextual critic is the social role of the Bible in the present: the functioning of the Bible in contemporary society.

Biblical interpretation in Africa acknowledges as central that which readers bring to the interpretive process, as well as what interpreters bring to their communities from that process. Ukpong (2001:148) mentions that his method arises “from a desire to make academic study of the Bible relevant to the existential situation of the people”. Omenyo and Arthur

(2013:61) assert that “African exegesis is need-driven ...”. Moreover, Dada (2010:163) calls contextual biblical hermeneutics “the rereading of the Christian scripture from a thought-out Afrocentric perspective”.

1.2 Aims and argument

As one influenced by reading and teaching the Bible in Zambia for ten years, I have gradually learned to welcome and embrace contextual biblical interpretation. (In section 2 below, I will explain more of this method’s importance and promise.) However, this article arises from concerns with the limitations of contextual hermeneutics. When an approach to the Bible elevates a particular community and its needs and ways of thinking as the generating centre of the interpretive process and the main source for the meaning of Scripture, the community risks hearing mainly its own voice.

Whenever we pick up the Bible, read it, put it down, and say, ‘That’s just what I thought,’ we are probably in trouble (Davis 2003:16).

At issue is how putting the context of the reading community in the prioritised position can square with allowing Scripture to speak its own message.

This article aims to honour the commitment of contextual hermeneutics to read for the sake of the African context, even while it also advocates for a version of the approach that gives ample space for Scripture to speak in ways which our communities and cultures do not already assume or anticipate. Interpretation which allows the Bible to be our Scripture involves deep listening to communication coming before and beyond ourselves, which we readers welcome into genuine and in-depth dialogue with our contexts. This dialogue requires that readers be true to their experience and who they are. It also means allowing the distinct voices of the biblical writings to be what they are. By assisting this dialogue between Scripture and culture, this article aims to serve the ability of African theological education to do and teach biblical interpretation with integrity and in a way that is genuinely transformative.

I wish to commend a form of contextual hermeneutics combined with a method of inductive analysis of biblical passages in their literary context. The process is *inductive*, because it aims to take in as much evidence – raw data – as it can from the biblical text itself before drawing conclusions about the meaning. This method can enhance African contextual hermeneutics, as it helps readers cultivate the ability to see much more in the text of Scripture. Readers learn to trace the main aims, themes, structure, and progression of thought, and recognise connections between the parts and

the wholes of books of the Bible.³ In seeing more of the world described by Scripture, readers become better positioned for a genuine dialogue between that world and their own.

I argue that, to preserve the promise of contextual hermeneutics and to avoid the pitfall of hearing mainly our own voices, those who teach the interpretation of Scripture in Africa should integrate the inductive analysis of Scripture with the focus on literary context. By so doing, we can help safeguard the discernment of God's voice to our communities through Scripture. The hope, ultimately, is to serve and protect the transformative and prophetic nature of biblical interpretation.

This article builds on my experience in teaching biblical interpretation in Zambia, as well as on the work of scholars of biblical hermeneutics in both Africa and the West. In what follows, the article will: 1) describe the importance and promise of African contextual hermeneutics; 2) explain limitations and needs which this approach does not tend to meet; 3) depict inductive analysis of literary context in biblical interpretation; and 4) explore a way to combine contextual hermeneutics with inductive study of literary context, leading to deeper dialogue between Scripture and readers. The article's results may serve those who study and teach biblical interpretation in Africa and perhaps those who practise contextual hermeneutics on behalf of other communities of readers beyond Africa.

2. THE IMPORTANCE AND PROMISE OF AFRICAN CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

This section will attempt briefly to explain the importance and promise of embracing a contextual approach to biblical interpretation in Africa. Many have observed that all interpreters – everywhere – naturally give priority to their own contexts, because all interpretation is *interested*; all interpreters bring agendas and concerns to the task of reading (see Punt 2006:78-79; Kim 2013:20). Contextual hermeneutics goes further than traditional Western methods in acknowledging what readers bring to the interpretive process. This way of doing interpretation has integrity, acknowledging the reality that interpretation involves readers who play a major role in interpretive outcomes.

Contextual hermeneutics, moreover, is a critical part of developing a theology that responds to and addresses the diverse cultural realities

3 An introductory textbook such as Wall & Nienhuis (2015) can also acquaint students with some of these aims, themes, and connections, but no substitute exists for discovering these while encountering biblical texts themselves.

of Africa. Shenk (2005:193) observed that doing contextual theology is part of the process of establishing authenticity both as Christians and as members of cultures. When the church is strong and vital in a particular place, Shenk (2005:208) asserts that it “combines cultural authenticity and theological integrity”. This demands an ongoing dialogue between insights from Scripture and insights from a given culture. A consciously contextual approach to Scripture helps develop contextual theology with integrity.

The need for contextual interpretation also arises as part of Africa’s response to its post-colonial situation (see Dube 2002). By valuing the production of African interpretations, contextual hermeneutics encourages the individuation of the African church as it continues to come out from under colonial powers. Contextual hermeneutics is empowering, because it gives African interpreters space to read and think for their own communities when otherwise it can seem that Western readings get accepted as definitive readings, even while not speaking to African concerns (Dada 2010:162-163; Adamo 2015:31). Contextual hermeneutics also serves the African church’s journey toward mature self-reflection, because it promotes sustained analysis of its own social context as part of the reading process.

Part of what motivates African hermeneutics is a distrust of Western exegetical methods and points of view. Dada (2010:172) asserts that “Western and other hermeneutical methodologies should not be swallowed wholesale, in a non-critical manner”. African scholarship tends to find unacceptable the rejection of supernatural power found in some strands of Western scholarship. Biblical scholarship in Africa happens closer to the life of the church than scholarship in the West. Throughout the vast majority of sub-Saharan Africa, the Bible is understood as powerful, authoritative, and relevant for both the church and society at large. Contextual hermeneutics suits the African mind in being highly practical. This also suits the Bible itself, which is practical and directed toward ordinary people. Contextual hermeneutics focuses not on speculative hypotheses about the biblical past, but on Scripture’s current, holistic impact, granting honour to ordinary readers.

Some scholars also emphasise that, by consciously reading from an African perspective, they can discover aspects of biblical texts that otherwise would remain hidden, and thus contribute to knowledge (Mbuvi 2017:150). Ukpogon (2002:25) observes that

a unitive view of reality, [an] emphasis on community, and a pragmatic outlook are among the marks of the African conceptual frame of reference.

This framework places African culture within closer reach of biblical ways of seeing than that of Western minds (see Kahl 2000:426). Anecdotally, I find that my students turn up shades of meaning on harmony between Christians which I do not anticipate. Ukpong (2001:158) urges African scholars “to use the lenses of our cultural and existential life contexts, our African biases and interests” to read against accepted understandings and uncover new dimensions of biblical texts.

For the above reasons, contextual biblical hermeneutics is an empowering method and a promising fit for Africa. A question remains as to it being as transformative an approach for Africa as it could be, on account of its constraints.

3. THE LIMITATIONS OF CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

I accept and embrace contextual hermeneutics, but I practise and commend this approach with a *caveat*: It is difficult for it to lead to prophetic and transformative readings of the Bible, unless we exercise care to enhance our approach. By prophetic reading, I mean discerning from and through Scripture the message that God desires to speak for our place and time (see Davis 2014:1-20). This section will explore the limitations – what seems to not be working well – in contextual hermeneutics. By giving priority to the context of readers, the method leads us to hear ourselves, the voices of our own community, more clearly than the distinct voice of Scripture. The repercussions of this may include a reduced role of Jesus Christ, and an elevated view of material prosperity, in African expressions of Christian faith. This section will also explore what contextual hermeneutics needs: a way of reading and hearing well the words that are spoken from beyond our community, for the sake of critical response.

3.1 Hearing our own voices

By placing the readers’ context at the forefront of interpretation, contextual hermeneutics may run the risk of undermining our ability to hear what the Bible itself has to say. The method too readily allows interpretations to mirror the aspirations and values of readers; the Bible means mostly what the reading community wants it to mean. The need-driven focus of contextual hermeneutics means that the priorities of the contemporary audience tend to leave little room for close observation of, and critical engagement with, the biblical text.

As I have experienced in Zambia, saying that the Bible means what it means to our community may suggest that biblical ways of seeing are not integrated into the genuine dialogue that the interpretive process demands. The method can give implicit permission to overlook or relegate to what is irrelevant the parts of Scripture that do not seem to speak to the needs of the community. Aspects of the Bible receive attention according to whether they pertain to various African values such as community, healing, material well-being, and protection against enemies. As Aryeh (2016:158) observes of contextual hermeneutics: "Interpretation is largely dependent on happenings in the environment of the audience more than in the text." Unless care is taken, the approach does little to encourage finding content in Scripture that calls preconceptions into question.

Instead of welcoming a true dialogue which leads to transformation, the use of the Bible in contextual interpretation can resemble a conversation between two rather different people, where one person does most of the talking and does not realise that the other has something to say. The community of readers has a voice, but biblical texts lack ample space and opportunity to speak. The contextual approach can be perilous, because the experience of readers may become a canon above Scripture, and even oppose the teaching of Scripture.

Adamo (2015:35) urges the use of biblical interpretation to place "Africans at the centre of the world [and] to promote African culture, tradition and identity". In a post-colonial context, it can seem that the West had its time to be the centre; now, Africa should have its time. However, my colleague Banda (2004:169) names the problem of

taming [interpretation] within the culture of the interpreter, [of] recycling into the text the interpreter's own ignorance and preconceptions congruent to one's culture.

This, of course, can happen in any culture. Banda claims that one can be a "prisoner" of how one's own culture sees. He goes on to affirm that "culture must itself be converted" (2004:169).

From the vantage point of Scripture, it may not be a good idea to consciously make one's own community the generating centre of interpretation and place full confidence in readers and what we bring to the text.⁴ Scripture imagines readers who receive it not as human words but as words from God. As we naturally tend to perceive our culture's way of viewing the world as the centre of reality, we must meet and come to terms with the theocentric perspective of the Bible. Moreover, despite the

4 This paragraph relies heavily on the perspective of Bockmuehl (2006:78-79).

reality that numerous African ways of seeing bear more resemblance to Scripture than Western ways, the Bible calls human reason and wisdom into question, and our minds need to be transformed and renewed (see Heb. 3:10; Rom. 12:1-2).

Placing the community of readers at the centre of interpretation may inadvertently undermine the process which Hiebert called “critical contextualization”. Hiebert (1987:108) affirms that Christians in all countries have the right to be “cognitively free from Western domination”. He also states that cultural biases tend to distort the interpretation of the Bible (Hiebert 1987:110). Describing the process of contextualisation, Hiebert (1987:110) speaks of the importance of a “critical response” to culture in light of new-found biblical understandings. Rowe (2016:220) reminds us of an early Christian process of sifting through culture, involving refusal and embrace, that is necessary in all eras:

Toward the larger pagan world across the Mediterranean, the Christians were positioned by their story in a complex relation of rejection and invitation.

The biblical narrative leads to a critical evaluation of our customs and preconceptions. If the community-centred approach to hermeneutics leaves biblical ways of seeing undiscovered, then the community misses the affirming and challenging influences of Scripture, which can seriously impact on African Christianity.

3.2 Repercussions: Less of Jesus Christ, more of the prosperity gospel

When the community is the measure of biblical interpretation, this can lead to an uncritical contextualisation of the Christian faith. Although Christianity in Africa is highly diverse, I suggest we may find this happening at present with respect to a limited role of Jesus Christ and an elevated role of material prosperity in many African expressions of the Christian faith. Billings (2010:33) asserts:

The Bible is the Spirit's instrument for leading Christians into a knowledge of the triune God on the path of Jesus Christ.

Billings also recognises that this knowledge is something Christians would not know, based only on their cultural backgrounds. In the Christianity that prevails in Zambia and its vicinity, Jesus Christ seems pushed aside, and this will not likely improve if we prioritise our context more than hearing the voice of Scripture.

In a previous article (Ellington 2017:91-92), I told of the number of times Jesus' death on the cross was mentioned in any way in comparison with the number of times the words "success" or "succeed" were spoken in a positive way during worship. Over ten weeks in chapel services of the Reformed university in Zambia, the ratio was eight to 39 in favour of success. If it had not been for one preacher focusing more on the cross, it would have been one to 38. Even if some mentions of success had hardly anything to do with prosperity theology, the ratio is striking.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of my past ten years among Christians in sub-Saharan Africa has been how little I have heard Jesus Christ named, apart from when people invoke the power of his name during prayer. Christian conversation seldom mentions Jesus and preaching seems rarely to concentrate on him.

It seems self-evident and even rather natural to think that Christianity focuses on Jesus. He is, after all, the reason for Christianity (Rowe 2020:3).

Can this be stated as currently true of Christianity throughout sub-Saharan Africa? My faculty colleagues tell me that I hardly hear of Jesus Christ because, in Zambia, people do not readily speak about that which is close to their hearts. They also mention that African cosmology makes it easier to speak of God than of God's Son, and that Africans find it difficult to relate to the idea that a powerful man became weak and died on the cross. Students often mention that they find it difficult to focus on Jesus Christ when preaching, because the congregations' priorities lie elsewhere. Yet, because Jesus and his death on the cross are so central to the Christian faith and churches have become so robust in Zambia (95% of the population calls themselves Christians), I would expect to hear frequently of Jesus Christ. While I cannot claim that what seems like a feeble appreciation of Jesus arises from an audience-centred approach to interpretation, attentive reading of Scripture coupled with dialogue between text and context would seem to serve the process of recognising the central place of Jesus Christ.

The prevalence of the prosperity gospel in Africa also provides evidence that the aspirations of the community ring louder than the voice of Scripture. Nyondo Nyirenda (2017:13) researched how preachers in the Presbyterian Livingstonia Synod (Malawi) interpret the phrase "abundant life" (John 10:10) – one of African Christianity's most prominent phrases. She asked ministers if they interpret it according to how people in their communities define it, or if they give priority to how John's Gospel itself describes the theme. In response, 75% stated that priority should go to how people in

the communities define their need for prosperity.⁵ The pastors affirmed that Scripture is important, but the needs of the community should come first in determining the message to preach. Nyondo Nyirenda (2017:13) comments:

Many people now are experiencing many difficulties and need the message of assurance. This is what prompts them to twist the message of life in abundance to only mean prosperity in all areas of their lives.

Heuser (2015:21-22) quotes a PEW Forum survey (2010), stating that

more than half of Christians [in Sub-Saharan Africa] believe in the prosperity gospel, that God will grant wealth and good health to people who have enough faith.

Kahl (2015:106) gives concrete examples from Ghanaian preachers of what he calls a “decontextualizing use of scripture”, giving quite different meanings to Christian and biblical language, in order to preach power and prosperity, and for the preachers to earn their society’s respect. With a need-driven approach to hermeneutics, deriving meaning mainly from the community, the result tends towards less of Jesus Christ and more of the prosperity gospel.

3.3 Needs not readily met by the contextual approach

What does contextual hermeneutics lack, in order to be as transformative as it can be? A common Zambian proverb says: “The visitor comes with a sharp knife.” The idea is that an invited guest from the outside, one known to have special knowledge, can bring incisive and useful perspective. Could we who teach interpretation assist readers to allow Scripture itself to be the invited guest? Showing hospitality to this guest means that we learn to listen well, and that we consider how our visitor’s words may speak to our community.

Reading is most transformative when we hear Scripture speak messages that are distinct from our own point of view, and when we grant space to let dialogue happen between the world of the text and our own world. Billings (2010:38) speaks of encountering “the text in a way that is open to learning, listening, and transformation”. Kahl (2000:424) speaks of interpreting the Bible as

5 Nyondo Nyirenda interviewed 20 ministers of the word and sacrament from the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.

a real-life involvement with an object which has something to say
 ... [c]ritical readers allow themselves to be challenged and made
 uncertain by the scriptures, and are open to change.

While learning about one's own context and culture through social analysis also brings growth, Christian transformation tends to occur when a situation of honesty about ourselves joins with the voice of Scripture. This points to a dialogical approach. We need a method to extend our attention, so that we hear well what Scripture has to say. That will position us for transformative dialogue with the Bible, allowing it to be the word of God, which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12 NRSV).

4. A SOLUTION: INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS WITH ATTENTION TO LITERARY CONTEXT

We have observed that contextual hermeneutics needs intentional, structured ways to help readers hear the distinct voice of Scripture, so that transforming dialogue can occur between the reading community and the text of Scripture. This section introduces inductive analysis of biblical texts with attention to literary context, a promising method for meeting the need of contextual hermeneutics.

4.1 Inductive analysis

I first learned of using the term "inductive" for the study of Scripture from an approach called Inductive Bible Study, which partly informs my method of interpretation, although I use and commend a scaled-down version thereof.⁶ Applied to the study of Scripture, Bauer and Traina (2011:14) explain that the word "inductive" means that we move

from the evidence of the text and the realities that surround the text to possible conclusions (or inferences) regarding the meaning of the text.

Inductive analysis helps readers develop skill at getting to the *what* of the text, to what is actually written in verses, passages, and whole books of Scripture itself in its final form. It is an *evidential* approach in that it fosters readers' ability to attend carefully to the words, phrases, and thoughts of Scripture.

6 For a full explanation of Inductive Bible Study, see Bauer & Traina (2011).

Bauer (2013:14) explains that

the study of the Bible calls for an inductive approach, since the fundamental reality of our experience of reading, including our reading of the Bible, is that of being addressed, of receiving communication from another.

The approach thus accounts for the nature of Scripture as God's word to us and responds to that reality by calling for a "radical openness" to the evidence found on the pages of Scripture itself for the sake of interpretation (Bauer 2011:18). A deductive method would mean turning to Scripture to locate evidence for what we already think and believe.

4.2 Literary context

An inductive analysis of biblical texts demands paying close attention to literary context. The following, in a nutshell, is what it means to attend to the literary context when studying Scripture. We interpret words and verses in light of the immediate sections of Scripture in which they are found, and small sections in light of larger sections of a book of the Bible. We interpret larger sections of a book of the Bible in light of the biblical book as a whole. We look, back and forth, at parts in relation to the whole. Words, sentences, passages, and chapters, as Brown (2007:213) affirms, "take their meaning from the biblical book of which they are a part".

The use of literary context is important, as it clarifies and sets interpretive limits. When we read something in its literary context, we must face what is really in the text. This keeps us on track with the main aims, themes, and progression of thought of specific passages and of whole books of the Bible. We must deal with a verse in light of what the remainder of its own context is saying. We read with the grain of a passage, so that we have the biblical book's own guidance as we seek to clarify meaning. Too often we attempt to make a piece of Scripture fit our preconceived notions and prior agendas. Reading a passage in its literary context prevents us from saying that Scripture means whatever we want it to mean.

In the Bible, the widest literary context is the canonical context. We can understand books of the Bible in relationship to the remainder of the canon. This is also valuable in the African context, as people often relate more easily to the narratives of the Old Testament than to those of the New Testament. The movement of the canon toward Jesus Christ can set the Old Testament in a larger context and help us avoid abuses. Once, when reading an imprecatory Psalm during an interpretation class, one impassioned student suddenly exclaimed: "May all witches die in Jesus' name!" The student missed the immediate literary context, which

suggested that the Psalm was not an invitation to pronounce death upon enemies, but an appeal for God to act. Moreover, reading with the grain of the whole canon invites us to view a passage through the person and teaching of Jesus. Students can be invited to view Scripture from back to front and from front to back.⁷

Attending to literary context is also a key to understanding the historical context of a passage. Because it is there on the page in front of us, the literary context is far more accessible and much clearer than the historical context. We can, however, take steps towards accessing elements of the historical situation through a close examination of a text's literary context. For instance, when studying a passage from an epistle in the New Testament, we can ask: What does reading the whole letter tell us about the situation it addresses?

An inductive analysis of a passage in its literary context is a way of entering the world of the text and dwelling in that otherness, seeing it for what it is. When we see more of that world, we can view our own world in greater relief, enabling us to compare between them. Incorporating the inductive study of passages in their literary context allows for recognising where Scripture speaks words that are affirming of or different from our own values and beliefs. Therefore, this approach fosters and encourages a process of critical contextualisation.

5. COMBINING APPROACHES

Can we hold together contextual hermeneutics *and* the inductive analysis of biblical texts in their literary context, the former prioritising the voice of the community and the latter the voice of Scripture, and acknowledge that both are crucial for transformative interpretation? The prospect of bringing two different priorities and approaches together holds promise. Contextual biblical hermeneutics is more an orientation toward the readers' context and a commitment to it than it is a particular method. Practitioners of contextual hermeneutics frequently affirm that not only the community, but also its dialogue with the biblical text (and some include the historical contexts of passages) are "decisive in the production of meaning" (Draper 2015:8; Kim 2013:27). My experience teaching in a setting that more or less demands a context-oriented approach suggests that it can absorb inductive analysis with attention to literary context, once readers recognise that they make valuable discoveries in the interest of their African setting.

7 This is one of the nine theses for interpreting Scripture described by Davis & Hays (2003:1-8).

I will attempt briefly to describe a way of combining approaches that builds on my experience of teaching undergraduate theological students in Zambia and that converses with the work of Gerald West and Jonathan Draper. West and Draper practise a form of contextual Bible study that holds together the priority of the community (with more emphasis on social analysis than my approach), on the one hand, with the priority of hearing in Scripture a word from beyond the community, on the other, by means of a close reading of Scripture that includes attending to literary context (West 2011:441). I suggest that the heart of a combined approach is inviting readers to ask questions of the text that help them use literary context to read with the grain of Scripture and also questions of themselves which foster a deep identification between the biblical text and the readers' context.

Before opening Scripture together, I invite students to view our study as honest engagement with God and as a process that needs patience. Students can get the idea that academic study is removed from the life of faith. This warrants a reminder that theological interpretation means that we are relating with God (and thus need to be open to repentance and transformation) as we discern God's voice through Scripture (see Davis 2003:16). While it may not be suitable in some universities, beginning with prayer can bring these realities to awareness (see West 2011:434). I found that students are accustomed to reading Scripture quickly, in order to find something useful for themselves and their community (West 2014:7). I must, therefore, prepare them for a process that

is slow, enabling a re-reading of the text and a recognition of "textual" detail that may not be readily apparent (West 2014:7).

Students may be initially reluctant to respond in dialogue about the biblical text, because they do not think that their perspective would interest the facilitator (West 2011:446). With a few seconds of silence after asking each question, this barrier is overcome.

A compromise I tend to require of contextual hermeneutics is that we begin with the Bible itself instead of discussing the readers' context before opening Scripture. This acknowledges that the word we ultimately need to hear does not come from us but from God (see Bauer 2013:14). Moreover, allowing Scripture this priority expresses an openness and trust that God will speak to our context through the Bible.⁸ Draper (2015:9) affirms that it is conceivable to do contextual hermeneutics without starting with a stated

8 Of course, the choice of which passage to study, or to which parts of a given book of the Bible we will direct the most attention, is an important contextual decision.

social agenda or analysis of the readers' context.⁹ The African students whom I have taught tend to be already talking with one another about their social context, whereas reading Scripture slowly and asking thoughtful questions to open a text's line of thought require more intentional practice. A typical session of studying a passage, in this case from an epistle of the New Testament, might take the form of a dialogue using the following questions in the first half to two-thirds of our time together.¹⁰

1. Read the passage several times to observe it closely. Try to read it in more than one translation (and the original language if you are able). What stands out or comes to mind the most as you read? Does anything surprise you?
2. Notice any repeated keywords, phrases, ideas, and images. What is/are the main theme(s) of the passage?
3. What do you learn about the situation of the audience, and the aims of the writer in addressing the circumstances of the audience?
4. Do you see any structure to the passage? Can you describe the line of thought, or how the subject of the passage progresses?
5. Read what comes before the passage and what comes after the passage, seeking connections. What does the remainder of the letter (the wider literary context) tell you about this passage or the situation it addresses?
6. What do you think was/were the contribution(s) of this passage to the original audience?

Since the method seeks to combine elements of inductive analysis of the text with contextual hermeneutics, it focuses on training students to ask questions that open the text of the passage in its literary context *and* questions that open the students' context in conversation with the text. The first question above tends to invite comments reflecting not only the text, but also the readers' context. The world of the readers thus has a point of entry into the dialogue from the start. Allowing the readers' context to enter discussion at the beginning requires compromise

9 For why readers might wish to begin with analysis of themselves and their own context, see Kim (2013:20, 27, 33). West (2014:2, 7) usually asks a group to do social analysis first, or he facilitates the Bible study of a group which has determined its social agenda ahead of time. He chooses a biblical passage to suit the group's agenda.

10 If we study a different genre, the questions are somewhat different; for instance, when studying a narrative, we ask questions that help readers discover what the narrative may be claiming about who God is, and questions to help them identify with characters in the story.

of the textual orientation of my background. But I find it an important acknowledgement that light may fall on the readers' world (or from that world to the text) at any point in the process. Whatever is brought out at the beginning will go through a testing process, as the group responds to the remaining questions that sharpen students' focus on what they are reading. Practising inductive analysis with the focus on literary context develops strong reading skills, as people learn to concentrate on the relation of small parts to larger sections and to interpret a passage in its whole-book context. My experience is that many students received limited training to analyse literature in their previous schooling. The emphasis on building their literary skills thus raises their level of engagement and brings joys of discovery. The questions asked of the biblical text enable what Draper (2015:9-10) calls *distantiation*, whereby the readers see the text clearly enough that they recognise it as different and allow it to be "other", so that it can then speak a word to the community.

Once readers have the opportunity to see much more than they had realised was in the text, a dialogue between the Scripture and their own context can move toward greater depth and breadth. The following questions, also used during the study of letters in the New Testament, help readers focus on their own context in relation to the text. They begin to view their context through the passage, which can be eye opening for the students.

1. What circumstances in your own life, or in the life of your congregation or community, does this passage lead you to think about?
2. If you can imagine seeing yourself in or through this passage, what do you see? What about your family, friends, church, or others? How do you see them through this passage?
3. How might God be speaking to you through these verses?
4. How might God wish to speak to others from the passage? How might the passage speak to the church as a whole in your home country?
5. What further questions remain about the passage or about how it speaks to your life and context? What do you need to discuss more with others or continue to study?

As we hold Scripture and our context in dialogue, we are essentially asking: How does this piece of Scripture speak to our community, based on what we have seen in this text through our work together? The process of study and dialogue raises salient aspects from the text as well as pressing issues from the community. As students walk through this process, they produce readings that result from in-depth dialogue between biblical texts

and their contexts. They find the process inspiring, because they receive a witness from Scripture which speaks to their situation in life. They also find it empowering, because they receive from the study and dialogue a message from Scripture to their community.

6. CONCLUSION: DEEPENING DIALOGUE BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

This article sought to contribute to discerning a preferred method of interpreting the Bible in Africa. We affirmed the value of contextual hermeneutics. However, the article also suggested that the contextual orientation can allow the needs, expectations, and values of the reading community to take priority over the voice of Scripture. We may see repercussions of this in the limited role of Jesus Christ and the elevated role of material prosperity in some African expressions of Christian faith. The article argued that our contextual approach must allow us to hear the witness of Scripture well, including when it says something different from the voice of our community. As with all cultures everywhere, Africa needs deep and sustained dialogue between what is found in Scripture and what is present in the readers' world.

The article encouraged practitioners of African contextual hermeneutics to adopt an inductive analysis of biblical texts with the focus on their literary context. Bringing two different approaches together holds promise. Inductive analysis and the use of literary context focus on deriving the meaning of a given passage from the whole book of the Bible in which it is found. The process is inductive, because it aims to take in all available evidence from the biblical text before the interpretation is complete. The method trains our eyes to recognise the main aims, themes, and progression of thought of a passage, and to see its connections with the larger units of Scripture in which it is found. The article briefly described a path toward combining the contextual orientation with the inductive analysis of a passage in its literary context, whereby the world of readers and that of the text meet in significant dialogue. The essence of the combined approach is asking questions that help students follow the grain of Scripture and cultivate a deep identification between the biblical text and the readers' context. The resulting method empowers interpreters to produce readings which hear Scripture with integrity and speak to the situation of the community. As the level of conversation between Scripture and the community deepens, interpretation becomes transformative, and readers can weave a more integrated identity that is at once Christian and African.

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