

## Memories of Midwives

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The invitation to respond to Kenneth Ngwa's stimulating paper, which sought to develop a postwar African hermeneutic that both deals with a trauma and forges a new collective, intergenerational, and interregional identity provided me with a good opportunity to think through some of the hermeneutical and identity issues that have accompanied my own scholarly and personal journey from (South) Africa to the United States and back again.

I will do so through two interconnected points of entry: first, by referring in the first instance to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,<sup>1</sup> who have done important work in thinking through some of the key issues in African biblical interpretation, and, second, by drawing on the narrative just prior to Exod 2, which is the focus text of Ngwa's paper, that is, the story of the midwives in Exod 1:15–22, who together with the Egyptian princess (Exod 2:5–10) exemplify the themes of compassion, resistance, and hospitality highlighted in Ngwa's exposition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Isabel A. Phiri defines the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as "a community of African women theologians who come together to reflect on what it means to them to be women of faith within their experiences of religion, culture, politics and social-economic structures in Africa" ("Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education [1989–2008]," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34 [2008]: 67). Various publications have appeared under the auspices of the Circle, including Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ed., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, eds., *Talita Cumi! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001); Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, eds., *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudiziwa Oduyoye* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 1–2 also has been important in my own writing, as evident in my chapter "God as Midwife," in which I argue that memories of the midwives who courageously outwitted the pharaoh and fostered new life "serves as a powerful symbol of ordinary people's ability to resist violence" (L. Juliana Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 69).

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, whose work is epitomized in its founding mother and most prolific author, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, can aptly be described in terms of the metaphor of a midwife. In the acknowledgments to her book *Hope Abundant*, Kwok Pui-lan dedicates the book to Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, whom she calls “two pioneers who have been midwives for the development of Third World women’s theology.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at the heart of the Circle’s life and work is the notion of enabling, fostering, and making it possible for African women to write, allowing their voices to be heard in theological literature that may serve their churches and universities as well as enrich the global conversation.<sup>4</sup> As the Circle’s 2007 draft constitution captures this main objective:

The Circle seeks to build the capacity of African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge using a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture. It empowers African women to actively work for social justice in their communities and reflect on their actions in their publications.<sup>5</sup>

Even though many of the Circle members are not biblical scholars per se, quite a few of them have written on the story of the midwives in Exodus 1. Mercy Oduyoye therefore is drawn to the prime example of resistance exemplified in the midwives. Together with the Egyptian princess, who “did exactly the opposite of what her father had decreed,” she interprets the midwives as “women who refused to be co-opted by the oppressor.” As she describes these women’s actions, “They must have been both compassionate and competent and were obviously full of wisdom.”<sup>6</sup>

With the memories of these midwives in mind, both those in the biblical text and those Circle women who engendered theological publications on the African continent, I would like to respond to two aspects of Ngwa’s article.

First, Ngwa offers a nuanced exposition of the nature of identity formation in his African context of Cameroon as well as in the biblical narrative of Exodus 2, which he structures around the “multiple consciousnesses and varied memories”

<sup>3</sup>Kwok Pui Lan, *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Note the important role of Orbis Books, which has been deeply committed to advancing the writings of the Circle, publishing quite a few of the first publications such as *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology. Reflections from the Women’s Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1988) and *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (1992), in the process serving in some sense as midwives themselves.

<sup>5</sup>Cited in Phiri, “Major Challenges,” 67; see also Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle,” in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 23.

<sup>6</sup>Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 6; see also Therese Okure, “Women in the Bible,” in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 53.

that accompany a movement from trauma to the forging of a new identity that extends even into Gershom, which Ngwa describes as “the narrative trope and communal embodiment that transforms the traumas of alienation to hopes of survival and integration” (p. 875).

The theme of identity is indeed important for African biblical scholars such as the ones also contributing to this Forum. It is interesting, therefore, that the author of the lead paper (Kenneth Ngwa) and one of the respondents (Aliou C. Niang) come from the ranks of the many African biblical interpreters who were trained and now teach at universities in the United States and so find themselves, to some extent, in diaspora. I can see how the idea of intergenerational and especially interregional identity formation would be important for Africans who need to reconstitute their identity while living far away from the African soil.

But the notion of identity is also central for the other contributors to this Forum who find themselves teaching at various institutions in (Southern) Africa. Gerald West, who wrote the introduction to this discussion, a white South African (English) male, and myself, a white South African (Afrikaans) woman, have most definitely in the past had to deal with the question, Are we African? Both of us have also been trained abroad, as was also the other respondent in this Forum, Musa Dube. What has helped me in my own journey of being able to claim that “we are *all* children of Africa,” has been the realization that hybridity is a central feature of most all of us. So Carrie Pemberton rightly notes that many of the Circle theologians have been trained in the West, where they learned tools such as liberation theology and postcolonial theory, which they would fruitfully employ in their attempts to forge a truly African biblical hermeneutic.<sup>7</sup>

The ambiguity regarding the identity of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exod 1:15 is quite interesting in this regard. Shiphrah and Puah can be understood either as “Hebrew midwives,” as implied by the masoretic pointing, or alternatively as “midwives to the Hebrews,” which suggests that the midwives actually may be Egyptian. Jacqueline Lapsley argues that, if the midwives indeed were Egyptian, the theme of crossing ethnic boundaries, which she suggests to be the central theme in this text, would be even stronger.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the image of the Egyptian princess who resists the genocidal inclinations of her father, who acts out of compassion when she hears the cry of the baby boy (Exod 2:6), and who performs an intentional act of hospitality when she makes sure the Hebrew child is well fed (ironically with

<sup>7</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West*, Studies of Religion in Africa 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 15. Pemberton writes about the complexity of the lives of many members of the Circle: “as an educated elite, they critique their cultures, church praxis, mission history and society whilst manacled by implication to them. They are, after all, beneficiaries of the western educational project undertaken in the main by the mission churches” (p. 4).

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 72.

the help of his own mother in Exod 2:7–9) and subsequently raises him as her own (Exod 2:10) is for me a great example of the importance of hybridity also for our African context. The answer to the question of who is “African” ought to be, whoever joins the struggle of resisting violence and injustice, whoever acts out of compassion to those who are most vulnerable, and whoever embraces hospitality as a key (African) value.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, it is significant that Musimbi Kanyoro describes the Circle as a space that “was to remain an open-ended forum, always hospitable to new people.”<sup>10</sup> From the Circle’s inception, white (South) African women like Denise Ackerman, Christina Landman, and Elna Mouton were welcomed as part of the Circle. This has not always been easy, however, as is evident in Carrie Pemberton’s use of the African proverb, “African women cook alone in their kitchens,” which captures the difficulty she herself has experienced as a white European woman seeking to join the work of the Circle.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Ngwa makes an argument for a reconstructionist, postliberation, postwar hermeneutics that shapes his particular context of African biblical hermeneutics. I would argue, however, that in large parts of Africa today many battles for liberation are still being fought, as one sees a number of wars of a different kind raging through this continent. So Oduyoye has written extensively about the terrifying effects of poverty caused among other things by the forces of colonization and globalization.<sup>12</sup> Add to this the HIV and AIDS pandemic that already has killed thirty million people—many of them on the African continent, as has been shown extensively by Musa Dube.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the violence of rape and sexual assault, which has been shown to thrive in the many armed conflicts that plague this continent but which also ravages the lives of many other African women who supposedly find themselves in a context of peace, could indeed be described as a war in a different sense of the word.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is not for nothing that the Circle of African Women

<sup>9</sup>Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes these values: “The sense of community characterizes traditional life in Africa and in spite of modernization, moves people to care for children, the aged, strangers, the sick and the needy, widows, disabled and others deemed vulnerable” (*Introducing African Women’s Theology*, IFT 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 34; see also, in the same volume, Oduyoye’s chapter “Hospitality and Spirituality,” 90–109.

<sup>10</sup>Kanyoro, “Beads and Strands,” 23.

<sup>11</sup>Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, 20.

<sup>12</sup>Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 8, 22; Oduyoye, “Poverty and Motherhood,” in Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 57–66. See also Kwok Pui-lan, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women’s Theology,” *JFSR* 20 (2004): 9–10, 15–16.

<sup>13</sup>Musa W. Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible: Selected Essays* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2006); Dube, ed., *Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Biblical Studies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003); Dube et al., *Grant me Justice!: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>See, e.g., the recent dissertation by Lisa le Roux, “The Role of African Christian Churches in Dealing with Sexual Violence against Women: The Case of the DRC, Rwanda and Liberia” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2014), which highlights some of the atrocities of rape that

Theologians is Concerned and, through their writing, long for a world where liberation truly has been achieved—from the dehumanization of poverty, HIV and AIDS, and gender-based violence. As Pemberton rightly notes, there is a sense of crisis that runs through the writings of the Circle that “requires a prophetic word or action from women to bring in liberation and freedom, justice and peace for a troubled continent.” As she says it well,

This is not a theology from a continent at peace, but rather in turmoil, troubled by the labour pangs of bringing in something new for the worldwide Church and for a bleeding land.<sup>15</sup>

This continued emphasis on the need for liberation, however, cannot be separated from the realization that, as womanist scholar Cheryl Kirk-Duggan has reminded us, “Exodus is not liberatory for everyone within the text, or for those who may read it.”<sup>16</sup> Drawing on the important work of Laurel Dykstra, Kirk-Duggan shows how all of us “have multiple identities in a pluralistic global reality; thus one can be privileged in one aspect, and oppressed in another.” She thus concludes that “many of us are both Egypt and Israel, and we are responsible for the liberation and the freedom of the oppressed.”<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, the values underlying Ngwa’s article, that is, a commitment to resist *all* forces that threaten the well-being and ability to flourish of Africa’s greatly diverse inhabitants, to embrace an ethics of compassion, and to rekindle hospitality as an (African) way of life, are essential for both a liberationist and a reconstructionist understanding of an African biblical hermeneutics. Particularly as the next generation of African scholars is brought into the Circle, the intergenerational and interregional character of the process of identity formation considered by Ngwa is important. These Circle members, white and black, male and female, gay and straight, will do well to remember the inspiring work done by the many midwives before them and to continue to resist injustice in the spirit of what Oduyoye has described as an important aspect of African women’s theology: “Hurting with those who hurt, and rejoicing with those who are enjoying life.”<sup>18</sup>

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accompanied instances of armed conflict and genocide in these countries. See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s article on this theme at the 1994 EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) meeting on this theme: “Violence against Women: Window on Africa,” *VFTW* 18 (1995): 168–76.

<sup>15</sup>Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “How Liberating Is Exodus and for Whom? Deconstructing Exodus Motifs in Scripture, Literature and Life,” in *Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, *Texts @ Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 27.

<sup>17</sup>Kirk-Duggan, “How Liberating Is Exodus and for Whom?” 27. See also Laurel Dykstra, *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), xi–xvi, 38–65.

<sup>18</sup>Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 37.