# The relevance of Old Testament science in/for Africa: two false pieties and focussed scholarship[1]

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***ABSTRACT***

*The innumerable calls for Old Testament scholarship to be (more) relevant to the African continent have fallen into a number of traps, or 'false pieties'. Two of these are the preference for hermeneutics to exegesis, and the conviction that the discipline must, and can, be inherently African / contextual / relevant. The constituencies of the academic pursuit of the Old Testament – university, church and society – cannot be better served, though, than by studies of the highest academic quality in the field.*

## A TWO BROAD APPROACHES: EXEGETICAL-THEOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL-THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Old Testament scholarship as practised in South Africa, and to a large extent in the international scientific community, may be categorised into two broad approaches: exegetical-theological and hermeneutical-theological studies. Briefly to describe these two approaches, the former has as its primary focus the analysis of the biblical text, within its contexts (historical, sociological, archaeological, and literary). Hermeneutical-theological approaches, on their part, may also be described as meta-theoretical interests in the exegetical-theological enterprise: here it is the interpretative framework within which the exegetical-theological work takes place that is the focus of critical attention. Going broader than the study of only exegetical methodology (which is more closely aligned to the exegetical-theological enterprise), philosophical frameworks come into question here. Philosophical hermeneutics would therefore be one branch of this approach, with the works of Schleiermacher (1958), Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1975), Barthes (1975, 1976), Derrida (1976, 1978), Ricouer (1976, 1978), Habermas (1984 & 1987) and others most often employed. Another branch of the hermeneutical-theological approach

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could be termed social hermeneutics, under which may be placed what has been called 'genitive theologies': feminist, liberation – with as locally influential branches Black and African – and ecological theologies. Influential proponents of each of these branches would include, respectively, Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, 1994); Gutiérrez (1984, 1988), Cone (1969, 1985), Setiloane (1986, 1988); and McFague (1993, 2001).

It should be made clear, at the outset, that neither the one approach nor the other could be regarded as 'more important' in any fundamental sense. Neither could exist without the other: exegesis and hermeneutics are intrinsically linked. In addition, both are inherently theological enterprises: both, at least in the broadly confessional context within which most of the scholarly work on the Old Testament is undertaken in South Africa, are theologically significant because the scholars involved accept that through this Word, Heavenly (and if not that, then at least heavenly) words are spoken.

Internationally, South Africa has had less impact on the exegetical-theological scene than it has had for its hermeneutical-theological contributions. The reflex-recognition of South Africa in theological academia internationally is the association with apartheid theology and the biblical justification thereof (cf. e.g. Kinghorn 1986; Lombaard 2001a:69-87). None of our exegetical studies has had the same international impact. Within the field of Old Testament studies, this line of hermeneutical-theological scholarship has over the last decade and longer been developed most fruitfully by West (e.g. West 1991/1995; 1998:3-32; cf. e.g. Lombaard 2001b:467-478; Adamo 2003:26-27; Akper 2005:1-14), with his emphasis on 'ordinary' readings of the biblical text. His substantial contributions in this field have led to his writings becoming internationally the most widely recognisable scholarly face of South Africa.

However, South African scholarship in general is, in my opinion, underperforming on the international scene. By this I mean that the exegetical-theological scholarship, in particular, of local theologians has a vastly larger potential than that which is at present being realised. If one considers that 20 of the 136 (i.e. just over 27%) academic papers read at the International Organisation for the Study of the Old Testament congress in Leiden, 2004, were by South Africans (not counting scholars from outside South Africa who have institutional links with local universities), it remains surprising that local scholarship does not feature much more prominently on the international scene than is currently the case.

I would like to suggest two reasons, among other possibilities, why this is the case. Both of these causes I relate to a 'false piety', that is, an implicit acceptance of certain truths which, I believe, should be rejected in order for South African Old Testament scholarship, in particular exegetical-theological publications, to receive more recognition internationally.

## B FALSE PIETY 1: HERMENEUTICAL-THEOLOGICAL AWARENESS TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER EXEGETICAL-THEOLOGICAL ENDEAVOURS

Probably for reasons related to the political history of this country, the *art of interpreting* biblical texts, in broader theological and societal circles at least, seems to have been afforded something of a priority to exegetical endeavours. In Old Testament scholarly circles, this certainly is not the case – the involved debate on exegetical methodology (cf. le Roux 1993) goes to prove this point, as do the large number of purely exegetical studies rendered at congresses and in journals. However, those studies most noted in broader South African circles tend to be of the hermeneutical-theological kind, doubtless because they seem more 'useful' to other disciplines (such as Systematic Theology, Philosophy, Practical Theology, and so forth), but also (and related) because they seem 'easier' to follow. Less linguistic, historical, culture-historical and technical interpretative (text-critical and exegetical-methodological) expertise seems to be required.

However, we have no dearth of precisely such expertise. The guild of South African Old Testament scholars has, apart from theologians who may also ably communicate to such broader circles, excellent exegetes. Even if exegesis does not seem sexy, because it does not draw wider recognition in local theological and other circles to the same extent as hermeneutical-theological studies do, I submit that in exegesis lies our true strength.

Put differently: this *chic*-ness of hermeneutical-theological studies is a false piety in our own consciousness. The strong language, biblical studies and exegetical training inherent to most of the Afrikaans language churches, should not be undervalued. In addition, the growing pressures within some English / African language churches towards similar training, gives hope that the South African group of exegetes may grow in both numbers and diversity. (About the growing pressures within some Afrikaans language churches to scale down on such requirements, nothing positive can be said.)

The underlying, most often unstated understanding in broader theological circles that exegesis of the highest, technically and intellectually demanding quality is, somehow, of provincial interest only, or – in politically-correct parlance – Eurocentric, should not be accepted blithely. Exegesis must retain its place as the queen of the theological disciplines. This would, moreover, not imply a 'conservative' theology, as is at times feared: the history of exegesis (cf. Krauss 1982) shows that it has had radical theological and social implications, much of which – such as the relationship between the origins of the Pentateuch and modern human rights ethics, for instance (cf. Otto 1994) – has by no means been adequately appropriated within other theological and non-theological academic disciplines, the church, and broader society.

A kind of implicit acceptance – a piety, if one wants – that hermeneutics outranks exegesis, means that we continue to underachieve exegetically on the international scene. For this there is no need; the strength of the South African Old Testament guild is exegesis.

## C FALSE PIETY 2: THE CALL FOR AFRICANISATION / CONTEXTUALISATION / RELEVANCE

Perhaps the most famous call for the Africanisation of the biblical message is that of Banana (1993:17-32[2]). However, carefully read, Banana's call for the rewriting of the Bible proves not to be about bringing the Bible home to Africa (as many have taken him, e.g. Mukonyora 1993:249-262), but about incorporating African and other religions into the Bible. This is a different issue – a new scripture for all / many[3] religions – to ours here.

On the call for the Africanisation, alternatively, the contextualisation, alternatively, the relevance, of Old Testament studies locally, I have changed from, originally, optimism in this regard, to a fundamental discomfort. To try to give expression to these rising awarenesses, I have systematised some of my concerns around three problems I sense in this respect.

### 1 Blind spots

In an earlier study on the ways in which the Bible had been employed both in support of and in opposition to apartheid (Lombaard 2001a:69-87), I was led to the conclusion that, however lofty a cause it is that one seeks to hold up, whenever the Bible is called in support, it is misinterpreted. Purposefully formulated bluntly, I submitted 'that the Bible cannot legitimately be used for modern-day political pronouncements. The use of the Bible to discuss politics subverts its intentions in two ways: the contextual messages of the ancient texts are largely discarded, and the biblical texts habitually serve but to legitimate. Neither of these features accords the Bible its authentic place as a book of faith. The use of the Bible for political assertions should therefore not be regarded as warranted practice' (Lombaard 2001a:85).

I was then, as I am now, fully convinced that hardly anybody will subscribe to this view. Somehow, studying the Bible in its context and then living enriched by such study (cf. le Roux 1997:172-177), seems not to be enough. Most Bible readers want to *apply directly*.

A contemporary example may demonstrate this again. In a recently published study (Farisani 2004:24-55), after restating the well-known historical

2 This version of Banana's thoughts represent a further development of his controversial paper two years earlier, and includes responses to some of the criticisms expressed during the intervening period.

3 Cf. Lombaard 2005.

background to Ezra-Nehemiah, namely of the conflict between the returnees from the Babylonian exile and those that remained in Judea, modern African and South African parallels are sought. All the well-known analogies are noted: slavery, colonialism, missionaries, political parties and churches, and First World countries (Farisani 2004:45-48), all of which have legacies of exploitation. Apart from this list of the usual suspects, one could – and I suggest should – have added a South African dynamic which offers in all respects a closer analogy to the socio-political background to Ezra-Nehemiah: the relationship between anti-apartheid activists who had been in exile and have now returned, often to prestigious positions in society, and the impoverished masses who had remained behind, and often still remain behind. However, the problem here, and typically, with the application of the Bible text, is that one retains blind spots. With textual analyses that bring into focus what past readers have not seen (cf. Yamauchi 2004:209-211; Himbaza 2002:5-7), naturally, no problem exists. However: always, I would venture, when we seek to extract from biblical analyses 'lessons' for today, those 'lessons' will apply to 'them'. It is hardly ever 'we' who have to 'learn'. The Bible thus remains, in essence, an instrument of power (cf. Adamo 2003:22-23[4]). In the '*critical solidarity*' de Gruchy (1997:450) refers to, the solidarity always applies to the 'me', and the critical to the 'you'. Being 'relevant' and 'contextual' is reduced to being politically correct (Heyns 1997:388; cf. le Roux 1995:169, 185).

## 2 Seeking affirmation

Another dynamic, particularly apparent among black academics reading the Bible 'in' and/or 'for' Africa, is that one senses some sort of deep-lying insecurity. It is as if when reading the Old Testament, or other literature from the Ancient Near East (cf. Anum 2000:457-473; Holter 2000:30-34; Yamauchi 2004:209), this is done with the purpose of seeking personal and cultural affirmation (cf. Ukpong 2000:11-28). These ancient texts are mined for possible references or allusions to Africa, or the languages for linguistic influences on modern African languages, and indications found are presented with a *voila!* kind of attitude (cf. Adamo 2003:10-11, 19-20, 22-24).

Though finding such 'symbols of identity' (Mukonyora 1993:252; cf. Bediako 1997:426-444) is psychologically understandable, in some ways, given the colonial history of this continent, this is an enterprise of limited value. At best, such investigations could indicate some aspects which have gone more or less unnoticed in Western / Northern[5] scholarship (Adamo 2003:17). However, affirmation cannot ever be truly attained by seeking

4 Adamo, here, understands power as something culturally positive. I find myself closer to the modern philosophical tradition of regarding power as, though inescapable, inescapably negative.

5 These designations are so ideologically loaded, apart from being inaccurate, as to have become difficult to use at all.

parallels or influences. It is not only the issue here that *overemphasising* the case for Africentric / Afrocentric interpretations undermines the credibility of such endeavours (so Yamauchi 2004:211-213). More fundamentally, seeking affirmation of identity in this manner is of itself a flawed exercise. The futility of this venture becomes clear if the geography is changed: if indigenous Icelandic, or Venezuelan, or Maori people cannot find any such succour in the Bible, that in no way diminishes either their personal and cultural worth, or the theological importance of the Old Testament for them (if they were to be of a faith that finds its roots in the Hebrew Bible). We do not *have* to find our continent, cultures or languages in any ancient and/or holy literatures to feel ourselves whole.

What is more, a Bible that affirms us would not serve us well,[6] the Bible should rather afford its readers the critical role it quite naturally has – of Western, African and other cultures; of societal and personal preconceptions and projects; of philosophic, religious and other undertakings; in each instance, 'ours' / 'mine' as much as 'theirs' / 'yours'. The Bible causes us to despair, and so it should (cf. Deist 1990:49) – both scientifically and existentially. Contextualisation / Africanisation / relevance which seeks foremost to play the 'I'm okay, you're okay' kind of game, applied to any kind of literature (religious or otherwise), cannot come to authentic understandings of the selves or the texts concerned, or the interrelation between these two.

## 3 An impossible enterprise

Lastly, and most fundamentally for my argument here: the futility in practical terms of the exercise of contextualisation / Africanisation / direct relevance of the Old Testament has proven itself. For decades now, the clarion call has been heard time and again: the Bible must be studied in a way that is peculiar to Africa. The terms 'Africanise' and 'contextualise' and 'be relevant' are often uttered with emotive force in the voice, and bear no questioning. They have become holy cows, which may not be nudged out of the way, even if they impede passage. However, during these decades, has such contextualisation been done even once in a way that could be regarded as, finally, something satisfactorily, uniquely African? Nobody who implores us to be contextual can really tell us how. Though generalities abound, examples do not.

Some moves in this direction have, of course, occurred. Masenya's Northern Sotho and *bosadi* / womenhood interpretations (e.g. Masenya 1991:41-56; 1996) and van Heerden's comparisons of ancient Hebrew and African proverbs (cf. van Heerden 2002:462-475), for example, are interesting studies in comparative theology / anthropology / literature (Adamo 2003:18, 21-22 lists further instances). West's influential contributions referred to above, and the growing number of dissertations on the understanding of a particular

6 This is a fundamental difficulty with Banana's suggestion, referred to above, too.

Old Testament text or practice within a specific African setting, are valuable contributions on reader response or reception criticism. Studies in the field of linguistic and interpretational difficulties when translating the Bible into African languages abound, with Wendland (see e.g. Wendland 2002:164-201; 1987) the leader in this field. However, none of these studies are inherently any more valid, or any less, simply because this continent enters into the picture.

What would make a study African? Skin colour? Home language(s)? Country or continent of (personal or genealogical) origination, habitation, orientation, or professional occupation? Ideological history? Personal and social loyalties? These questions and more lie at the heart of the recent Masenya-Snyman debate (Masenya 2002:3-8; Snyman 2002a:8-20; 2002b:799-820; cf. also other contributions on this matter in this and subsequent editions of the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa*). This discussion will not come to any neat or agreed conclusion – partly because of the futility of trying to develop an inherently or essentially African take on the Old Testament. The 'moves in this direction' noted above do not fulfil any kind of requirement for being inherently or essentially African. They are, clearly, scholarly contributions in the internationally accepted sense of what constitutes scholarship, namely critical – that is, intellectual and argued – analyses.

I therefore do not believe there is or can be such a thing as 'contextual' Old Testament science in the sense that the scholarship would then be distinctively African. Old Testament studies are in no way unique among the academic disciplines in this respect; it applies to all forms of intellectual activity. For example: recently, sociologist Ken Jubber (2005) and author Max du Preez (2005), both after decades of involvement in their fields, despaired of finding a distinctive Africanness in, respectively, the discipline of Sociology or the cultural identity debate of the inhabitants of this continent. As much as all knowledge is, in one sense, always contextual (cf. Odora Hoppers 2001:76, 83-84), it is at once also always trans-contextual (that is, 'universal' in the sense usually employed in discussions on the nature of science) – both in whence and whereto its influences. To reinterpret Adamo (2003:17), then, on this matter: 'African cultural hermeneutics is [trans-]contextual like any other ~~Third World~~ interpretation and theology.'

Though faith – a different way of 'knowing' – can no doubt become 'internalised' in a variety of ways in African cultural matrixes (Bediako 1997:426-444; Mukonyora 1993:249-262), and though Bible translation doubtless facilitates this process (West 1999:96-98), and though, clearly, Africans can make substantial contributions to the understanding of the Old Testament, both academic and otherwise (Holter 2000:9-25, 38-40, 51-60; West 2000:29-53), none of these processes are unique to this continent. Nor can they be generalised to the whole of the continent, or to significant segments (cultural, geographical, and linguistic) of it. 'Africa' as an ideological and therefore rhetorically powerful construct, does not help scholarship in any

discipline. When taken as a more malleable concept, though, 'Africa' is in a variety of ways part of the constitution of a variety of scholars in a variety of places, as each subjectively and inter-subjectively approaches his or her subject matter.

In this softer sense, then, Africa and the Old Testament are in reciprocal interpretation (cf. Adamo 2003:20, 25-26, 29-30; Himbaza 2002:5-7), through the eyes of the modern readers, in ways that cannot be either determined nor, certainly, demanded. Here is an interpretative process in which the 'then' of the textual context and the 'now' of the interpreter's context mix inextricably, (in)forming the individuals' insights and outlooks (le Roux 1995:172-177).

### 4 Summarising the false piety

The second 'false piety' of contextualising the Old Testament in/for Africa thus consists of, among other matters, these three aspects: the insistence on applying the Bible too directly to our issues, the search for affirmation / identity, and the belief in what has turned out to be an impossible enterprise. These three aspects relate some of my misgivings about the contextualisation / Africanisation / relevance of the Old Testament.

This should, however, in no way be taken as a vote of no confidence in either this continent or in its Old Testament scholars. The dynamic identified as the first 'false piety' discussed above – the implicit broader preference of hermeneutical-theological contributions to exegetical-theological studies – is strongly related to this second 'false piety'. To alter the one would be to alter the other…

## D EXEGESIS AS THE HE/ART OF SOUTH / AFRICAN OLD TESTAMENT SCIENCE

When the point is pressed, what precisely is meant by the insistence that the Old Testament should be relevant to Africa, the reflex response has become an inventory of the evils on the continent: HIV/AIDS and other health problems, poverty, war and violence and crime… The obvious follow-up question is hardly ever asked in such a concrete way: but how can my scholarly investigation of, say, Amos 7:9, ever alleviate the suffering of even a single orphan from war now afflicted with AIDS? Rather than ask this follow-up question, we tend to remain briefly and awkwardly silent, with the vague and uncomfortable answer to this question remaining ever unsaid: nothing. My exegetical study of Amos 7 will save nobody.[7]

This does not make me un/anti-African or uncaring, as some would perhaps have it. I would argue precisely the opposite. A South African Old

[7] Of course, the same point could be made on any study, be it – for the moment to employ an unfair binary opposition – esoteric *or* contextual.

Testament scholarly community devoted to the study of the texts of the Old Testament, even on matters that broader society may regard as 'obscure', has a large contribution to make on the international exegetical scene.[8] Apart from a host of attendant consequences, a fundamental feature this dynamic brings to the African cultural landscape is the multiplication of peaks of intellectual achievement within this society. Africa is not only about death and suffering; here, science too, and of the highest quality, is practised. Such intellectual peaks are not merely for the sake of the public image of this continent to the rest of the world, which can bring economic benefit only. More important is the cultural crests created in society by such scholarship. Not only physical prowess (as is celebrated so much in African societies' fondness for sports and armies), economic growth (the prime concern – at once self-serving and to the benefit of society – of business and politics), and other more glamorous aspects of society, but also cerebral endeavours constitute a part of a cultural matrix that shows richness. It is such a matrix, with as many peaks of achievement as possible, that prevents a society from being trapped in its troubles only.

The very act of determining to practise scholarship to the highest standards is thus an *ethical* decision. It serves not only the development of the individual and of the discipline – on their own each already a worthy motivation for the practice of science – but, inherently and unavoidably, of society too.

Naturally, there are additional ways in which society is influenced by scholarship, such as the power of the ideas being created, the cultural and economic activities around publishing and reading and housing books, *et cetera*. The strongest socio-ethical argument, though, is the intellectual peaks scholarship creates within society.

This perspective frees us from having to study only those matters that are deemed economically, politically or socially worth while. Perhaps it would even preclude us from 'applying' for the sake of such pressures our expertise to issues on which we have no specialist knowledge.[9] Our subject is the Old Testament – its text, theology, languages, history, cultural background and related matters. Exegesis is our strength. By pursuing precisely that strength in a focused way, all the constituencies involved – university, church and society – are best served.

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8 If we wrote more books and less articles, that contribution would be even larger – a related matter for another time.

9 Reacting to this tendency, Ellul (1985:154) despaired: 'I hardly ever find Protestants speaking with competence on political economics, sociology, social psychology, or political science'. ('Protestants' may be replaced here with 'some / many / most theologians'...?)

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