

Twice Called, Thrice Rebuked: Doing African Biblical Scholarship

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Twice Called

In a speech to the International Labour Conference in 2003, Thabo Mbeki, the president of South Africa, turned to the Bible, engaging in an extended way with the parable of the talents “in the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew” (Matt 25:14–30).¹ Here the Bible is used to shape an argument concerning economic matters, an argument that Mbeki will reiterate again and again, regularly using the Bible, as he attempts to separate the spheres for which the government is responsible and the spheres for which religion is responsible.² Mbeki began by reading the King James Version of the biblical text. He then interpreted this parable against the grain of Matthew’s redaction to locate Africans in solidarity with the “unprofitable servant,” saying:

Among the hundreds of millions of the African world from which we came, as we travelled to Europe, the outer darkness into which the money merchant cast his unprofitable servant, there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Those who do not hear and do not see the agony, have neither ears to hear nor eyes to see.

But I am certain that even they who do not see or hear the people, have seen the great volumes of literature that describe in the greatest statistical detail and graphic language, the extent of the poverty that afflicts billions in Africa and the rest of the developing world....

¹Thabo Mbeki, Speech at the International Labour Conference, 11 June 2003, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2003/mbek0611.htm>.

²Gerald O. West, “Thabo Mbeki’s Bible: The Role of Religion in the South African Public Realm after Liberation,” in *Religion and Spirituality in Postcolonial South Africa*, ed. Duncan Brown (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009).

The surfeit of information available to all of us says that we live in a world defined by a deep economic and social structural fault that mirrors the angry outburst of the money merchant of the Parable of the Talents, when he uttered the ominous curse not just to his servant, but to the poor of the world: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”³

Recognizing, perhaps, that his appropriation of the Bible may seem a little out of place in Europe, he went on to say, “Obviously, we have to explain what we have just said, lest we are accused of special pleading and being overly dramatic.”⁴ Mbeki then did just that, using the biblical parable as an extended metaphor for his analysis of global capitalism.

On 15 December 2013, Bishop Ziphozihle D. Siwa, the presiding bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, preached on the same text, Matt 25:14–30, at the state funeral of Nelson Mandela. The sermon begins with a reading of a portion of the parable, with the assumption that the parable is well known, as indeed it is, among South Africans:

“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.” (Matt 25:21)⁵

What follows is a grappling with whether to read this parable with or against Matthew’s redactional grain. For Siwa, the third slave is his “special comrade” because “he has the guts to look at justice issues at a great cost to himself—true selflessness and sacrifice,” which is one of the primary “lessons from the life of Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.” But Siwa goes on to note that the other two are also slaves, and their actions, though not as commendable as the systemic resistance of their comrade, the third slave, nevertheless do try to make use of “what was available at the time,” though working within the system. Here too, Siwa suggests, Mandela provides our exemplar, for “we still learn from my comrades that opportunities must not be allowed to fly by—as long as we do not forget the justice issues. In 1985, Tata Mandela refused to leave the fellow comrades behind and waited for an opportune time.”⁶

These invocations of the Bible summon African biblical scholars, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. African biblical scholars are, in most cases, socially engaged scholars, engaged not only with their studies and students but also with their communities.⁷ We are summoned, regularly, to serve our local African

³Mbeki, Speech at the International Labour Conference.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ziphozihle D. Siwa, Nelson Mandela State Funeral Sermon (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INdPD1bGnq8>; <http://www.methodist.org.za/news/12152013-1129>.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretation in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 77.

communities with our scholarship, often around a particular social concern, whether it be the struggle against apartheid, gender violence, HIV, unemployment, or some other issue that matters. Part of what we offer is the detail that our scholarly tools provide. Our communities recognize that the Bible is a complex text, and they call us to assist them with navigating its intricacies in the service of a pressing social issue.

The First Rebuke

Yet when we heed their summons, our attentiveness to the detail of the text often destabilizes “the Bible,” rendering it diverse, requiring some recognition of its contending voices.⁸ Bishop Siwa’s reading of Matthew’s parable grapples with what to do with the different voices he discerns through his collaboration with socially engaged biblical scholars.⁹ Those of us who offer our scholarship to our local communities are both re-called (called again) and rebuked. The re-call comes with the recognition that the detail we conjure with our scholarly tools often does make a difference. But we are rebuked if our recovery of discordant detail unsettles local understandings of the Bible’s sacredness. “We do not interpret the Bible,” we are told, “the Bible interprets us.” And yet we are regularly re-called.

The Second Rebuke

Summoned by African receptions of the Bible in the public realm, such as that of Thabo Mbeki, some African biblical scholars enter this public realm, attempting to discern for what purposes and how the Bible is being used. Making use of a favored “silo ... of the Black masses,”¹⁰ politicians like Mbeki deploy the Bible for specific economic and political purposes. But when African biblical scholars engage such appropriations they risk rebuke, for in post-apartheid South Africa, as in much of the continent, the Bible’s scope of address tends to be restricted to moral matters. So while it is permissible for Mbeki to use the Bible to denationalize the South African economy after apartheid, reconnecting it to global capitalism, socially engaged biblical scholars are told to restrict their use of the Bible to re-nationalize our nation’s moral soul.¹¹ And yet we persist with our prophetic appropriations.

⁸ See Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁹ See, e.g., William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 150–68.

¹⁰ See Takatso Mofokeng, “Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation,” *JBTSA* 2 (1988): 40.

¹¹ See Gillian Hart, *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013); Gerald O. West, “From a Reconstruction and Development Programme (Rdp) of the Economy to an Rdp of the Soul: Public Realm Biblical

The Third Rebuke

The first and second rebukes come from our African communities and are almost always linked to the call of these same communities. The third rebuke comes from the academy, particularly its dominant Euro-American manifestations. These scholars worry that we work primarily with others different from themselves. That the primary dialogue partners and collaborators of African biblical scholars are outside the academy worries them¹²—and even if this dimension of our work is not an issue, that we risk partiality in choosing to work with particular interpretations in particular social contexts is of concern to them.¹³

Risking Rebuke

The articles we have gathered for this *JBL* Forum risk such rebukes. The focus article, by Kenneth Ngwa, is careful in its use of the tools of biblical scholarship and just as careful in explaining how the field of biblical studies “lends itself to postwar hermeneutics” in African contexts, with particular reference to Cameroon. African biblical scholarship works hard at a critical analysis of the biblical text, a critical analysis of the African context, and a critical analysis of how and why the biblical text and the African context might be brought into conversation.¹⁴

In her response to Ngwa’s article, constructed as comradely engagement (as the responses have been conceptualized), Juliana Claassens foregrounds questions of African social location and identity, as well as questions of the ideological dimensions of the biblical text. Identity and ideology are at the forefront of African biblical scholarship and are never allowed to slide into the background.

Aliou Niang offers a more direct response to Ngwa’s essay, recognizing a kindred African space and exploring this space with specific attention to human agency, particularly the agency of women. Niang recognizes and recovers African agency, alongside the recognition and recovery of the agency of marginalized others and so takes his scholarly stance within the long tradition of African “post-colonial” biblical scholarship.¹⁵

Musa Dube, too, engages quite directly with Ngwa’s provocative piece, reflecting on the many African (and other) “postwar” contexts and reminding socially engaged African intellectuals that “the struggle continues” as they do their work

Appropriation in Postcolonial South Africa,” in *The Bible and Justice: Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges*, ed. Matthew J. M. Coomber, BWo (London: Equinox, 2012).

¹²Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

¹³See Alissa Jones Nelson, *Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Book of Job with Edward Said*, BWo (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

¹⁴See Jonathan A. Draper, “African Contextual Hermeneutics: Readers, Reading Communities, and Their Options between Text and Context,” *R&T* 22 (2015): 3–22.

¹⁵See Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

within African nation-states shaped by colonial and neocolonial violence. Pharaoh hovers but must be confronted by “trickster intellectuals,” including socially engaged biblical scholars: “The postwar reading paradigm, as proposed by Ngwa, is a call to the role of trickster intellectuals and communities that hold and practice unwavering and unceasing commitment to work against all forms of oppressive structures (and potentially oppressors) in their communities, nations, and regions and in all international relations” (p. 899).

Implicit in each of our pieces is that this favored silo of the African masses—the Bible—is itself a site of struggle and that biblical scholarship has some potentially useful resources to offer alongside the many resources being deployed by trickster communities in their struggles for postcolonial survival, liberation, and life.