

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AND INCULTURATION
HERMENEUTICS: A COMPARISON, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE WORK OF JUSTIN UKPONG AND THE SCRIPTURE
PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Grant LeMarquand in his 2006 essay, “Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from the North Atlantic and African Worlds”¹ observes some of the differences and respective challenges facing biblical studies on each side of the Atlantic. He summarizes that “African biblical studies with its much more pragmatic concern for the present world appears to be at odds with North Atlantic scholarship.”² LeMarquand suggests, however, that, “Justin Ukpong’s ‘inculturation hermeneutic’ provides a model that may help North Atlantic and African scholars to begin a conversation about ways the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world.”³

This thesis pursues LeMarquand’s suggestion, bringing Ukpong’s work on inculturation hermeneutics into conversation and comparison with North American scholarship, and more specifically with theological interpretation in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, a compilation volume that emerged out of the Scripture Project at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton. The Scripture Project included several respected scholars, and the Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture that begin the volume are generally accepted as a summary description of theological interpretation.

Hans Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics undergird a dialogical approach in comparing Ukpong’s African inculturation hermeneutics with theological interpretation in *The Art of Reading Scripture*. The thesis makes use of Gadamer’s notion of horizons, exploring the prejudices and perspectives both bring to the biblical text and how these shape the approach and outcomes of interpretation.

The thesis argues that there are significant similarities and differences between inculturation hermeneutics and the theological interpretation of the Scripture Project, such that dialogue between the two is instructive for each in areas of agreement and in areas of challenge. Jonathan Draper’s and Gerald West’s work on tripolar models of reading is helpful for analysis of the dialogue in the area of *conceptual framework*, and chapter six gets at the crux of the differences between the two, examining the

¹ *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (ed. David Tuesday Adamo, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006), 62-85.

² LeMarquand, “Siblings or Antagonists?” 78.

³ LeMarquand, “Siblings or Antagonists?” 78.

motivations, commitments, and goals of each dialogue partner. While the dialogue partners share some general sensibilities and orientations, the chapter traces the origins of both models to an epistemological crisis in their respective historical moments; emerging out of different histories and contexts, the two inhabit different worlds from their beginnings. There is space for learning and appreciation between the two, as each offers insights and perspectives the other may not have on its own. There is especially a lot for the Scripture Project, as the dialogue partner in the center, to consider when brought into conversation with inculturation hermeneutics, a model formed and used in the margins.

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Chapter 1: Desire for More Dialogue

Introduction

“Siblings or Antagonists?” Justin Ukpong as a promising link between African and North Atlantic biblical scholarship

Grant LeMarquand in his 2006 essay, “Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from the North Atlantic and African Worlds,” observes some of the differences and respective challenges facing biblical studies on each side of the Atlantic.¹ He summarizes that “African biblical studies with its much more pragmatic concern for the present world appears to be at odds with North Atlantic scholarship.”² LeMarquand suggests, however, that, “Justin Ukpong’s ‘inculturation hermeneutic’ provides a model that may help North Atlantic and African scholars to begin a conversation about ways the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world.”³ LeMarquand does not pursue this suggestion at all himself, and offers little more about what exactly he has in mind. I set out in this thesis to pursue LeMarquand’s proposal further and bring Ukpong’s work on inculturation hermeneutics into conversation and comparison with North American scholarship, and more specifically with theological interpretation, as I see promising parallels between theological approaches and inculturation. Thus, my project begins with a construct suggested by LeMarquand, bringing together significant influences in my own life for a dialogue of heuristic value. My work does not pick up an existing conversation, but constructs a dialogue between specific conversation partners across the Atlantic.⁴ It is increasingly trendy in the North American academy to give a nod to

¹ David Tuesday Adamo, ed, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006), 62-85.

² Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*, 78.

³ Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*, 78.

⁴ I do not mean to say that there are not other efforts to bring African and North Atlantic readers of the Bible into conversation with one another. See “Situating this

biblical scholarship coming out of other contexts, but sustained dialogue between specific partners about the task and goals of biblical interpretation is rare indeed.⁵

Ukpong died rather suddenly about a year before I began work on this thesis, and I would like to draw out his contributions to global interpretation and explore the possibilities of his work for dialogue going forward. Though LeMarquand does not mention the North Atlantic trend of theological interpretation, I think he would readily see the potential for fruitful dialogue here, as he suggests in a footnote that he would add “religious and theological commitments” to Gerald West’s desire to connect biblical research and social commitments⁶ and he highlights Ukpong’s sense that the biblical text is relevant for African contexts “precisely in its theological meaning.”⁷

Project in a Larger Conversation” later in this chapter (pages 27-28) for more on other comparison projects. I mean that the dialogue between Ukpong and the Scripture Project that this thesis pursues does not directly extend an existing conversation.

⁵ To borrow a phrase from Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, I aim to “organize encounter” between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project. De Wit and Dyk do this throughout the reading process in empirical hermeneutics, and I take it up here after the fact, but I like the phrase. See de Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 5.

While constructing a dialogue or organizing an encounter is a descriptive endeavor that may take a range of courses with a multiplicity of outcomes, even such a heuristic effort may retain hopes about what it will accomplish. I hope for increased understanding and appreciation among African inculturation readings and theological interpretation, more specifically between Justin Ukpong and the members of the Scripture Project.

⁶ See endnote 31, connected to page 69 of “Siblings or Antagonists?”

⁷ LeMarquand, “Siblings or Antagonists,” 73. As will become clear throughout this thesis, a “theological” focus for the Scripture Project and especially for Ukpong is not at all limited to theoretical rumination on categories of systematic theology. Moberly, in discussing the wider trend of theological interpretation, considers additional descriptions of the hermeneutical trend, including “religious interpretation,” “spiritual understanding,” and “Christian reading,” getting at the idea that theological interpretation is more about a perspective of faith than narrow theological reflection. “What is TIS?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.2 (2009) 161-178. Erik Heen [“The Theological Interpretation of the Bible,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21.4 (2007)] argues that in theological interpretation “the ‘social location’ of the contemporary interpreter is taken seriously” (373). He even likens theological interpretation to reader-response models, with the caveat that theological interpretation is for church communities, whereas reader response criticism tends to be more exclusively academic.

My experiences of the state of the dialogue between Bible scholars in Africa and the United States

Beginning this project, I was aware that the work of biblical scholars in the global South is increasingly receiving attention in Western academic contexts. Over the last decade the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) has greatly increased attention on and efforts in international arenas. In 2007 SBL formally launched a multifaceted International Cooperation Initiative that includes several efforts to distribute academic resources to international contexts (including working with JSTOR to offer free access in Africa and beyond, which I benefited from while working at Uganda Christian University) as well as to support, publish, and make available “scholarly work originating in the developing world.”⁸ SBL’s Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship series has a smattering of publications from the early 2000’s forward, making SBL presentation papers and other occasional essays available in edited book version. The International Voices in Biblical Studies series publishes works from international scholars in freely available online formats.

I found these developments generally exciting and encouraging⁹, and hoped that SBL is making it harder for Western scholars to claim ignorance of global developments in one’s field of specialization. I had experienced a disheartening brush with such ignorance when, upon my move to Uganda in 2005, I contacted a well-known Old Testament scholar from one of my *alma maters*. In my first semester teaching load at Uganda Christian University I had been assigned multiple sections of an introductory survey of the Old Testament; in reviewing the existing workbook for the course I noticed it did not acknowledge *African* contributions in Old Testament studies. I was looking for my former professor to point me to names of scholars or

⁸ SBL Society Report, November, 2007. See the portion of the report on the International Cooperation Initiative for more detailed information about what the Initiative includes. Available on the SBL website at www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/SocietyReport2007.pdf

⁹ As I see it, specially designated sections like those on African Biblical Hermeneutics are a mixed blessing. Positively, such a designated section recognizes the legitimacy and particularity of biblical studies in Africa. Negatively, such a designation suggests that African efforts and concerns are still on the periphery and sectarian in interest. That is, they by and large are not integrated into the mainstream, but rather inhabit a description primarily based on location. Still, I find the occasional African Biblical Hermeneutics section of an SBL meeting over the last several years to be a move in the right direction, at least acknowledging and including the African scholarship that will hopefully continue to move toward inclusion in the larger international field.

publications of Old Testament studies in Africa¹⁰ so that I could demonstrate to my classes that academic study of the Old Testament was not just something for old white guys, like the workbook implied.¹¹ The unfortunate reply I received suggested that Africans probably did not really do Old Testament studies, and if they did, they probably wrote in obscure languages that would be inaccessible to me. I do hope that same professor has had opportunity in recent years to gain expanded knowledge of and exposure to Old Testament studies outside the United States and Europe.

To balance the negative story, I had another experience with a former professor, one who demonstrated at least beginning awareness and initiative with regards to the global character of biblical studies. A New Testament professor I had at one of my American institutions contacted me upon learning that I was teaching a course titled “Reading the New Testament in Africa,” requesting suggestions for an African addition to round out the syllabus for an introductory survey course. These two experiences, I think, both accurately reflect the current reality of biblical studies in the American academy. The positive steps being taken by SBL as well as other efforts, including the desire of my former professor to diversify a syllabus, indicate openness toward voices from the margins.¹² At the same time, ignorance about and ambivalence toward the margins remain surprisingly tenable across the Western

¹⁰ I had enough basic knowledge of New Testament studies in Africa (mostly acquired through my own efforts in divinity school) to assume that there would be Old Testament material available as well. Still, the fact that I had to ask for minimal starting points immediately following seven straight years of higher education with biblical and theological emphases indicates the dearth of global representation, including that of Africans, in syllabi at leading American institutions. The year was 2005, the year I completed divinity school and began teaching at Uganda Christian University.

¹¹ An American who had served in an administrative position at UCU had primarily written this particular workbook, but as I have seen documented more than once, Africans tend to do their higher-level biblical and theological studies at Western institutions, and a workbook with a similar focus could have resulted even from African leadership. For recent statistics regarding African Ph.Ds in Old Testament, see Knut Holter’s “Geographical and Institutional Aspects of Global Old Testament Studies” in *Global Hermeneutics? Reflections and Consequences* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010), eds. Knut Holter and Louis Jonker. The volume is available in full at <http://ivbs.sbl-site.org/uploads/JONKER~1.PDF>

¹² A book by this title, *Voices from the Margins* [R S Sugirtharajah, ed, subtitle *Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London: SPCK, 1991)] was in my experience among the first publications with contributions from the global South to surface relatively widely in the US.

academy, including among students, syllabi, and even acclaimed scholars and teachers.

Encountering other ways of reading

It has been my experience that encountering other ways of reading, understanding, and practicing Scripture can challenge and enrich one's own perspective and interpretations. My sense is that scholars in most American institutions would agree in principle with that claim, but in practice often do not seek out alternative approaches or reach out to scholars in radically different settings from their own. In this project I aim to facilitate a dialogue between two significant influences in my own life. My education, particularly in divinity school but also at times as an undergraduate, was often sympathetic to theological interpretation of Scripture. Among the methods modeled to me for engaging the biblical text, I found theological interpretation a welcome respite from the detached, scientific approach of the historical-critical method. Where I was afraid that, even in a confessional setting, the Bible was dying or in fact was already dead as a historical object of criticism, theological interpretation offered a glimmer of hope that the sacred text of my faith could remain living and active in the midst of academic study.¹³ Theological interpretation made it acceptable to approach the text as holy Scripture, and to read it in and for the church, while utilizing critical and academic tools.

In the final semester of my undergraduate studies, I took a course titled “Contemporary World Theologies” that ignited in me an interest in African Christianity. While in divinity school I pursued opportunities to learn about Christianity in Africa, including biblical studies by African scholars. Upon finishing divinity school, I moved to Uganda to live and teach in Mukono at Uganda Christian University, thereby continuing my exposure to samples of biblical interpretation in Africa on a range of levels including academic, homiletic, and devotional. In a lot of African interpretation I again found a thread of biblical studies that, for all its foreignness to me at times, instantiated one of my basic beliefs or hopes—that the

¹³ That Jeremy Punt could affirm in a 1998 article [“My Kingdom for a Method, *Neotestamentica* 32.1] that many South African students expected their university work in New Testament to be related to their faith (presumably including in public institutions) shows how different my experience was. I began undergraduate studies that same year at a faith-based institution and became frustrated early on by what I perceived as a lack of much personal or social import in my biblical studies classes.

Bible is still useful for real life. Frequently the interpretations that I found compelling along these lines would fall under a general approach of inculturation, that is, putting the biblical text alongside and into the substance and framework of one's own culture, with a result that the Scriptures and the culture test, challenge, and transform one another.

Learning more about inculturation hermeneutics and its distinctive priorities and approaches, I was convinced that this is an important and promising emphasis in biblical studies, and I was somewhat surprised, or at least disappointed, that it had not yet gained attention in American institutions and curriculums, at least in my experience. I perceive the general posture of theological interpretation to demonstrate more promise than thoroughly historical-critical leanings for openness to what African inculturation hermeneutics is doing. I detect a shared desire among the two to allow the biblical text to come to life in real communities. While theological interpretation in the United States and African inculturation hermeneutics surely have their significant differences, I believe these differences can challenge, enrich, and encourage one another as they each pursue pertinent interpretation in their own settings.

Constructing the Dialogue

The promise I see for dialogue between African inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation, combined with the lack of attention the latter has shown the former, leads me to make an effort to draw the two into conversation with one another. Neither inculturation hermeneutics nor theological interpretation has a hard and fast definition with a clear boundary determining who or what is in or out. Both have scholars and characteristics that lie clearly within the trajectory, and both have their blurry edges going different directions and engaging with other methods and trends. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen specific dialogue partners for direct comparison, while supplementing and analyzing the conversation with additional sources.

The Scripture Project

The Art of Reading Scripture is a compilation volume emerging out of the Scripture Project, which consisted of four years of meetings among Old Testament and New Testament scholars, systematic and historical theologians, and pastors from a range of institutions and denominations.¹⁴ The Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey convened this group to read Scripture together across disciplines, and the participants took an integrated, theological approach. There are a few reasons for my choice of *The Art of Reading Scripture* as a dialogue partner. One is personal: as I said above, I appreciated the theological approach to interpretation I encountered in divinity school, and the editors of *The Art of Reading Scripture* were my professors.¹⁵ Another reason I like it is that it is already a dialogue in itself, with 15 people making up the Scripture Project, thirteen of them contributing directly to the volume. They come from different fields and disciplines, with pastoral, theological, historical, and biblical expertise; the men and women of the Scripture Project come from multiple Christian denominations.¹⁶ The Scripture Project

¹⁴ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁵ Richard Hays and Ellen Davis were the only Bible professors I had while at Duke, as it turned out, not counting classes in biblical languages.

When Richard Hays was appointed Dean of Duke Divinity School, the Duke student newspaper quoted Hays as saying, “One of the things that makes this school distinctive even among major university divinity schools is the way in which we have a commitment to a theological interpretation of the Bible.” Maggie Spini, “Hays named new Divinity School dean,” *The Chronicle*, February 14, 2012 <https://www.dukechronicle.com/section/university?page=335>. It was not just my experience—a former Dean of the Divinity School sees it as a piece of institutional identity.

¹⁶ Given the different identities and fields of the members of the Scripture Project, one may wonder about the coherence of the group: what do they share and how are they able to contribute to one project with any focus? The members of the Project may push the question in the other direction, however, as they “aim to overcome the fragmentation of our theological disciplines” (xv). The more pressing question, to them, is why tasks and aspects of Bible reading, interpretation, and application have become so specialized, narrow, and insular that it takes “a group of fifteen specialists to function corporately as a ‘Complete Theologian’” (xv). What unites people of faith reading the Bible in and for the church should have obvious answers: in addition to shared faith, sacred text, and Christian community, there are marks of Christian unity found in Scripture and tradition, including baptism and communion, imagery of membership in the Body of Christ, “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3), one Lord, and many more. These theological answers, while perhaps unconvincing for strictly academic demands for coherence, are right in line with the goals and sentiment of theological interpretation.

instantiates the collaborative and diverse, at least in some senses of the word, spirit of theological interpretation as a movement. Still, the Scripture Project is a moment of thick collaboration that is this Project for a time. Though *The Art of Reading Scripture* has received criticism for maintaining a rather insular list of contributors, in form it manages to offer multiple perspectives within theological interpretation and to affirm the value of dialogue in interpretation.¹⁷ The Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture put forward by the Scripture Project offer general framework and discernible unity to the range of essays in *The Art of Reading Scripture*. These theses also generally represent the tenets of theological interpretation as a wider trend.¹⁸ Finally, I choose this book for its four sections of essays that help round out its approach to include theory and method, other readers and reading contexts, consideration of difficult texts, and sample sermons that demonstrate theological engagement with particular texts.¹⁹

Justin Ukpong

Justin Ukpong receives special reference due to his definitive contributions to the birth and growth of inculturation hermeneutics prior to his death in late 2011. Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole credits Ukpong with the “decisive launch” of “intercultural biblical exegesis in Africa,” subsequently taken up by several African scholars.²⁰

¹⁷ I look forward to challenging the Scripture Project on its own terms by drawing it into dialogue with African inculturation hermeneutics. As far as I know, while general criticism has surfaced about the lack of diversity (in some ways) among members of the Project, no one has actually brought the Project into intentional conversation with another interlocutor such as inculturation hermeneutics.

¹⁸ Daniel Treier (not a member of the Scripture Project) agrees that the theses “to a large degree, could reflect the identity of theological interpretation of Scripture fairly well,” and he cites them in a concluding section on the hermeneutics of theological interpretation and its future. *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Rediscovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 199.

¹⁹ The final section of selected sermons is a strength of *The Art of Reading Scripture*, as other publications on theological interpretation receive criticism for focusing on theory at the expense of practice, failing to demonstrate interpretations of specific passages for a particular setting.

There are other options I could have chosen for a dialogue partner representing theological hermeneutics. Several scholars, including Francis Watson, Stephen Fowl, and Daniel Treier, among others, have done good work summarizing theological interpretation, but no single author on their own is able to bring the strengths of the Scripture Project as I see them, as outlined in this paragraph.

²⁰ Loba-Mkole credits Ukpong in two versions of the same article: “The New Testament and Intercultural Exegesis in Africa” *JSNT* 30.1 (2007) and “Rise of

Indeed, no one else's work rivals that of Ukpong on inculturation. A range of African Bible scholars of diverse denominations and ideological approaches reflect inculturation sensibilities and are indebted to Ukpong's pioneering work; others rarely offer much second order reflection on the work of interpretation and the method of inculturation, something Ukpong does frequently and with distinction. There is no better choice to represent inculturation hermeneutics in a dialogue with theological interpretation.

Ukpong writes on the theory and strategy of African interpretation, first summarizing and outlining what he began to call "inculturation hermeneutic" in the mid-1990s. He not only does second-order reflection on biblical studies in Africa, however, he also practices the strategies he describes and contributes first-order interpretation of specific passages in particular settings. One of my favorite examples is the parable of the shrewd manager, as he calls the passage from Luke 16:1-13, which he reads with Nigerian day laborers.²¹ Ukpong is widely published on topics including theology, biblical studies, missiology, ecclesiology, inter-religious dialogue, and African traditional religion. It is perplexing that there is not much written about the scholarly importance of Ukpong's work, though there are a couple recent pieces, published since his death and after I began working on this thesis. Samuel Tshehla reflects on how "Justin Ukpong's Jesus" may "shed light on a possible Christian way forward" in contemporary South Africa,²² and Madipoane Masenya "ruminates" on "Justin Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics and its Implications for the Study of

Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa" *HTS* 64.3 (2008). See also Ukpong's obituary penned by Gerald West, where West describes Ukpong's work as having "broke the hegemonic hold that Euro-American 'contextless' biblical scholarship had on much of the African continent, declaring that African contexts must become the subject of biblical interpretation." West continues, "Forging a way from within the dominant traditions of his own training, Justin Ukpong invited other African biblical scholars to join him in constructing forms of biblical scholarship that resonated with our African contexts and made a difference to the many millions of Africans who read the Bible in African contexts yearning for social transformation." Available at www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/JustinUkpongObituary.pdf

²¹ Ukpong writes about the interpretation of this passage in "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic" *Semeia* 73 (1996) 189-210 and also presented it at the SNTS conference at Hammanskraal in 1999, published as "Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers" in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, Mary N. Getui et al, eds, Nairobi: Acton (2001), 188-212.

²² Samuel M. Tshehla, "Justin Ukpong's Jesus: Emmanuel for Our Times," *Missionalia* 43.3 (2015), 292-305.

African Biblical Hermeneutics Today.”²³ Matthew Lanser finished a thesis at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2014 entitled, “A Critical Examination of Justin Ukpong’s Inculturation Hermeneutics.”²⁴ Gerald West wrote a fitting tribute to Ukpong’s work in an obituary posted on the SBL site, and a recent SBL publication is “dedicated to the memory of Rev. Dr. Justin Ukpong,” with acknowledgement of his work contained in one descriptive sentence: “Eminent New Testament scholar, first Vice Chancellor of Veritas University, Nigeria, and a pioneering member of the African Biblical Hermeneutics Section in SBL.”²⁵

I find Ukpong compelling primarily in content, but believe the strength of his academic work lies in the strength of his person. Justin Ukpong was a Roman Catholic, a man of the cloth committed to the church universal. In reading his criticisms of the church (or at times the Church as he engages the magisterium) one gets the sense that his passion and concern stem ultimately from his love for the church and his desire to see it grow in grace and knowledge. In a very critical piece on the *Lineamenta* (proposed outline) for the (first) Special Assembly for Africa, Ukpong’s frustrations are clear throughout the article, but it ends with the hope that the Synod could be a *kairos* for Africa and the wider church as it presented an opportunity to “come face to face with the issue of the irruption of the African church” that “calls for a paradigm shift in the perception of what it means to be

²³ “Ruminating on Justin Ukpong’s Inculturation Hermeneutics and its Implications for the Study of African Biblical Hermeneutics Today,” *HTS Theological Studies* 72.1 (2016), 1-6. Masenya inculturates Vashti in contemporary South Africa, utilizing Ukpong’s insights, before moving to interrogate “the biblical sciences in Africa today” as well as Ukpong’s work, finding Ukpong instructive at times while criticizing his failure to critique adequately African culture and the biblical text. In an earlier essay Masenya distances herself and her *bosadi* hermeneutics from very male forms of African inculturation hermeneutics, though she never mentions Ukpong.

“Struggling to Find ‘Africa’ in South Africa: The Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach to the Bible,” *SBL Forum*, May 2005. <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=402>

²⁴ As far as I know, it remains unpublished and I have not been able to see it.

²⁵ Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), from the dedication page. The sole mention of Ukpong in Dube’s introduction to the volume acknowledges him as one of the “gurus” of Two-Thirds World scholars of the Bible among a list of six others. Unfortunately, Ukpong’s work never receives mention or reference elsewhere in the volume.

church.”²⁶ Other African scholars do not always retain such hope in the church, especially in a historic, colonial church such as Rome. While Ukpong’s enduring commitment to the Catholic Church may be confusing, disappointing, or even viewed as a weakness by some, I believe it demonstrates his ability to reconcile himself to a fallen world and a broken church still groaning for redemption. He maintains faith and hope that redemption is indeed in the works, believing that he, in and with the Church, could in some way contribute to the realizing of that redemption.²⁷

Simultaneous with, or perhaps prior to, his commitment to the church is Ukpong’s commitment to African contexts and identities.²⁸ Justin Ukpong was truly an African in the sense that he thoroughly navigated life and scholarship from the perspective that his relationships with the people and locations around him constituted his very being. More than once he referenced in writing the sentiment that what constitutes a human being in African culture is not Cartesian individualism expressed in *cogito ergo sum* but rather relatedness expressed better in *cognato ergo sum*—I am related or I belong in a family.²⁹ Relationship and interconnectedness extend beyond bloodlines to include wider human community, nature, and God. Thus Ukpong’s African heritage and community made him who he was, and he would defend Africa with boldness and hope, insisting that any contributions Africans make to the interpretation of Scripture or the wider Christian faith are precisely due to their identity as Africans.³⁰ It may be fair to say that Ukpong was a postcolonial before his

²⁶ “A Critical Review of the *Lineamenta*” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives* (1996), 32-42. An earlier version appeared in *Concilium* in 1992.

²⁷ I do not mean to suggest that Africans who have parted ways with a Catholic or Protestant denomination have necessarily given up on Christian redemption; they simply may have chosen to pursue it elsewhere.

²⁸ I am aware of changing verb tenses between past and present in discussing Ukpong as an individual person who has died (past tense) and his work that continues into the present. Academic writing tends to reference the work of a deceased person in the present tense.

²⁹ “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 9. Ukpong references Pobee as his source for the rephrased Latin. See also “Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, ed. Mary Getui, (Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 192, and “Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology,” *Mission Studies* 16 (1999), 112, where he does not use the Latin phrases but similarly summarizes a human person in an African worldview.

³⁰ If some find Ukpong too conservative by his commitment to the church, others may find his faith in African culture and identity troubling and believe it to indicate a

time. For him it was not a scholarly trend, but an effort to defend, invigorate, and redeem his very life and identity, along with the community around him.

Ukpong was an intellectual and a practitioner, a professor and a priest, a world traveler and a villager, an orthodox Christian who rendered those in the center of orthodoxy uncomfortable; in the tension and conflation of these identities and commitments lay the compelling nature of his work. He cannot be written off as a sectarian stuck on African issues because he maintains hope in the church and in her Scriptures for the broader human community.³¹ Neither can he be dismissed as a

position of compromise, failing to uphold a pure gospel. One of the best known foils to Ukpong's belief that African Christians contribute to the Christian faith by virtue of their being Africans is Byang Kato, a fellow Nigerian born just a few years before Ukpong. Kato believed there was radical discontinuity between African culture or tradition and the Christian faith, and lamented that many Christians in Africa were "no longer taking the Word of God at face value," seeming to aspire to a pure interpretation of Scripture that transcends culture, or at least African culture. Kato later in the same article acknowledged that "evangelicals do not deny the fact that biblical theology needs to be expressed in the context of Africa" but limits his examples of the application of the Word of God to "speak[ing] to Africa's problems such as polygamy, music in the church, the spirit world." "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity," *Moody Monthly*, (November, 1974), 53-56. Kato's life and work were cut short in 1975, but suspicion of contextual theology and biblical interpretation persists among some African Christians. One contemporary example is Philemon Yong from Cameroon of Training Leaders International. In a piece called "The Challenge of Cultural Hermeneutics," Yong characterizes those "in the African context making the case for cultural hermeneutics" as "liberal scholars, western trained, with no concern for the purity of the gospel."

<http://trainingleadersinternational.org/blog/126/the-challenge-of-cultural-hermeneutics#->. Interestingly enough, Yong's own education is Western (Bethel College and Seminary (BA and M.Div), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Ph.D)) and I would venture to say his own take on cultural hermeneutics is heavily influenced by conservative American evangelicalism.

³¹ I am not aware of anyone leveling this critique specifically at Ukpong or inculturation hermeneutics, but there are plenty of sentiments that equate any contextual interpretation with insularity, narrowness, and/or eisegesis. Thomas Howe of Southern Evangelical Seminary and Bible College, for example, on a webpage about "biblical objectivity" as a distinctive of SES, quotes James Smart [*The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956)] about interpreting out of a worldview instead of objectivity: "The danger inherent in this development was that theological interpretations of Scripture would be its meaning for this or that theologian. Thus, theological exposition...would give each segment of the Christian community the license to read its own theological convictions out of the text of Scripture." This is obviously not a good thing for Smart or Howe. www.biblestudy.org also cautions against narrative theology as "subjective," consisting of the "perspective (opinion) of a group or individual reader." One does not have to look far on a Google search to find those who believe objective exegesis is

puppet of an imperialist church as his commitment to helping Africa challenge the church and the conceptualization of the Christian faith permeates his work.³² His scholarship demands attention by virtue of its caliber, but he was not an academic relegated to the ivory tower. He was at once an African, firmly situated in a particular context, and a member of the Body of Christ, the communion of saints, ontologically drawn together with others in their particularity. Ukpong was a Bible scholar and a theologian, grounded in the world in both capacities. As a Bible scholar Ukpong offers rich theological contributions to hermeneutics, which makes him a good match for the Scripture Project with an intentionally theological approach to Scripture.

I did not know Ukpong well, personally speaking, having met him only once, a few months prior to his death. At that time he agreed to co-supervise my thesis with Tony Balcomb, and I was overjoyed at the prospect of working with them both. As it was not to be, it is my hope that this thesis, with a new co-advisor in Gerald West, in some way serves to honor Professor Ukpong and his work.

Inculturation hermeneutics

Ukpong consistently describes inculturation hermeneutics as he envisions it in this way: inculturation hermeneutics “seeks to make any community of ordinary people and their social-cultural context the *subject* of interpretation of the Bible through the use of the conceptual frame of reference of the people and the involvement of the ordinary people in the interpretation process.”³³ Ukpong believes this approach to interpretation could be used in any context, though he prioritizes African contexts. Important features to highlight at this point from this definition

able to identify authorial intent—the one meaning for all times, places, cultures, and persons. Ron Rhodes, author of several books and President of Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministry claims this view, and even the www.biblegateway.com blog articulated this perspective in 2016.

³² Again, I am unaware of this particular criticism of Ukpong, but millions of Africans have parted ways with colonial or missionary churches in favor of African Instituted Churches and may remain suspicious of mainline denominations and even Africans who work with them. Cf. David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) and for a more recent view, Obed Kealotswe, “The Nature and Character of the African Independent Churches (AICs) in the 21st Century: Their Theological and Social Agenda,” *Studia His. Ecc.* 40.2 (2014).

³³ Justin Ukpong, “Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, ed. Justin Ukpong, et al, (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 12.

include, 1) African contexts and peoples as the *subject* of interpretation, 2) the starting point of a local conceptual frame of reference or worldview, and 3) the inclusion of ordinary readers in the interpretation process. Andrew Mbuvi writes that for Ukpong and African biblical studies more generally, the African and biblical realities are “partners in *dialogue*, resulting in a distinctive juxtaposition of questions, approaches, and interpretations.”³⁴

The reality of my own horizon as facilitator of this dialogue

Of course my own horizon will be significant in pursuing and evaluating this dialogue. As much as I will attempt to listen to both the Scripture Project and Ukpong and encounter them on their own terms, my horizon will influence the way I understand and present them. The reality of my own horizon is unavoidable and constitutes the only means I have for making sense of both dialogue partners and for drawing them together in conversation with one another. Even where my horizon could prove a problem insofar as I misunderstand or distort one or both of the dialogue partners, my horizon remains inescapable but not hopelessly ignorant. I hold onto the hope that even making mistakes is part of the learning process in the expansion of my horizon.

I have already offered glimpses of my horizon as an American trained in confessional institutions with mostly mainstream Western curriculum, where I found both theological interpretation and African hermeneutics refreshing and promising. These institutions were not overly sectarian, at least in comparison with some similarly confessional schools, and thus I had opportunity to encounter Christians that embodied a faith, practice, and to some degree interpretation of Scripture different from my own. As an undergraduate in a non-denominational Christian setting, I heard lectures from international faculty members who spoke with accents and had Christian identities out of histories and experiences like those of the French Huguenots and a Sri Lankan Christian minority. In curriculum and relationships, I gained exposure to Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as other Protestants, mainline and evangelical. In divinity school, I continued to learn cognitively and in practice that a well-lived life is not compartmentalized but an integrated effort to the glory of God and the dignity of human persons made in God’s

³⁴ Andrew Mbuvi, “African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15.2 (2017), 152, emphasis in original.

image, whether consisting of worship in chapel and morning prayer, pursuing social justice for the conditions of migrant farmers or the death penalty, or simply in friendship and living life in community.

I finished divinity school fascinated by the multiplicity of forms of the Christian faith I claimed. I wanted to be unofficially apprenticed under a faith and practice in a different social and cultural location than my own, and sought to go to Africa. I was prepared to agree to a menial job description in order to contribute to another community in a helpful way while simply living among Christians and participating in the life of faith in an African setting. As it turned out, I agreed to a generous job description on dual appointment as a lecturer and a member of the staff of the Dean of Students at Uganda Christian University. I was generally comfortable in my lecturer role and navigated with relative ease my relationships with students and academic staff. I had a much more difficult time making sense of my role on the staff of the Dean of Students. My appointment with the Dean of Students office and even my overall invitation to the University were due to my experience in the residential component of the university student experience. (Teaching had been something of an afterthought based on the interests and skills I articulated.) UCU was in the process of completing the first large-scale residence hall that would house 400 women; the administrative vision was to shift a residential component from ad-hoc space-as-needed and as-available to a more integral part of the educational experience. Since I had been in leadership as an undergraduate and on staff as a graduate student in such intentional residential components, I was brought in as something of an authority on how UCU should build and pursue their program.

It did not take me long to understand that I knew very little about housing as educational component in this setting. I had a limited sense of how UCU students approached campus life, with many of them coming from boarding school experiences in secondary school prior to university. Very few students at my American institutions had ever lived outside their parents' homes prior to university. What issues and opportunities were there for residential UCU students I had very little idea, much less how we should go about addressing them. Early on it was clear to me that the support staff working for the Dean of Students office, some of whom were barely literate but had worked at UCU and its predecessor, Bishop Tucker Theological College, for years knew much more about developing an appropriate residential program than I did. They may not have been able to articulate technical

terms and theories of student development, but they did know what UCU students needed and wanted, often better than the students did themselves.

This humble realization was fraught with issues of power and privilege: not only was I brought in as a resource for residential programs, but I was the only member of the staff with a master's degree other than the Dean himself, and I was the only white person ever to work for the Dean of Students office. All of these things contributed to making others believe that I should know what I was talking about, or at least contributed to others deferring to me *as if* I should know what I was talking about; it was almost always hard for me to tell. I, for one, knew the obvious—my supposed qualifications, for all the power and privilege they often did reflect, were by themselves useless in a setting about which I knew very little.

It was not so much the resulting humility itself that was difficult for me; after all, that was part of my motivation for going in the first place, to learn from others who knew, believed, and practiced different things than I did. It was easy enough for me to admit to myself and others that with their wisdom and experience the support staff who were officially “untrained” in student affairs could better read the situation than I could and intuitively knew something about how to proceed. What was difficult for me, however, was working out how to live into the implications of this humble reality: who was I on the team if not the knowledgeable consultant, and what was I to do if not help plan and implement a strategy for residential programs? For awhile I happily volunteered for menial tasks, listening more than speaking at staff meetings and planning sessions. There came a time, however, after several months at UCU, when I began to feel that I was gaining a sense of the place, along with an ability to revise the tools of my foreign training and experience to put them to effective use there. By that time, however, I was solidified in a role that had been appropriate at the beginning, one that I had willingly assumed and had helped create, but was beginning to make me feel stifled. Student workers, after all, could make signs for orientation and complete the other jobs I had been doing. How could I begin to contribute in more substantial, theoretical ways toward the creation and realization of a vision for residential programs as a true member of the team among others?

I was not sure whether the dynamics would revert back to the way I had perceived them at the outset: with me as assumed authority not to be questioned. Equally possible was the scenario that I had too eagerly exposed my own ignorance and was now destined to live with that over my head indefinitely. The postcolonial

theory that had once made for interesting discussions now directly confronted my sense of self and purpose as an individual; this conflict was frequently on the top of my mind and made contemplation of my role and identity excruciating at times. It was also just beneath the surface of my everyday life; though rarely manifesting in actual interpersonal conflict, it permeated my daily activities and interactions. It was not as if I was not wanted there, or as if I did not want to be there; the reality was simply that none of us knew exactly what to make of my presence.

Ultimately, I did not have the maturity or patience to continue the course—the uncertainty of my role with the Dean of Students, combined with the more fulfilling and enjoyable role of teaching, led me to accept an offer of a fulltime teaching load that allowed me to step gracefully out of the difficult space that was the development of residential programs. I was under the perception, at least, that in my teaching role the issues of power and privilege that I embodied were somewhat muted. I was treated with respect due to my position as a lecturer, with little difference from the respect afforded other lecturers. Colleagues patiently endured my learning curve, helping me with a range of things without giving a sense that they thought me and my history inferior or superior. To fellow lecturers I simply was who I was, an individual colleague who at times had different needs and different things to offer as we all worked together.

I tell this long story as part of my horizon for multiple reasons. It is the setting in which I first observed and participated in African biblical interpretation, and solidified my appreciation for it. Occasionally the sermons, women's Bible study group, or curriculum from my 'Reading the New Testament in Africa' class caused me more angst, but much more often these offered solace and comfort. These settings demonstrated that the Bible was not mine, personally or culturally, but was still for me. That first year at UCU I appreciated African biblical interpretation and the ways it left me feeling simultaneously relieved and challenged, and sometimes confused. Though my exposure was hardly a cross-section of the Bible in Africa, with sermons from ordained Anglicans, Bible study with mostly professional women, conversations with educated individuals, and reading published academic biblical scholarship, interpretation was still local and cultural. I gained glimpses of ordinary African interaction with the Bible, such as when a friend of mine mentioned that he had been sleeping with his Bible under his pillow after experiencing difficult times. Fascinated, I asked him why, and he looked at me puzzled, with an expression that wondered why

this wasn't obvious to me if I had any faith in the Bible. I cannot remember his exact words, but his terse response was along the lines of, "because the Bible has power." Raised in a Protestant free church setting in a largely scientific culture, it had never occurred to me that the Bible might be an object of power, even though my evangelical upbringing was convinced of the powerful words of Scripture.

This story also offers a personal example of reassessing myself in encounter with the other, in line with the philosophical hermeneutics that will help guide this thesis.³⁵ I am aware of how difficult an encounter such as the one I endeavor to create in this thesis can be for both sides. In my story I had to do the majority of the revising of self in the encounter with the other in practice because I was the outsider—I navigated the space mostly on their terms because local ways permeate local ethos and dictate success in it.³⁶ In theory I also should have had to do more of the revising of self since I was operating from the historical place of power. What has been historically dominant must assume vulnerability in order for partnership to be achieved. In this way, my story serves as an analogy to the dialogue at hand: the Scripture Project, while perhaps not at the center of contemporary Western scholarship, still occupies the historical position of power and should thereby be rendered most vulnerable. Almost always it is African readings that have to fit into Western ways of doing things—the academy remains conducted on the terms of the West, and African scholarship has to fit in accordingly. Similar to my experience, it is time for the tables to turn and for the dialogue to proceed on the terms of an African way of reading, in this case Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics. It is my hope that, unlike my withdrawal from the Dean of Students office, biblical studies as a global phenomenon will persevere in forging working partnerships that honor distinctiveness and allow each to contribute out of their uniqueness, with no one afforded too much or too little credibility or guiding impact. This thesis is one small effort to contribute to such a state of affairs.

³⁵ See the subsection on philosophical hermeneutics below, beginning on page 22 of this chapter.

³⁶ There were, of course, many concessions to my terms present due to globalization and the cultural dominance of American media, fashion, etc., the most important concession surely being the English language. Even in an environment that was primarily African, our mode of communication was limited to a language that was my mother tongue and one of the second languages possessed by my African acquaintances.

This first chapter, especially this portion on my own horizon, makes heavy use of the first person. I will continue to use the first person occasionally throughout this thesis, as I have personal experience and vested interest in this dialogue. In addition to an academic opportunity, this thesis has personal stakes for me and is part of a process of sorting through the influences on and perspectives in my life, theology, and Bible reading, and negotiating my own identity and commitments. I begin this thesis valuing the theological interpretation I learned at American institutions, and finding compelling the inculturation hermeneutics I have been exposed to through published academic work and in less formal experiences in Uganda. Less pertinent to the work of this thesis but remaining instrumental in my life and identity is my evangelical upbringing. Though I do not imagine myself practicing my faith primarily within a conservative evangelical community at any point in the future, I remain indebted to such a community for cultivating my faith and practice in many positive ways in my youth.

Part of the personal work of this thesis, then, will be sorting out my own relationship with the Bible and with the various influences that continue to shape me. Among schooling in theological interpretation, an appreciation for inculturation hermeneutics, and an evangelical upbringing, as well as general exposure to and appreciation for a range of Christian traditions and perspectives, what do I think and believe about the Bible? How should the Bible be read and appropriated in various contexts? If there are multiple good ways of reading, where does that leave me? Must I choose one interpretive model and community? Or are there ways of reconciling my values and influences? This thesis will help me consider whether and how cross-fertilization may take place in general between the dialogue partners and in my own faith and practice. There will also likely be ways I will find myself challenged and changed in ways I do not anticipate at the outset of this project. My own story will continue to unfold and I will continue to grow and change as a person, I trust, throughout the work I do for this thesis. I will save most reflection on what I have learned or how I have changed throughout working on this thesis for chapter eight, where it will be most appropriate to return to my own horizon in relation to this thesis.

Why Dialogue?

I have chosen to bring together the Scripture Project and Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics by means of dialogue both for the process of dialogue and the potential outcomes. Dialogue can often be a positive method of engagement with any other, but the fact that both the Scripture Project and Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics operate from within the Christian faith and locate themselves within the universal church makes dialogue even more compelling as shared Christian practice.

Dialogue as Christian practice

There are a number of ways of thinking about dialogue as Christian practice. Here are some brief highlights.

Hospitality. Dialogue is a form of hospitality, accepting the other as they are and sharing what one has with the other. Hospitality is a biblical and Christian practice, and dialogue is a way to give oneself and receive the other in this manner.³⁷

Ecclesiology. Different members of the Body of Christ, united under his headship, each have their own gifts and contribute with equal importance to the work of the church. Teresa Okure puts it beautifully, "For we, though many, form one body, and like grains gathered from, yet located in, different parts of the world, we intensify and increase our effectiveness in being salt to the earth and light to the world until the whole batch of the world is seasoned and becomes bright with God's light and God's love."³⁸

Biblical example of the early church. Along with the theoretical/theological sense of the unity of the church as the Body of Christ and the light of the world, the New Testament offers the example of the early church engaging in dialogue on important matters in the life of the church. The Jerusalem Council, recorded in Acts 15, addressed issues of the interpretation of Scripture and tradition, and how Gentiles,

³⁷ For a thorough account of hospitality, both given and received, as central to the biblical witness from the Old Testament through the New, as well as implications for the life of the church, see Amos Yong's *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, especially chapter four. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

³⁸ Thersa Okure, "The Church in the World: Dialogue on Ecclesiology," in J. Haers and P. De Mey, eds, *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven, Belgium: Leaven University Press, 2003), 424.

with cultures and identities different from the Jews, should be added to the church. They reached a compromise after “sharp dispute and debate” (v 2) regarding the law of Moses and the requirement of circumcision (v 5), the witness of the Holy Spirit (v 8), and the words of the prophets (v 15-18). The final decision delivered to the Gentile believers from the Council was that they need not be circumcised or follow other requirements of the law, except to abstain from food sacrificed to idols (this requirement would be visited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8), from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality (v 23-29).

Witness. The unity of the church in its diversity serves as a witness to the world, but when differences are allowed to create division rather than dialogue, there is missed opportunity for witness. Again, Okure’s words capture this nicely:

If when the world looks at us, a city on a hilltop, it sees only broken down fences, falling rafters, streets filled with potholes, dilapidated walls and peeling plasters, it will consider itself blessed for having nothing to do with us....As city on the hill, people should look up and see that we, gathered from all nations under heaven, love one another across barriers of race, class and sex, colour and so forth, and are firmly committed to being good news to one another and to the world.³⁹

Trinitarian. Bradford Hinze explains how hermeneutics that include different individuals and communities are thoroughly Trinitarian. (He calls it a Trinitarian hermeneutic). Honoring God the Father (or Mother) as Creator

entails respecting and attending to the particularities of continents and geographical regions, ethnic groups, and cultures, and all of the particularities of bodies and psyches, minds and freedom that contribute to the dignity and identity of individuals and families. To reverence the work of the Creator requires that interpreters ‘reverence the particulars’ as these affect and leave their mark on texts and traditions.⁴⁰

How can such inclusive interpretation be achieved except by exchanging ideas and experiences through dialogue? This way of reading also honors Christ as the Word: “It is the doctrine of the *totus Christus* that must bind both scripture and

³⁹ Okure, “The Church in the World,” 435-436.

⁴⁰ Bradford Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions and Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, eds J. Haers and P. De Mey. (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 317.

communal interpretation together and offer the possibility of healing the breach between communities who have torn Christ apart.”⁴¹ Finally, Hinze writes that in order to honor the diverse work of the Spirit, this kind of hermeneutic must be receptive to what others have to say out of places and circumstances different from our own. This inclusive effort to understand not only honors the work and person of each member of the Trinity, but actually emulates the interior life of the Trinitarian God. Each person of the Trinity “hears and heeds” the others in “mutual obedience.”⁴² Hinze summarizes, “Differentiation and communion occur in the divine reality and in the church and the world through mutual obedience, understood as attentiveness, reception, and response.”⁴³ As the members of the Trinity engage with one another in their particularities, God pursues communication with us in the incarnation and in Scripture, and allows us to engage and understand in our own particularities. These are not negative differences to be overcome, but positive differences worth honor and preservation, as they all contribute to a more thorough understanding of God’s communication to humankind through the Word.

Dialogue in a fallen world. While these concepts have touched on the significance of dialogue as Christian practice, dialogue is not some magical tool that will bring about a utopian state of enlightened mutual understanding. Hinze reminds us of both the promise and perils of a theological hermeneutics of dialogue, saying, “One must savour the redemptive and sanctifying graces that are available through dialogue and communication, while confessing the brutal facts about distortion in the depths of the human psyche and in social relations.”⁴⁴ Dialogue is worth pursuing and certainly contributes to increased understanding and new possibilities, but the realities of “tragedy and brokenness, finitude and sin” persist, and we do well to remember this and demonstrate grace and compassion to others and claim these for ourselves throughout the sometimes difficult process of dialogue.

Philosophical hermeneutics

Dialogue is also an extension of the hermeneutical project of interpreting Scripture as a text. The process of reading and understanding a text is characterized

⁴¹ Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions,” 318.

⁴² Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions,” 319.

⁴³ Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions,” 319.

⁴⁴ Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions,” 312.

by a kind of dialogue—that is, a back-and-forth process between one’s own presuppositions and what the text is attempting to convey. The interpreter of a text has a sense, then, of a dialogical posture simply by virtue of encounter with a text. Being open to what another says about the text at hand is an extension of the openness toward the text that is required in the hermeneutical process.

Philosophical hermeneutics, often referred to as the art and science of interpretation, advances a theory of knowledge about how we come to understand something other than ourselves, usually including a text or other persons. Part of human existence is to encounter people, ideas, and experiences that are other than ourselves. We have the option to deny the validity and importance of these others, or even to deny that they exist at all. However, if we seek to understand or interpret these others, this is a hermeneutical practice, similar to seeking to understand or interpret a text. Philosophical hermeneutics helps us understand how this understanding of text and of others happens. Since this project has elements of seeking to understand both the Scriptural text and the interpretation of another in bringing the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics into conversation with one another about biblical interpretation, philosophical hermeneutics will provide helpful framework.

This thesis will appeal to the work of one of the masters of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, to lay a framework for the dialogue between two distinct interpretive threads and to help explain the process. Francis Watson, influential in theological interpretation, sees conversations involving the doctrine of Scripture as having “a natural affinity with that side of the hermeneutical tradition on which textuality is a primary rather than a derivative phenomenon,” and says, “hermeneutics and textuality are reintegrated in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.”⁴⁵ Jonathan Draper finds that Bible reading as conversation in the spirit of Gadamer’s emphasis on language as the medium of hermeneutic experience is fitting for African contextual hermeneutics.⁴⁶ Thus Gadamer is a good fit for both *The Art of Reading Scripture* and inculturation hermeneutics.

⁴⁵ Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12.2 (2010), 121.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Draper, “Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa,” *Grace and Truth* 19.2 (2002), 13. Explaining why conversation is a good model for African contextual hermeneutics, Draper says, “In African tradition, meaning is determined in the

Gadamer does not see himself as articulating a method, so I will not be following Gadamer's prescription for dialogue, but rather making use of his description of what takes place when human beings undertake the task of interpretation, either of texts or of other human beings. The project as a whole will be an effort to bring about a "hermeneutic experience," as Gadamer calls it, when inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project encounter one another in a mutual search for truth and meaningful, transformative interpretation. In Gadamer's use of the term, a hermeneutic experience necessarily entails a new understanding of both oneself and the other, and takes place on relatively equal terms. Gadamer does not allow for one dialogue partner to dominate the other, and seems to see any such tendency challenged by the process of dialogue, when done well.⁴⁷ That Gadamer does not readily admit drastically disproportionate power dynamics as a significant element of the historical prejudices of an individual or community has been a criticism leveled at *Truth and Method*.⁴⁸ Indeed, for Gadamer, a hermeneutics of good will eclipses a hermeneutics of suspicion, and this is not always a bad thing.⁴⁹ In

community," continuing, "it is recognized in African tradition that what has been said and decided before remains an important influence on what is said and decided now...Above all, it is because the meaning of a conversation is always linked inextricably to its context, to the real life situation of the dialogue partners" (13).

⁴⁷ "A person who possesses the 'art' of questioning is a person who is able to prevent the suppression of questions by the dominant opinion." Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Garret Barden and John Cumming, trans eds, (New York: Seabury, 1975), 330. This translation was my initial introduction to *Truth and Method*, and I use it throughout this thesis because the translation preferences of Barden and Cumming shaped my reception of Gadamer's work. I have chosen to mirror this experience for readers of this thesis, occasionally referencing other translations.²

⁴⁸ Jurgen Habermas criticizes Gadamer's sense of historical horizons and hermeneutical situations, saying Gadamer focuses on their linguistic character at the expense of extra-linguistic factors such as power and economics. Habermas and others assert that Gadamer is too optimistic about how dialogue contributes to understanding and the expanding and eventual fusion of horizons. Jacques Derrida, influenced by Nietzsche, says that Gadamer's assumption that hermeneutical experiences will be characterized by good will toward the other and a willingness to risk oneself in the encounter fail to consider the will to dominate. John Caputo likewise critiques Gadamer's understanding of tradition that, as Caputo sees it, does not readily enough consider how power plays have affected histories and traditions.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Draper ["African Contextual Hermeneutics: Readers, Reading Communities, and Their Options between Text and Context," *Religion & Theology* 22 (2015)], while finding Gadamer helpful for African contextual hermeneutics, footnotes that he "would not like to let go of the usefulness of 'a hermeneutics of suspicion' even, or perhaps particularly, with respect to the text as other," but would "rather use the terminology of a 'willing suspension of disbelief" (17, fn 44).

terms of facilitating dialogue between two contemporary interpretive traditions, I find good will and equality, even if ideals that ultimately cannot be fully realized, to be attractive and promising starting points.⁵⁰ Postcolonial hermeneutics helps keep issues of power and hegemony in perspective, and as such will provide helpful additional framework from time to time.⁵¹ This thesis aims to allow neither dialogue partner to dismiss or concede to the other too readily. A posture of suspicion is detrimental to the goals of dialogue and a hermeneutic experience, and a project like this one, if guided by suspicion, would not make much progress before stalling, encountering a deadlock or a communication impasse due to incommensurable positions or perspectives. A posture of humility and good will not only serve the purpose of dialogue but also embodies Christian virtues.

⁵⁰ Ukpong repeatedly demonstrates his good will toward other interpretive communities, even including those in historically powerful positions. While Ukpong is at times suspicious of the biblical text itself and certain strands of interpretation, I would characterize his overall tone in engaging others to be one of charity and openness. Thus, while acknowledging the critiques of Gadamer, I do not think it unfair to Ukpong to use Gadamer's theory for a general framework for comparison in this project.

⁵¹ While assuming a more thoroughly suspicious posture than Ukpong, the experience of marginalization often tempers postcolonial hermeneutics, leading to a rejection of any subsequent marginalization of others, and at least theoretically leaving room for dialogue on relatively equal terms. Sugirtharajah, for example, writes of vernacular hermeneutics, "when it creates an exclusive and a protective past, in the process silencing other voices and hindering the growth of communal harmony, and views contemporary perceptions and attitudes as poisonous, then it has to be challenged." *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 195. Hjamil A. Martinez-Vasquez, writing as a historian in a volume on feminist and postcolonial biblical studies, offers a helpful distinction: "To develop a theory from the borderlands that breaks down the colonial imaginary and transforms the social conditions it generated is to focus on *resistance instead of exclusion*, on the *inclusion of difference instead of homogenization*" (emphasis mine). "Breaking the Established Scaffold: Imagination as a Resource in the Development of Biblical Interpretation" in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, eds. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Panner (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 80. In the same volume, Vernon Robbins envisions interpretations that include "disenfranchised voices, marginalized voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully located voices" where they "explore with each other, debate with one another, and disagree with each other as equals, inviting other voices into the dialogue" across disciplines and identities. "The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation," in *Her Master's Tools?*, 111.

There is here, I think, a debt to Latin American and South African liberation hermeneutics, which in initial and occasional militancy helped pave the way for readings that privilege context and 'the poor' or 'the people' to be taken seriously enough for a vision of equality to become a feasible goal.

Both Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project approach biblical studies from within their own histories and contexts; each bring their own epistemologies, experiences, commitments, and unique histories of biblical interpretation to their scholarly endeavors. Gadamer calls these sets of pre-understanding and prejudices "horizons" that each brings to the text and its interpretation. The text also has its own horizon for Gadamer, which is a helpful concept in an analysis of Scriptural interpretation. Gadamer will prove instructive in drawing out how inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project do not simply read Scripture differently, but in fact reflect their own horizons as they much more broadly interpret histories, politics, contemporary events and issues, and others. This broader process of understanding and interpretation is simply part of human existence, thus the horizons and "prejudiced" interpretations both bring to the table do not foreclose the possibility of meaningful communication and understanding, but in fact are prerequisites for it.⁵² We are open to understand something new only by encountering something outside our horizons and struggling to integrate it or understand it from within the movements of our own horizons.⁵³ This is fundamentally a dialogical process; whenever we interact with anything other, whether a text, an individual, or a community, we gain exposure to that other and are increasingly likely to gain understanding on their terms and have our own perspectives broadened. The encounter and ensuing reassessment of self and the other constitute a "hermeneutic experience."

⁵² The use of the word prejudice does not have the negative connotations for Gadamer that it carries in the English translation. Gadamer suggests that everyone lives within a horizon of historical prejudice, but not everyone has acknowledged and explored their horizon, which is a precursor for expanding it. "A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him" (*T&M*, 269). Conversely, "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion" (*T&M*, 272). That particular histories and prejudices offer a starting point for engaging the horizons of others is a significant claim in a postmodern time when some believe that communication and understanding across dramatic difference is not even possible.

⁵³ "The horizon is...something into which we move and that moves with us" (*T&M* 271). A horizon is never static or "closed" as Gadamer describes it, but is dynamic as it encounters other horizons.

Situating this Project in a Larger Conversation

I am not picking up a conversation that has already begun, but creating a dialogue using the existing work of two specific partners. My project is intended heuristically and will make efforts to honor the trajectories each dialogue partner sets up for themselves. It does not necessarily aim to conclude or prescribe anything; instead, the goal is to construct a dialogue and see what happens. Perhaps moments of hermeneutical experience, seeing themselves anew in light of the other, will be possible for both partners. Whether and how these moments may come about apart from these pages remains to be seen. I could send a copy of this thesis upon completion to Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, offering my former professors opportunity to review my work, and perhaps they would find something to think about. Ukpong, unfortunately, will be unable to evaluate my work himself. While I am creating a dialogue between two partners, this work is for me more than it is for the dialogue partners. I undertake this work for personal reasons and offer it heuristically. I do not imagine there is much demand for this kind of work, though both dialogue partners operate within wider hermeneutic trajectories, and there could be implications for interpreters doing inculturation work or theological readings.

Intentional efforts at dialogue

There is some comparative work between academic biblical studies in Africa and the West. Much of this work focuses on influences and concerns that shape the content and to some degree the method of biblical studies in both contexts. In almost all cases, representatives from both regions participate knowingly and intentionally in dialogue with one another, often at a conference or carrying out research together. This thesis will be unique in taking a sample of theological interpretation in the West and bringing it into conversation after the fact with an African approach.

Other efforts at dialogue include *Through the Eyes of Another*, a 2004 compilation volume reporting on a three year study of how 120 small groups in 25 countries read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Hans de Wit continues to lead a good deal of international dialogue on biblical interpretation, occasionally including African groups or settings. De Wit continues the work of *Through the Eyes of Another* at a website that shares the name, compiling

reading reports from groups around the world that engage with another group in a different geographical and social location in reading the same passage together. This massive project focuses on contextual reading and the experiences and perspectives of ordinary readers in conversation with one another. De Wit calls this data and scholarly work on it *empirical hermeneutics*, analyzing the process of appropriation, the role of local context, and the “behavior potential” of the text for ordinary readers. The most substantial work in empirical hermeneutics came together in a 2013 conference in Amsterdam and the subsequent volume, *Bible and Transformation*.⁵⁵

There is also *African and European Readers in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*, coming out of a Stellenbosch conference held in 2006. This conference and publication pursue dialogue between African and European readers, as the title of the volume suggests, with each essay having a respondent, thereby stimulating discussion among Bible readers in different parts of the world. Joanna Stiebert of University of Leeds and Musa Dube did a three-year project called “Biblical Studies in Southern Africa and the UK in Dialogue: Trends and Challenges,” culminating with a study day at Leeds in 2014. There does not seem to be much published from it. This thesis, then, is among other efforts to contribute to dialogue and, perhaps, increase awareness of and appreciation for one another’s perspective, approach, interpretation, and/or appropriation.

Ukpong has facilitated and participated in a small-scale dialogue between Nigerian and Scottish readers, partnering with John Riches. Ukpong’s write-up of the project can be found in an essay in *The Bible in Africa*. That Ukpong undertook this experience and generally writes positively about it, even though he did not continue to pursue similar dialogues after that, could be further indication that he is generally open to such endeavors. Bringing his work into conversation with the Scripture Project is certainly different from what he did with Riches, as that project facilitated dialogue between ordinary readers in Nigeria and Scotland.

⁵⁵ Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

This thesis is not the only effort, then, to bring African and Western readers of the Bible into dialogue with one another. The possibility for dialogue between interpretive traditions begins with the sharing of the biblical text.⁵⁶ Inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project each make efforts to bring that text to bear on their respective contexts. In so doing, each also inhabit a “third pole” of appropriation, that is, the ideo-theological posture each has toward text and context. A tripolar model of interpretation is a helpful analytical tool for bringing the two partners together in dialogue, considering how each approaches *text* and *context*, and what *ideo-theological orientation* guides their interpretation.⁵⁷ Analysis of these three poles will help mediate the dialogue.

Ukpong does not overtly draw on such a tripolar model, though Gerald West discerns an ideo-theological pole latent in Ukpong’s work. Ukpong identifies five components in the task of interpretation, and each of these will offer key areas for dialogue: “an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*.”⁵⁸ Chapters will take up each term in succession, one term per chapter, following a chapter on historical backgrounds of Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project’s theological interpretation. Allowing Ukpong to suggest the terms of the dialogue certainly privileges his work and positions. Ukpong and other African scholars have pursued their work in the shadow of Western trends. In Ukpong’s case, this means frequent sensitivity to and engagement with Western scholarship; as the dialogue partner who

⁵⁶ Jonathan Draper says, “the need to remain ecumenical demands that we continue in conversation with a text so that we can continue in conversation with each other.” “Reading the Bible as Conversation,” 23.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Draper’s work on a tripolar model, especially in “Reading the Bible as Conversation,” provides the framework for this analytical tool. Gerald West has also done helpful work on a tripolar model. In this thesis, chapter six on *conceptual framework* draws heavily on the idea of an ideo-theological third pole. While the other chapters infrequently use the language of third pole, there is analysis throughout the chapters of the theological and ideological assumptions that guide each dialogue partner.

⁵⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5. Italics in original; Ukpong intentionally highlights each of these terms as key pieces of the hermeneutical task.

is more aware of the other, it makes sense to allow Ukpong the lead.⁵⁹ This thesis also aims to bring together equal dialogue partners, and with the burden of historic inequality that relegates African scholarship to the margins, it is also just to privilege Ukpong in this way.

Each chapter will uniquely unfold, not always following the same structure. I will prioritize Ukpong, often beginning with an analysis of inculturation hermeneutics, but I will allow the material to lead and try to bring the two into conversation that logically follows. The ways conversation develops will vary among chapters. At times, when the Scripture Project clearly articulates something or gestures in a particular direction, I will allow them to take the lead. Where patterns break or are difficult to discern, it is deliberate, because the material and the clarity of one conversation partner lead in that direction at that moment.

Summary of forthcoming chapters

This chapter has summarized the impetus and reasons for the direction of this thesis, both in terms of the big picture of biblical studies as a global discipline, and in terms of my own education, experience, perspective, and hope. It has outlined the state of awareness and conversation between African and North American biblical studies, including intentional efforts at dialogue, and demonstrated how this project aims to further such interaction characterized by mutual respect, learning, and challenge.

Chapter two situates inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project in their respective historical contexts, considering historical events, existential experience, and intellectual influences and finds promise for dialogue between the two. Theological interpretation follows modern and postmodern crises of meaning. Skepticism and a desire for objectivity rendered the Bible a historical text and biblical studies a secular endeavor in modernity, while pluralism and recognition of particularity in postmodernity made it difficult to know what to do with sacred texts.

⁵⁹ Hans de Wit confirms, “When we ask Western exegetes how orientation to the elsewhere, the other, and the otherwise is given shape in their exegesis, the answer is a meager one. Hardly anything has come of a systematic interaction with, for example, colleagues from Latin America or Africa, where the elsewhere and the otherwise are often a given.” *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture*, Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics series book 1, (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 2012), 26.

Theological interpretation reclaims the Bible for the church as people of faith, while simultaneously upholding academic tools, attempting to balance a tradition-specific claim on the text with more critical reception. Missionary history and experiences of colonialism and imperialism, along with translation efforts, lead to African readers resisting foreign explanation of the Bible. Inculturation hermeneutics reads intentionally out of African experiences and worldviews, and seeks to interpret the Bible primarily for African contexts and communities.

Chapter three takes up the dialogue between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project on the first of Ukpong's terms in his description of the task of interpretation: *interpreter*. Ukpong intentionally begins with the person and world of the reader, and while the Scripture Project also readily acknowledges the subjectivity or situated nature of all interpreters, tension ultimately remains between the two concerning the best ways to prioritize the reader and to include "ordinary," everyday readers in the interpretation process.

The focus of the dialogue in chapter four is *context*. Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project are significantly contextual, not only acknowledging the presence of the receiving community as a factor in interpretation, but claiming it as an important part of the interpretation process and purpose. Inculturation hermeneutics pushes the Scripture Project here, though, questioning the depth of the Scripture Project's notions of context and any real commitment to concrete contexts. With Africa as the subject of interpretation, inculturation hermeneutics insists on a robust sense of context and on commitment to improving that context in practical ways. The Scripture Project, meanwhile, insists that the context and story of the Bible *are* our context and story as people of faith, challenging inculturation hermeneutics to conform to the witness of Scripture even while appropriating the Bible for contextual situations.

Chapter five discusses the *text* in both approaches. The Bible is a shared sacred text for inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project: both approach the text with postures of faith and criticism at the same time. Each desires to bring the text to bear on contemporary communities and situations in helpful, life-giving ways, while they do that in their own ways, foregrounding their own priorities.

Chapter six, on *conceptual framework*, is where the basic worldviews and postures of the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics are laid bare, including their assumptions, motivations, and commitments. Both embody a paradigm

shift upon finding existing frameworks insufficient and making efforts for new ways forward. Exploring the “third pole” of ideo-theological orientation, this chapter draws out similarities and differences regarding the primary axes of each. Both see the Bible and the historical moment they inhabit as mutually shaping one another, and both look for an active component in interpretation, though inculturation hermeneutics forefronts context and the Scripture Project prioritizes text. They challenge one another on the role of ideology in interpretation, and press each other with different areas of preferred attention, with inculturation hermeneutics urging the Scripture Project to move beyond the boundaries of the visible church, and the Scripture Project reminding inculturation hermeneutics of the uniquely Christian nature of the text and appropriation.

On the last of Ukpong’s terms in the task of interpretation, chapter seven turns to *procedure*. Procedure is appropriately last for both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics, as each puts procedure to the service of the primary goals and purposes each pursues. They do not begin with procedure, but rather offer reflection on what they are already doing. Again, it emerges that Ukpong procedurally favors context and ordinary readers, while the Scripture Project holds fidelity to text and tradition primary.

The final chapter evaluates what the thesis has accomplished and reflects on the content of it. Chapter eight also reflects on my horizon and how it may have shifted or expanded through the process of writing. Finally, the chapter suggests ways forward to continue and deepen dialogues such as this one.

Chapter 2: Historical Horizons

Introduction

Before endeavoring to bring the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics into dialogue directly with one another, both must be situated in historical context so that the horizons of each have some depth. As Gadamer says, “the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past.”¹ A brief survey of biblical interpretation in the Western academy will help explain the pre-understanding of the Scripture Project and how it approaches the biblical text and the task and purpose of interpretation. Similarly, a brief look at the history of interpretation in Africa will outline the history and identity of inculturation hermeneutics and how this general reading strategy arose. The chapter will address each intermittently with some conversation between the two. Gadamer will also be instructive throughout the chapter, helping to explain and critique the epistemology of modernity, as well as undergird the contextual nature of all interpretation.

Modern biblical studies: objective scholarship apart from theology

The intellectual culture of modernity² was characterized by increasingly rational and scientific worldviews and a desire to be emancipated from religion and traditional authority.³ The modern university privileged “objectivity” and increasingly saw its disciplines isolated from one another. The realm of theology was no exception. Theology faculties had previously been comprehensive in study of the Bible, canon law, church history, philosophy and other supporting disciplines, and had been a mainstay among major university departments. The Enlightenment saw the prestige and authority of theology greatly diminished, and its place in the university uncertain. There was parallel uncertainty about the place of the Bible: as a historic and cultural text, it retained importance, but enlightened modern people of the

¹ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans eds Garret Barden and John Cumming, (New York: Seabury, 1975), 273.

² In this discussion, modernity and modern are technical terms referring to a specific historical period, generally regarded as approximately 1500 through the late 19th century, and the corresponding ethos that largely characterized the time.

³ “It is the general tendency of the enlightenment [sic] not to accept any authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason” (*T&M*, 241).

university generally had little need for a Church-related sacred text associated with superstition and hegemonic authority.

Remnants of a pre-modern and increasingly questionable field, professors in theological and biblical studies defended their interests and sometimes sought to integrate them into the modern paradigm to ensure their survival and acceptance. Such a defense increasingly distinguished between what the biblical text meant in its original context and what it means in contemporary application, between history and interpretation, biblical studies and theology. Three well-known scholars spanning over 200 years merit recognition for contributions along these lines: Johann Gabler, Wilhelm Wrede, and Krister Stendahl.⁴

Gabler, in a 1787 address “On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each” distinguished between biblical theology, which, “as is proper to historical argument, is always in accord with itself when considered by itself,” and dogmatic theology, which, “is subject to a multiplicity of change along with the rest of the humane disciplines.”⁵ History came with a kind of certainty and objectivity “always in accord with itself,” while theology was much less certain and scientific. The divide was established, with the Bible as historical text with its own theology, and dogmatic theology as an evolving human project contingent on a range of human factors (not to mention its claim to divine factors) in addition to interpretation of Scriptures. Gabler himself focused on biblical theology and made it a kind of science of history, seeking to explicate “those things which holy men perceived about matters pertinent to religion,” a discipline that “remains the same...and is not made to accommodate our point of view.”⁶ Gabler’s speech did not minimize the importance or potential of dogmatic theology, but that he preferred the side of biblical theology was surely a safer enterprise. The biblical authors were responsible for the content of Gabler’s work; as a biblical theologian it

⁴ Summarizing a scholarly model that distinguishes between the descriptive task of biblical theology and the normative task of dogmatic theology, Gerhard Hasel collapses these three into one descriptive term: “the scholarly tradition of Gabler-Wrede-Stendahl.” *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 28.

⁵ Johann Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,” 184, as excerpted from the translation by John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge in “Johann P. Gabler on Biblical Theology” at jimhamilton.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Gabler-ProperDistinction-BiblicalTheology.pdf.

⁶ Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 193.

was his task to sort out what each biblical author did and discern “wherein the separate authors agree in a friendly fashion, or differ among themselves” toward a “system for biblical theology” that is “pure and unmixed with foreign things.”⁷ Gabler left room for dogmatic theologians to justify their enterprise as distinct from his, while securing a safe and acceptable space for the Bible as historical document.

Over 100 years later, Wilhelm Wrede picked up the distinction between the Bible and theology and, with the assistance of Immanuel Kant’s concern for proper boundaries between university disciplines, outlined New Testament theology as an objective study, likened to every other science, with its own end of describing New Testament religion “totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology.”⁸ Simultaneously, “how the systematic theologian gets on with its results and deals with them—that is his own affair.”⁹ A century after Wrede, Krister Stendahl noted a distinction between what the text meant and what it means.¹⁰ Thus the divide was entrenched, with a separate space still offered to the theologian, but the enterprise of biblical studies safely established as an objective, descriptive task. Rather than the historical horizon of the text meeting the interpretive horizon in a fusion of horizons, biblical studies and theology were effectively alienated from one another.

Broader cultural and historical factors also contributed to this alienation. The Protestant Reformation had both intended and unintended effects on the perception and use of the Bible and its relation to theology. Following years of religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries, nontheological hermeneutics had social and political appeal for people weary of fighting over religion. Martin Luther’s theology began a trajectory that went beyond his desire to emancipate the Bible from Church tradition, and eventually led to a firmly secular place for the Bible. Luther appealed to “faith in

⁷ Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 190.

⁸ From Wrede’s “The Tasks and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” as quoted in W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., “From Biblical Exegesis to Theological Construction: Reflections on Methodology,” *SBL Forum*, Sept 2004. <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=309> This indifference, according to Brian Daley, amounts to “methodological atheism.” “Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 72.

⁹ Wrede, “The Tasks and Methods,” as quoted in Tucker, “From Biblical Exegesis to Theological Construction.”

¹⁰ See Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 418-32. Stendahl did not necessarily mean to imply that the meaning of the text changes over time, but means that the purposes and emphases of the historian differ from those of a preacher or theologian.

God's redeeming power as revealed through Christ in the Bible, and that alone."¹¹ Trust that the Holy Spirit could prompt an individual to faith as an interior response to the grace of Christ found in Scripture meant that the Bible no longer needed the Church and all its trappings, including theology, to mediate it to believers. Luther translated the Bible into vernacular German, and the King James Bible emerged in English, versions more accessible to lay people than the Latin the Catholic Church had used for so long. Individual interpretation and the breakdown of Church authority opened the door to pluralism and skepticism: autonomous individuals increasingly used their own critical faculties to understand and evaluate the Bible, often from a perspective emancipated from Church teaching. Before long, the Bible could be read without the corresponding Reformation emphases of grace and faith in Christ, and the cry of *sola scriptura* became an ambivalent "it's only the Bible." In an ethos of increasing faith in science, the Bible could also be studied from an objective standpoint with the methods and assumptions of science. Philosophy also paid increasing attention to human reason with the rational individual at the center of knowledge, discovery, and even society. Thus, biblical studies became a firmly secular enterprise, relying on the historical-critical study of the scholar for illumination, quite apart from any church, theology, or divine inspiration.

Appropriation by an African context

While for Ukpong inculturation hermeneutics presupposes some kind of relationship with the community of faith, the possibility of interpretation apart from the authority of the church, and even apart from normative claims at all, can be very useful in a context where the Bible has often been a tool of oppression. Ukpong has no problem drawing on the methods and tools that emerged out of the context of modernity described above. While the ethos of modernity may never have been Ukpong's sole or primary cultural home, he is well-educated in the historical-critical paradigm and has little angst about making use of it for his own purposes, even if not a sufficient framework for his own work. It seems self-evident to Ukpong that the

¹¹ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Modern Mind* (New York: Random House, 1991), 234.

“master’s tools” can be used for a variety of purposes, sometimes in line with the master’s project and other times challenging it or even dismantling it.¹²

Historical Overview of the Bible in Africa

African church fathers and patristic interpretation

The Bible, of course, is not new to the African continent. In the early years of Christian history and the interpretation of Scripture, African contributions were often among the mainstream.¹³ Church fathers in North Africa were instrumental in shaping Christian doctrines and interpretation of Scriptures. Clement of Alexandria, whose work Kwame Bediako describes as featuring “frequent and optimistic use of the Scriptures” as well as attention to his own Hellenistic culture, was head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria in the second century CE.¹⁴ Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian are important figures, and Athanasius and Augustine from a little later are among the most influential thinkers from the first centuries of the faith. Athanasius, in addition to his proficiency in the international and more academic language of Greek, occasionally wrote and preached in Coptic, as the vernacular of his region came to be called.¹⁵ The historic importance of these Church Fathers means that Western and African interpretive histories include some of the same Patristic contributions. African

¹² A volume titled *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* [edited by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Panner (Atlanta: SBL, 2005)] explores this very notion, offering a number of essays that cumulatively offer “a prolonged, varied, and often volatile conversation regarding the usefulness of historical criticism” (3).

¹³ Scholars have shown how these contributions were African not only geographically but also culturally. Nancy R. Heisey locates Origen in a kind of hybrid context, “shaped by the intellectual and cultural traditions not only of the broader Greco-Roman world and of Judaism but also of Egypt itself.” *Origen the Egyptian: A Literary and Historical Consideration of the Egyptian Background in Origen’s Writings on Martyrdom*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2000) 33. A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya believes Tertullian’s formulation of Trinitarian doctrine owes a large debt to his African cosmology and sense of community. *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity*, (New York: Paragon, 1994).

¹⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 176.

¹⁵ See B.Y. Quarshie, “The Bible in African Christianity: Kwame Bediako and the Reshaping of an African Heritage,” especially page 8, for more references and information on Athanasius’ use of the Coptic language. *Journal of African Christian Thought* 14.2 (2011).

interpretation, especially in the inculturation model, tends to have commonalities with some premodern interpretive strategies, and the Scripture Project intentionally seeks to recover some lessons from early Christian interpretation.

Paul Decock identifies the following characteristics and assumptions of Patristic interpretation:¹⁶

1. *Scripture as God's life giving Word for the reader.*
2. *The mysterious depth of Scripture*, including a literal and a higher spiritual meaning. Methods of allegory “forced [the literal meaning] into dialogue with contemporary experience.”¹⁷
3. *The importance of the historical meaning is relativized* (keeping in mind the next point):
4. *Scripture as God's Word for the readers in the here and now.*
5. *Understanding Scripture is not merely for information but ultimately for transformation.*
6. *The moral and religious quality of the readers affects the level of their understanding.*
7. *The task of interpretation is arduous and never exhaustive.*

Decock establishes that the starting point for the Church Fathers is the “context of God's living relationship to the readers,” and goes on to say that this is “an approach which is close to that of most ordinary readers in Africa.”¹⁸ This is Decock's only explicit comparison with contemporary interpretation in Africa; there is a basic affinity between the two in a shared fundamental assumption about the nature and purpose of Scripture. Ukpong affirms this sentiment and also foregrounds points one and four above with this conviction: “questions which inculturation

¹⁶ Paul Decock, “On the Value of Pre-Modern Interpretation of Scripture for Contemporary Biblical Studies,” *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005), 57-74.

¹⁷ “On the Value of Pre-Modern Interpretation,” 64. Decock explains how the Church Fathers thought a literal interpretation usually inferior to a spiritual one, and how the Patristic sense of literal is much different than that of biblical literalists today. Decock summarizes how fundamentalist readings are a product of modernity: “For Christians caught up in this spirit of modernity Scripture was seen as the infallible Word, in the modern sense of the word, leading to an absolutizing of the only acceptable sense of Scripture, the literal sense, which now became the historical sense.... This was very much in contrast to the traditional Christian understanding that our knowledge remains very imperfect” (65).

¹⁸ Decock, “On the Value of Premodern Interpretation,” 61.

hermeneutic seeks to wrestle with... would eventually all come to this: how to make the word of God alive and active in contemporary African societies and in the lives of individual Christians within their socio-cultural contexts.”¹⁹ The Scripture Project also assumes that God’s word is for today’s readers and the church has an active relationship with God.

Though Ukpong rarely references the Church Fathers directly, his approach closely follows several of the above descriptions of Patristic interpretation. The following chapters will draw out several of these affinities more thoroughly and specifically. *The Art of Reading Scripture* also has much in common with Patristic interpretation that will emerge in the following chapters. Thesis Seven affirms the “chain of interpreters” that inform our own readings, and “we learn from the saints the centrality of interpretive virtues for shaping wise readers.” Brian Daley’s essay in the volume specifically seeks “to reflect briefly on how, and how much, a renewed contact with patristic exegesis might help us develop our own ways of interpreting the Bible theologically, as a normative canonical whole still capable of nourishing and challenging our life of faith.”²⁰

First and second waves of encounter with the missionary Bible in sub-Saharan Africa

Though North Africa was instrumental in shaping early Christianity, sub-Saharan Africa had little contact with the Bible prior to the growth of global exploration and trade in the 1400s. While encounter with Christian countries was often negative amidst the slave trade and exploitation of natural resources that characterized these early centuries of contact between Africa and the West, this first wave of modern Christian mission to Africa did have some sense of the value of contextualization and local leadership. By 1520 there was an African bishop in the Congo, the son of a Congolese king, who had studied in Portugal. Rome’s instructions for the *Propagation of the Faith* offered in 1659 explicitly said it was “absurd” to make the introduction of European cultures primary in China, and exhorted

¹⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 4.

²⁰ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 70.

missionaries to take the faith, not European countries, to foreign lands.²¹ Even so, missionaries possessed limited understanding or ability to do this, and Ukpong describes the efforts at contextualization during this period as “superficial.”²²

The period of the 1700s into the 1900s is a second wave of missionary history in Africa, usually considered the bulk of the modern missionary movement. Protestant missionary societies sent missionaries in the hundreds of thousands to Africa in this period, and Catholic interest in missions persevered. Gerald West considers 1920-1959 a third wave in the transition from the colonial period to independent African states.²³ Both Catholic and Protestant missions increasingly focused on education in these years, and some of the most well respected primary and secondary schools, and even some universities, to this day have their roots in early 20th century missionary efforts.²⁴ Efforts to translate the Bible into local languages often went hand-in-hand with a focus on education, so that Africans would have the skills and the text to read the Bible in their own languages. Several scholars note that those educated in missionary or colonial schools sometimes became the mouthpieces of resistance. “Central... was a foundational vernacular book, the Bible, and through it, African Christianity began to “talk back” to power.”²⁵ This is in line with the work of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, who demonstrate that the translation of the Bible into African languages freed the Scriptures from missionary confinement, opening them

²¹ Quoted in Ukpong, “Contextualization: A Historical Survey,” *African Ecclesial Review* 29 (1987), 280. Whereas this 1987 article is generally sympathetic to historical efforts in contextualization, including those of the missionaries, Ukpong’s contribution to the *Global Bible Commentary*, “The Gospel According to Luke and the Mission of the Church,” published in 2004, is much more critical of missionary efforts and even of the ways that Luke’s Gospel portrays the mission to the Gentiles.

²² Ukpong, “Contextualization: A Historical Survey,” 280.

²³ Gerald West, “After the Missionaries: Historical and Hermeneutical Dimensions of African Appropriations of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 38.1 (2012).

²⁴ By way of anecdote from my time in Uganda, King’s College, Budo, an Anglican mission, remains a prestigious secondary school that has educated top government officials, both national and tribal, as well as top authors, professors, and clergy. Bishop Tucker Theological College, also Anglican, became Uganda Christian University in 1997, and in 2004 was the first private university to be chartered by the Ugandan government.

²⁵ West, “After the Missionaries,” 4. Ukpong similarly observes how Western education “rather than destroying Nigerian culture, led to the development of a Nigerian elite who started the struggle for Nigeria’s political independence—an ironic situation the missionaries themselves did not intend or foresee.” “Gospel According to Luke and the Mission of the Church,” 386.

up to African interpretation and use on their own terms, literally.²⁶ Once one admits translation, one can no longer own interpretation. Translation is a significant effort in inculturation, as Scripture is rendered in local language, that most basic purveyor of culture. Though at times translation contributes to adaptation more than thorough inculturation, to render the biblical text in local words and concepts admits the contextual character of Scripture interpretation. The historical significance of this cannot be overlooked, and the theory and theology behind translation efforts hold crucial implications for dialogue between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, justifying a short exploration of the assumptions that Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture* make about ideas of translation, contextualization, and inculturation.

Translation, Contextualization, and Inculturation

Translation: theory and implications

Inculturation hermeneutics holds that context and inculturation are basic to the Christian Scriptures. Inculturation hermeneutics not only legitimates different reception of biblical texts, but necessitates the ongoing process of inculturation: as different communities bring their own questions to the text, new perspectives and even new renderings of the text itself will emerge. The text cannot be truly known without translation and subsequent answers to new questions. It is for this reason that Kwame Bediako can say with confidence that the world needs Africa, specifically African questions put to the Bible and to Christian theology in general.²⁷ Gerald West builds on Bediako's claim, "To put it provocatively, what 'the gospel' is is yet to be

²⁶ Sanneh's definitive work is *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), and Bediako offers a similar account in *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

²⁷ "In the Bible...Africa walks on familiar Ground': Why the World Needs Africa," *AIMCAR Bulletin* 6 (2007), 32-50. Linguistic translation is not directly a major theme in Ukpong's work, but his attention to context, inculturation, and ordinary readers assumes the reality and necessity of translation. In his 2011 Kwame Bediako Memorial Lecture, B.Y. Quarshie cites with appreciation Ukpong's work on the history of biblical interpretation in Africa, but notes Ukpong's silence on language as an important factor in interpretation. (See note 12 above for reference information.) Though Quarshie's observation is worth noting, I do not think Ukpong believes language is unimportant, but Ukpong tends to assume the inclusion of language in broader categories of culture and context.

determined, for not all indigenous voices have yet been heard speaking for themselves.”²⁸ American missionary Vincent Donovan encountered this phenomenon in his missionary efforts, finding that the Masai ended up showing Donovan what the gospel means as much as Donovan showed the Masai.²⁹ Gadamer observes that translation in some sense embodies the hermeneutical task itself, as both are concerned with reading and understanding an other that is “alien in some sense.” “The translators task of re-creation differs only in degree, not qualitatively, from the general hermeneutical task presented by any text,” he says.³⁰ While missionary translators may have often failed to understand accurately the local language and culture and/or the message of the Bible that they were attempting to translate, their efforts were significant hermeneutical endeavors, trying to bridge a contemporary language and setting with those of the Bible.

The Scripture Project rarely directly engages the concepts of translation, inculturation, or contextualization,³¹ but does affirm “new imaginative readings of the texts” (commentary on Thesis Four) and acknowledges that “the narrative of Scripture is open to a future that God will give” (commentary on Thesis Nine).³² Individual essays demonstrate varying levels of attention to context. By affirming the theoretical value of new interpretations emerging out of different contexts, the Scripture Project has set itself up for dialogue with inculturation hermeneutics.

African interpretation takes root

²⁸ Gerald West, “Indigenous Biblical Hermeneutics: Voicing Continuity and Distinctiveness,” *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, Atlanta: SBL (2012), 94.

²⁹ Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978).

³⁰ Gadamer, *T&M*, 349.

³¹ I searched the Google electronic version of this book for the terms contextualize, contextualization, inculturate, and inculturation and they all came up with no results. When I searched translation, the nine results all had to do with contemporary translations of the English Bible or of other works (Athanasius, Augustine, Gabler) translated into English, including noting the authors’ own translations. Though there is no mention of translation into any other language and culture, the primary use of passages translated into English, with only secondary reference to Greek and Hebrew, indicate acknowledgement and general acceptance of using Scripture in translation.

³² *The Art*, 3, 5. The Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture reflect core affirmations of the Scripture Project about the Bible and theological interpretation. More will be said later in the chapter about these theses, and they will be treated in full in chapter six on conceptual framework.

With formal education largely in the hands of missionary and colonial powers, Africans were educated under Western paradigms throughout the majority of the 20th century, whether in Africa or abroad. Ukpong notes that Western methods of historical criticism and literary analysis were widespread in Africa by the latter portion of the 20th century, and concludes that “biblical scholarship in Africa today is...to some extent a child of these modern methods of western biblical scholarship.”³³ Even so, Ukpong traces a distinctively African history of academic biblical interpretation beginning in the 1930s. Before summarizing Ukpong’s three phases of the history of academic biblical interpretation in Africa and supplementing his view with the work of others, it will be helpful to sketch a brief overview of inculturation, as it is a key concept in the growth and development of African theology and biblical interpretation, and central to Ukpong’s own method.

Inculturation

The term inculturation was first used in the 1960s and became more widely used in the 1970s, particularly by the Society of Jesus, otherwise known as the Jesuits. The Jesuits engaged in missionary efforts since the founding of the order in the 16th century by Ignatius of Loyola, and some made efforts toward inculturation. Some Society of Jesus missionaries, like Matteo Ricci, did their best to learn local languages and cultures when they arrived in a new place to preach the gospel. Inculturation is closely connected with missions and places of recent conversion as the gospel and local culture engage and inform one another, and the term arose in these contexts. The Vatican began using the term in the 1980s, including favorable use by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*. The African Synod in 1994 addressed inculturation as one of five sub themes. Inculturation often has associations with Roman Catholic use of the term, though individuals from other church backgrounds also employ the term. The Ecumenical Association of African Theologians accepted the term in the mid 1980s.

Aylward Shorter, who has done much work on inculturation of Christianity in Africa, summarizes it as “an encounter with whole cultures,” while Chibueze Udeani describes inculturation as “a creative and lively encounter between the Message of Christ and the respective cultures of the world.” This encounter is complicated,

³³ Justin Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000), 4.

“never... a simple dialogue between the gospel and a pristine rural culture, and this is even less so today, when multicultural situations and experiences are becoming more and more common,”³⁴ and inculturation is not a “fixed method.”³⁵ It is important to note that this encounter is a dialogue—a two-directional exchange where the gospel and culture engage one another and mutually inform each other.³⁶ Peter Lokiru says, “the process of inculturation is by nature dialogical,” and describes inculturation as “a true and authentic dialogue which humbles the ‘superiority complex’ error of Christianity – especially its negative patrimony in the course of history – and elevates the ‘inferiority complex’ error that has for long been inflicted on culture and diverse contexts of African societies.”³⁷ Udeani also sees dialogue as the basic posture of inculturation, and discusses Africa in dialogue with itself, since “dialogue presupposes self-knowledge,” dialogue with the Church in a “real encounter” among equal partners, and dialogue with Christ, since Christ is the speaker and the content of the message to be inculturated.³⁸

Inculturation has always had a specifically theological sense, and has gained preference over other terms such as acculturation, enculturation, contextualization, or adaptation³⁹ since these can give the sense that the encounter produces a change only in one direction, implying that the local culture needs to accommodate to the gospel,

³⁴ Aylward Shorter, “Inculturation in Africa: The Way Forward,” *Mission and Culture*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 103.

³⁵ Chibueze Udeani, *Inculturation as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ*, (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 209.

³⁶ N. Onwu expresses the two-directional sense of inculturation well in a 1985 article [“The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa, *The Journal of Religious Thought* 41.2, 35-46] though he never uses the term inculturation. Onwu describes a “serious attempt to have the Christian faith ‘cultured’ in light of African circumstances, thereby allowing the Gospel to become relevant to the situations in which Africans live” (41). It is clear which dialogue partner must accept change first: until the Christian faith is ‘cultured’ it will have limited relevance to African cultures.

³⁷ Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation: A Dialogical Mission with Specific Reference to Africa,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 42.3-4 (2010), 65.

³⁸ Though Udeani’s arguments sometimes lack sophistication, I appreciate the insight that inculturation requires knowing and exploring one’s own horizon while engaging the perspectives of others and acknowledging real divine presence and communication.

³⁹ Ukpong does not like the term adaptation and generally assumes it implies a one-directional change, but Emmanuel Martey demonstrates that adaptation has occasionally described a two-directional challenge. Martey quotes a post-Vatican II survey on Africa that expressed desire for “Africanization of the church” and insists the church “must adapt herself to African conditions.” *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1993), 64.

without the sense that the gospel will also be shaped by this culture. Transculturation never caught on as a theological term, originating in anthropology. Ukpong sees indigenization as a general term that may take the form of inculturation or could be adaptation. Incarnation is sometimes a term or model used even in Ukpong's work, though the Vatican distanced itself from this use of the term, which is puzzling given the biblical and Christological themes of the word as well as the Vatican's adoption of "the economy of the Incarnation as a point of departure for understanding the different cultures and philosophies of people."⁴⁰ Inculturation has endured as a term describing a general approach in African theology. In the 1980s Ukpong described inculturation as "radical" in comparison with other approaches that simply assumed a Western format and procedure, even if adding African content. By 1996 inculturation had "become a household word in theological circles in Africa" but Ukpong still saw work that needed to be done, as the African church "[struggled] to create a holistic approach to inculturation."⁴¹ Over these same years Ukpong was developing a way of reading the Bible as a specific effort in inculturation, which he called inculturation hermeneutic early on, and later referred to as inculturation hermeneutics. Ukpong observed that by 2005 inculturation hermeneutics was making significant headway in decolonizing academic study of the Bible in Africa.⁴²

Ukpong and several others find evidence of inculturation in the New Testament itself, in the early church, and throughout Christian history, though the term did not come into use until the latter half of the 20th century.⁴³ Even if there are instances of inculturation throughout Christian history, Africans had to find their own way as they struggled with colonial Christianity, and continue to chart their own

⁴⁰ As quoted in Martey, *African Theology*, 66.

⁴¹ Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation: A Major Challenge to the Church in Africa Today," *African Ecclesial Review* 38 (1996), 258.

⁴² Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa," pages 32-50 in S. O. Abogunrin, ed, *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 46.

⁴³ Ukpong says, "the history of Christianity is full of milestones of inculturation." "The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 504. Fergus King explores multiple examples of inculturation within the New Testament itself throughout a number of his writings, especially in *More than a Passover: Inculturation in the Supper Narratives of the New Testament*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007). See also Joseph Osei-Bonsu's *The Inculturation of Christianity in Africa: Antecedents and Guidelines from the New Testament and Early Church* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005) for the task of inculturation in Africa situated within the practice of inculturation in the New Testament and early church.

course today. Claiming a faith that is both thoroughly African and Christian is an ongoing enterprise, as what it means to be either one is never static. Dialogue in the process of inculturation includes putting local questions to the gospel in order to get locally appropriate answers. Several authors write about Africans getting answers to questions they had not asked, and failing to get answers to their own questions, indicating failed efforts at inculturation. Desmond Tutu, for one, describes the “religious schizophrenia” of the African Christian: “The white man’s largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul; he was being given answers, and often splendid answers to questions he had not asked.”⁴⁴ Ukpong finds this disconnect between Africans and Christianity to be true in general and to include the Bible more specifically, and advocates putting African questions to the biblical text in his inculturation hermeneutics. This way of reading “has arisen in the attempt to respond to questions and issues arising from the African Christian experience with the bible which current exegetical frameworks are unable to satisfactorily handle.”⁴⁵

Gadamer agrees that interpretation is very much about dialectics of questions and answers, and perceives that the kinds of questions asked emerge out of the horizon of the interpreter. The same passage may mean very different things to different readers, who will approach the text with their own questions and thus receive answers different from one another. “The world needs Africa”⁴⁶ because the meaning potential of Scripture cannot be known without African questions put to the text, questions that will reveal new depths and dimensions of the texts left untouched by other questions. Ukpong points out that even where Africa is asking the same old questions, the same questions may reveal new answers from different approaches to old questions.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ From *Black Theology/African Theology*, as quoted in Simon Maimela, “Traditional African Anthropology and Christian Theology”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 76 (1991), 9. See also Vincent Donovan’s and John V. Taylor’s perceptions from missionary perspectives in *Christianity Rediscovered* and *The Primal Vision*.

⁴⁵ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 7-8.

⁴⁶ Kwame Bediako’s article with this phrase as the subtitle makes a version of the argument in this paragraph.

⁴⁷ “New ways of posing the question may be revealed or some light may be thrown on new approaches to the issue. Besides, African answers to old questions are bound to provide a broader understanding.” “The Emergence of African Theologies,” 535.

Modern Problems

Meanwhile, Western interpretation had its own questions to address. Gadamer articulates how and why modernist hermeneutics fall short in an exclusive focus on the historical horizon of the text, at the expense of other aspects and claims of the text. “The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true,” Gadamer says, “We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, *ie* place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves.”⁴⁸ The focus on history effectively alienates not only the Bible from theology and the descriptive task from the dogmatic one, but also the past from the present, ironically making modern hermeneutics an ahistorical enterprise. For all the focus on history, modern hermeneutics views history as a separate realm from the present, with little sense of historical connection. The ideal of objectivity, seeking truth by approaching the text as a blank slate without ties to history, context, and identity ultimately renders the reader unable to understand much of the text at all. This is because we can only understand the text based on our own pre-understandings—the very aspects of history, context, and identity that modernism sought to bracket actually provide the framework, the horizon, from which to encounter and make sense of the text. “In order to understand [the meaning and importance of the text],” explains Gadamer, “[the interpreter] must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand it at all.”⁴⁹

The hermeneutical circle of interplay between text and reader must begin somewhere. “Understanding begins...when something addresses us. This is the primary hermeneutical condition.”⁵⁰ Hermeneutics consists of the horizon of the text addressing the reader in his or her own horizon, then. Thus, it is important to make an effort to learn something about the horizon of the text—historical investigation is not a bad thing at all, only insufficient as an end in itself. Simultaneously, “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its

⁴⁸ Gadamer, *T&M*, 270.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *T&M*, 289.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *T&M*, 266.

newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."⁵¹ This "circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle, but describes an ontological structural element in understanding."⁵² It is not coincidence that the horizon of the text meets the horizon of the reader, nor is it one interpretive possibility: rather, this hermeneutical circle constitutes what happens when a text is read. This also illustrates that the act of reading and understanding is not separate from interpretation, but all of these are bound up in the hermeneutical circle and inextricable from one another. "Interpretation is not an occasional additional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation."⁵³

The legacy of the Enlightenment and the dichotomy between the historical horizon of the text and the horizon of any contemporary meaning very much remained in the Western academy even throughout the 20th century. The modern academy thought it knew what to do with history, including historical texts, of which the Bible was one among many. This dimension of the biblical text, then, was successfully preserved as legitimate for academic study, and a range of historical-critical tools prevailed for undertaking this kind of scholarship. It remained unclear what to do with any normative dimension of the text, however, described by words like inspiration, authority, revelation, or doctrine. Conversations around these dimensions of the text were largely reserved for theologians, often members of the clergy who had vested interests in theological formulations; a number of those pursuing theological studies in university contexts were ordained scholars.⁵⁴ Even with the moderate success of theologians in the academy, the modern ideal of an objective approach to the text still led many Bible scholars to bracket elements of their faith such that it was difficult to distinguish between the work of a scholar of faith and the work of one with no personal faith-related interests. Bible scholars could not afford to be theologians, or at least often believed they could not.

Theology as an academic and ecclesial discipline had its own crisis of identity, method, and purpose. Edward Farley discerns around the time of the Enlightenment a

⁵¹ Gadamer, *T&M*, 238.

⁵² Gadamer, *T&M*, 261.

⁵³ Gadamer, *T&M*, 274.

⁵⁴ Many well-known Western theologians of the 20th century were ordained and even served in chaplaincy or church ministry prior to university appointments, including Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, John Macquarrie, Edward Scillebeeckx, Hans Kung, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and David Tracy.

loss of a sense of *theologia*—what I might describe as faith seeking understanding—in both personal knowledge and as discipline or more formal inquiry.⁵⁵ Whereas this concept united and guided theological reflection and inquiry throughout medieval times, the Enlightenment’s eschewal of faith made this posture of faith seeking understanding an indefensible unifying factor in theological undertakings. The elevation of objectivity, combined with a desire to categorize academic disciplines with their proper boundaries, led to the disintegration of a sense of *theologia*, and instead saw what Farley describes as a four-fold paradigm emerge, where theological studies accepts the breakdown of the theological enterprise into biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology.⁵⁶ There was no longer a sense of what binds them together; the branches of theology were often alienated from one another and even from their own goals and purposes. The Bible became one source or area of theological reflection, its relation to a broader theological enterprise increasingly uncertain. Theology allowed itself to become a clerical endeavor, consisting largely of content for professional training, losing a sense of organic reflection on the Christian life rooted in the larger life of the church. The church became alienated from theology and, sadly and ironically, clergy alienated from the church by virtue of their specialized theological training. Thus several entities—the church, the clergy, the Bible, and the discipline of theology—held unclear and tenuous relationships with one another. In the absence of a coherent identity and purpose internally, the community of Christian faith was also increasingly unsure of the proper relationship with the world outside the faith. The church lacked clarity regarding what it is the community of faith has to offer the world, and thus the search for relevance gained momentum even as conviction and vision as to what this meant became all the more obscured.

⁵⁵ Edward Farley, *The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

⁵⁶ David Kelsey posits that the goal of modern higher education, in shifting from the ancient focus on virtue to a narrower focus on research and professionalism, also contributed to this fracturing of theological disciplines. Certain categories of theological studies passed the modern test to remain academic disciplines, but theology as a whole was a casualty. See Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

History of Academic Biblical Interpretation in Africa

Academic biblical studies and theology have almost always had a close affinity in Africa, much different than in the West. Writing in the mid-1980s, N. Onwu often conflates theology and biblical studies in his survey of “biblical studies in Africa,” describing Imasogie’s *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* as “a new approach to *biblical interpretation* in the context of Africa’s experience and self-understanding.”⁵⁷ Onwu summarizes the theological premises with which Africans should approach Scripture in such a way that it is clear Onwu views contextual interpretation of the Bible *to be* Christian theology, even if this is not all that theology is to Onwu. Even with this frequent affinity between theology and biblical studies, African scholars have always pursued their own directions, and as early as 1969 Charles Nyamiti said, “An absolutely uniform African theology is an undesirable fiction.”⁵⁸

Ukpong’s phases of African academic biblical studies

Ukpong identifies three general phases of African academic interpretation in a 2000 article entitled, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions.”⁵⁹ He summarizes the three phases as follows:

⁵⁷ N. Onwu, “The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 41.2 (1985), 45, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ As quoted in Camillus Lymo’s “Quest for Relevant African Theology: Towards an Ujamma Theology” *African Ecclesial Review* 18.3 (1976), 134.

⁵⁹ See note 32 for full citation. Knut Holter offers a similar three-phase chronology of Old Testament scholarship in Africa, with the first phase consisting of “background” years of the 1960s and 70s, when independence movements and the founding of seminaries and universities proliferated and there was increasing interest in African religion, languages, and cultures. Much comparison work on Africa and the Bible emerged during this phase. In the second phase of “breakthrough” years of the 1980s and 90s, much growth in Old Testament scholarship occurred in Africa, Holter summarizes, though this largely academic growth did not always connect meaningfully with ordinary African Christians. Holter sees inculturation hermeneutical approaches making efforts to take the African context seriously throughout both of these phases, though in the 80s and 90s there was increasing interest in traditional exegesis and less focus, for some scholars, on contextual concerns. Holter finally offers some comments on the future of biblical studies in Africa upon the turn of the millennium, hoping to see increased publication and attention to African contexts. Technological advancement, he hopes, will lead to increased resources and conversation. “Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan

Phase I (1930s-70s): reactive and apologetic, focused on legitimising African religion and culture, dominated by the comparative method.

Phase II (1970s-90s): reactive-proactive, use of African context as a *resource* for biblical interpretation, dominated by inculturation-evaluative method and liberation hermeneutics (black theology).

Phase III (1990s): proactive, recognition of the *ordinary reader*, African context as *subject* of biblical interpretation, dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies.

1930s-1970s

Early academic interpretation, comprising Ukpong's first phase, was largely reactive, engaging missionary history and offering alternatives. Ukpong posits a definition of comparative studies that adopts a framework from comparative religions, bringing African religion and culture alongside religion and culture in the biblical text, often with the theological conclusion that African history and identity served as a preparation for the gospel.⁶⁰ With a narrow understanding of comparative studies, Ukpong implies that a strictly comparative paradigm offered no further theological implications for contemporary Africa,⁶¹ but successfully challenged interpretations that marginalized or demonized African history and culture. As far as these studies addressed the Bible in light of African contexts and questions, however, I would maintain that they were in some sense doing constructive theology. An apologetic approach can itself be constructive—Christian theology often emerges out of apologetic contexts, and even if written for non-Christians, serves to further and deepen Christian understanding—thus even if these comparative studies, functioning as apologies, were primarily written for non-Africans, they deepened African claims

Africa North of the Limpopo River,” pages 54-71 in Gerald West and Musa Dube, eds, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁶⁰ The first of these studies was Joseph John Williams' *Hebrewism of West Africa*, published in 1930, which explores similarities between the Hebrew and Ashanti languages. Kwesi Dickson did comparative studies between the Old Testament and African contexts; John Mbiti did a study of eschatology in the New Testament and African concepts.

⁶¹ Nyirenda describes comparative efforts as “merely apologetic and polemical...their value merely heuristic.” “Familiar Ground: Origins and Trajectories of African Biblical Scholarship” pages 80-96 in Stephen R. Goodwin, ed, *World Christianity in Local Context*, (London: Continuum, 2009), 87. Ukpong also uses these adjectives, but maintains a tone of more appreciation than does Nyirenda.

on the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and embodied and illuminated the very theological claim that the Bible is for Africa and Africans. Others have a more inclusive sense of what constitutes comparative studies, extending the notion to include any biblical interpretation that brings the Bible and Africa into conversation with one another. In this more inclusive sense, much of African interpretation is comparative even beyond this first phase, including more recent inculturation efforts.⁶²

1970s-1990s

Following this first phase, African biblical interpretation began to demonstrate a proactive stance that addressed the particulars of African contexts, manifesting in liberation and feminist readings, while maintaining a largely reactive posture. Black theology in South Africa proliferated at this time, and scholars in other places took up liberation themes as well, including Canaan Banana of Zimbabwe and Jean-Marc Ela of Cameroon. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was among the first female theologians in Africa, and advocated for the inclusion of women over the decades. In 1982 she published an article entitled, “Feminism: A Pre-Condition for a Christian Anthropology” and she remains the Director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary through the present time. Other female and feminist theologians followed Oduyoye, and in 1989 the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians formed.

In this second phase Ukpong also identifies precursors of the inculturation approach expressed in instances of Africa-in-the-Bible and evaluative studies. Ukpong does not specify how he sees inculturation at work, but he does explain how these studies identified both Africa influencing the Bible (on the historical level of the actual canonized text) and the Bible influencing Africa. Evaluative studies “focus on the encounter between African religion and culture and the Bible” and resulting theological implications.⁶³ Along with Emmanuel Martey and others, Ukpong identifies a basic weakness of these evaluative studies in that they “focused narrowly on the cultural-religious dimension” at the expense of “dialogue with the critical

⁶² Gerald West’s article, “Shifting Perspectives on the Comparative Paradigm in (South) African Biblical Scholarship” [*Religion and Theology* 12/1 (2005)] adopts this more inclusive sense, and Samuel Muindi’s dissertation characterizes inculturation hermeneutics as an example of a new comparative approach, discontinuous with the older model Ukpong describes in the first phase.

⁶³ Ukpong, “Developments,” 9.

issues raised by political and economic factors of the continent.”⁶⁴ Ukpong acknowledges, however, that evaluative studies extended the importance of African culture and religion beyond preparation for the gospel and established them overtly as “*indispensable resources in the interpretation of the gospel message and in the development of African Christianity.*”⁶⁵

Scholars often differentiate between inculturation and liberation paradigms of African interpretation, and indeed they have been cast in opposition to one another at times.⁶⁶ Emmanuel Martey’s work treats the two thematically and in terms of content, which leads Martey to demonstrate that while the two are often viewed as competing theological paradigms, they have important commonalities. Martey explains that they both seek “an epistemological break... from Western cultural assumptions and intellectual framework,” and both look to “[understand] African cultural-political reality and [to interpret] this reality in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so as to bring about transformation of the oppressive status quo.”⁶⁷ Thus Martey envisions “a synthesis between these seemingly conflicting approaches.”⁶⁸ Gerald West’s distinction between inculturation and liberation, while not contradicting Martey’s characterization, is more geographically and methodologically focused: West describes southern African concerns as socio-political while religio-cultural interests prevail farther north in sub-Saharan Africa. Simeon O. Ilesanmi admits the two appear “distinguishable by regions, gender, and socio-political concerns,” but sees a

⁶⁴ Martey, *African Theology*, 8.

⁶⁵ Ukpong, “Developments,” 11, emphasis in original. Nyirenda (in “Familiar Ground”) maintains the characterization of Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics under evaluative studies, though Ukpong obviously wants to add “attention to social, economic, and political issues” he sees as missing in most evaluative studies of this period.

⁶⁶ Liberationists have faulted inculturation for failing to work toward practical, political change, instead remaining on a level of abstraction. Jean-Marc Ela and Desmond Tutu are among those who found the inculturation efforts of the 1970s and 80s insufficient. Liberation theology also has its critics, and may place too much emphasis on the political front and even be in danger of repeating the colonial mistake of “uniting God’s glory and Caesar’s power,” as Ilesanmi puts it in “Inculturation and Liberation: Christian Social Ethics and the African Theology Project,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (January 1995), 58.

⁶⁷ Martey, *African Theology*, 56, 55.

⁶⁸ Martey, *African Theology*, 69.

basic affinity between the two, finding “the central theme of inculturation theology is then itself a theme of liberation.”⁶⁹

During this time Ukpong was already beginning to pursue a synthesis between the two: in the 1990s inculturation hermeneutics fused the attention given to African religio-cultural issues by earlier inculturation models, as well as spoke to social issues like poverty and oppression, usually the realm of liberation readings and often neglected by previous inculturation efforts. Ukpong describes the 1990s as a period where African interpretation began to assert itself in a “decidedly proactive” manner, with inculturation hermeneutics characterized by 1) making the African context the *subject* of interpretation, and 2) taking seriously the contributions of ordinary readers in academic biblical studies, while 3) adopting a “*holistic approach to culture*” whereby both the secular and the religious aspects of culture are seen to be interconnected and as having implications one for the other, and the Bible is read within the religious as well as the economic, social, and political contexts of Africa.”⁷⁰

1990s to present

Inculturation hermeneutics builds on the strengths and concerns of the approaches of prior phases, and has emerged as a major form of biblical interpretation in Africa. It remains among those at the forefront, propelling African biblical interpretation and African theology more generally to maturity. Part of the growing maturity of African biblical interpretation is an ability to move beyond the reactive, apologetic, or militant postures of earlier phases and pursue a uniquely African course. Earlier comparative approaches and liberationist readings often assumed a primary interlocutor that was somehow an outsider, perhaps appropriate for reacting to missionaries and other forms of oppression or patriarchy. Inculturation hermeneutics has certainly not lost sight of the fact that biblical interpretation remains part of a global conversation; however, in its maturity, inculturation hermeneutics articulates and pursues its own priorities and goals with Africa and African contexts and peoples as the primary interlocutor, while remaining open to dialogue with other perspectives, both within Africa and outside of Africa. The characteristics of holistic approach to culture, the priority of ordinary readings, and Africa as the subject of

⁶⁹ Samuel Ilesanmi, “Inculturation and Liberation,” 51, 52.

⁷⁰ Ukpong, “Developments,” 16, emphasis in original.

interpretation indicate the priorities and agendas that inculturation hermeneutics has set for itself as it seeks to make a positive impact in the realities of African communities. Later chapters will further explore these characteristics.

African scholars in the third millennium have different views of inculturation hermeneutics and its prevalence and promise. In an article on “an emerging paradigm” in black and African theology in the year 2000, Tinyiko Sam Maluleke brushes over inculturation as one current of “Cold-war era African theology” and never mentions Ukpong at all in his survey of African theology and hermeneutics. Musa Dube, while generally sharing Maluleke’s tendency to underappreciate Ukpong and his work on inculturation hermeneutics (in my opinion), writes five years after Maluleke’s article that “the bulk of African scholarship is still focusing on inculturation hermeneutics.”⁷¹ Thus two scholars, both of whom want to move beyond Ukpong’s inculturation strategies for their own reasons, have much different takes on the importance and prevalence of inculturation hermeneutics in the early 2000s. The slippery nature of the categories and characterization of African theologies and hermeneutical strategies leads to disparate takes on what qualifies as “liberation,” “inculturation,” “comparative,” etc. and thus to different conclusions about the breadth and depth of each. However one understands and organizes the growth of African theology and biblical studies up to the present, the following observation by Maluleke is timely by many accounts:

The question of hermeneutics has been thrust to the fore and many African theological approaches have bidden farewell to hermeneutical innocence and have begun to take conscious responsibility for this important and complex task of hermeneutics, not only in relation to the Bible but also in relation to the social reality in which African Christians find themselves.⁷²

⁷¹ Musa Dube, “Circle Readings of the Bible/Scriptures,” pages 77-96 in Johannes A. Smit and P. Pratap Kumar, eds, *Study of Religion in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of G.C. Oosthuizen* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 81. As suggested in this chapter, some forms of feminist or other liberationist hermeneutics could be characterized as inculturation; Dube’s own work is surely indebted to inculturation insights and methods.

⁷² Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An Emerging Paradigm of Post-Cold War and Post-Apartheid Black and African Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000), 32.

While Maluleke may not see inculturation hermeneutics as lending itself toward that description, Ukpong's work evidences each part of it, and inculturation is an important contributor to African biblical interpretation finding itself "on the threshold of maturity as we enter the third millennium."⁷³

Trajectories of Modernity

Meanwhile, biblical studies in the West also continued to pursue its own course. The alienation of the Bible from theology meant issues and questions for both disciplines, and a range of attempts try to remedy or clarify each, often in relation to the other. The following efforts contributed to the rise of theological interpretation in the vein of *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

Biblical theology as objective, historical project

The neutral, historical character of the biblical theology project of Gabler, Wrede, and Stendahl remains a viable and attractive option for some. Heikki Räisänen, for one, explicitly appeals to Wrede in his own proposal for two different projects to replace the older project of New Testament theology. Räisänen envisions one trajectory pursuing "a history of early Christian thought" from a disinterested, neutral perspective, and the other consisting of work on the New Testament and its influence "from a philosophical perspective informed by modern awareness of religious pluralism."⁷⁴ The problems that plague biblical studies, believes Räisänen and others, often spring from a failure of the discipline to pursue the neutral project set out by Wrede, with theological and ecclesial interests muddying the biblical waters.

⁷³ Ukpong, "Developments," 3.

⁷⁴ The first quote in this sentence is Räisänen's own description, the second a summary by Richard Hays. Both found in Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1.1 (2007), 7. Hays also references Michael V. Fox, an Old Testament scholar who believes faith-based study "cannot contribute" to academic Bible scholarship, and Wayne Meeks, who wants biblical studies to abandon any role of teaching for the church.

Bridging the divide

A range of efforts attempt to bridge the divide between biblical studies and theology, each with their own reasons and methods. Karl Barth from a theological position and Rudolph Bultmann from the biblical studies side often receive credit for bolstering perspectives that make theological interests inextricable from biblical studies, and vice versa, even if this is an overly simple summary of their respective projects. These contemporaries had vastly different approaches to the Bible and to theology, but both sought to demonstrate how and why the Bible could be useful for the modern person or community of faith, and scholars of both theology and biblical studies have continued to read the Bible as a constructive tool for modern life.

Canonical approach

Brevard Childs challenges the “iron curtain between the past and the present” from a canonical perspective, arguing in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* that such a divide “is an inadequate division for studying the Bible as the church’s Scripture.”⁷⁵ When Childs addresses biblical theology he envisions something much different than what Gabler and his successors mean by the term: for Gabler, biblical theology is the theology contained in the books of the Bible, derived from a historical-critical study of the text and the world behind it, a purely descriptive task with content that has little relevance for today (a historical approach). Childs’ proposal for biblical theology consists of theological interpretation of Scripture that assumes the whole of the canon and its disclosure of divine reality has constructive importance for the church (a hermeneutical approach). Mary Calloway summarizes that this approach effectively “moved the quest for the locus of biblical authority from the Bible’s content to its shape,” implying Childs’ lack of patience for the proof-texting biblicism of American fundamentalism.⁷⁶ The canonical approach Childs undertakes treats Scripture in its historical and ecclesial tradition, seeking to contemporize it for the church by way of informed exegesis, making wide use of the historical-critical tools of the academy. Childs’ desire to treat the Bible as the church’s Scripture and as object of historical-

⁷⁵ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 141-42.

⁷⁶ Mary Calloway, “Canonical Criticism,” pages 142-155 in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, eds, *To Each Its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, revised and expanded edition, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 145.

critical study has certainly had its critics from all directions, but his legacy endures in scholars that intentionally have one foot in the church and the other in the academy, believing everyone is richer for it.

Multiple scholars influenced by Childs, adopting a version of a canonical approach for their own work, are worth brief mention. English scholar Francis Watson is a scholar outside the United States associated with theological interpretation;⁷⁷ Watson takes up a biblical theology project that makes theological use of hermeneutics, exploring a “doctrine of Scripture...in a more contemporary theological idiom.”⁷⁸ Stephen Fowl, who studied under Childs, was an early proponent of theological interpretation. In *Engaging Scripture*, Fowl traces the professionalization and fragmentation of the disciplines of biblical studies and theology, noting some who have challenged and problematized this reality, and then offers a proposal for theological interpretation that seeks to overcome this separation.⁷⁹ *Engaging Scripture* offers multiple examples of how this model might work, actually engaging in interpretation of specific biblical passages. Fowl remains among those at the forefront of theological interpretation, having written a simple introductory volume on *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* and co-authoring *Reading Scripture with the Church*.⁸⁰ Fowl and Gerald West occasionally engage one another’s work; in his engagement with West and recognition of Mosala’s work, at

⁷⁷ Werner Jeanrond of Germany, Master of St. Benet’s Hall at Oxford since 2012, is another important figure outside the United States. Jeanrond earned his Ph.D at the University of Chicago and studied with David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur. See especially *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and *Text und Interpretation als Kategorien theologischen Denkens*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), English edition: *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson, (New York: Crossroad, 1988). Jeanrond wants to uphold a critical component in hermeneutics, and has criticized Gadamer and even Tracy for failing to admit or adequately address a critical component.

⁷⁸ Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why they need each other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 12.2 (2010), 126. Though this quote is in context of this article, it also summarizes well the overall thrust of his work, in my estimation, including his *Text, Church, and World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 and *Text and Truth*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997.

⁷⁹ Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998).

⁸⁰ Stephen Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009). Stephen Fowl, Francis Watson, Kevin Vanhoozer, and A. K. M. Adam, eds, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

least by way of footnote, Fowl demonstrates a willingness to cross the borders of scholarly communities more easily than most of the other Western scholars mentioned in this chapter.

Narrative approach

Childs taught at Yale for many years, but is not primarily associated with the trajectory of narrative theology, sometimes called the “Yale School.”⁸¹ The turn to narrative, however, is a parallel effort to recover a coherent and integrated view of Scripture in the life of the church. Hans Frei demonstrates the importance of the narrative character of Scripture, and George Lindbeck casts doctrine as the rules of a particular faith, operating akin to grammatical rules, governing community practice and evolving with it, serving as part of the narrative framework of community identity. A focus on the narrative of the Christian faith, both historically in God’s redemptive action and as *our* story as contemporary Christians, has served as framework for scholarly endeavors in a range of fields.⁸²

⁸¹ Both the canonical and the narrative approach see Christian identity shaped by the traditions and stories of the community. Childs’ main contention with the narrative focus of his Yale colleagues concerns reference: Childs wants to preserve a reality to which the story refers, whereas the postliberal Yale School tends to focus more on the formative power of the narrative itself. George Lindbeck contributes an essay in honor of Childs that explores how Childs’ work can be “accommodated... clarified... strengthened... embraced and enhanced” by scholars interpreting Scripture for “narrationally structured symbolic worlds,” typified by Richard Hays (editor of *The Art of Reading Scripture*) in the lineage of the Yale School, and by an interest in “authorial discourse,” like the impressive philosophical work done by Nicholas Wolterstorff. “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval,” pages 26-51 in Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, eds, *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard Childs*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁸² Stanley Hauerwas is representative of efforts in theological ethics, while others have made use of a narrative framework in other disciplines. A similar theme of narrative has additional proponents as well, not originating directly with the Yale School, including the philosophy of Alistair MacIntyre, Lesslie Newbigin’s approach to missions, Charles Gerkin’s work in pastoral theology, and many others. N.T. Wright is a well-known New Testament scholar who has adopted this kind of narrative framework for biblical studies, though there are numerous others who share similar approaches.

Some scholars utilize narrative primarily as a literary category rather than a cultural-linguistic framework for particular forms of life. David Gunn’s survey chapter on narrative criticism, for example, takes this approach and in so doing never mentions the Yale School. Even Frei’s book does not make Gunn’s short list for further reading at the end of his chapter. Thus narrative approaches to Scripture adopt several forms and purposes, and the Yale School much more than the literary-critical

Kevin Vanhoozer is an evangelical theologian who wants to reclaim the centrality of Scripture for the doctrine and life of the church.⁸³ Vanhoozer's efforts make use of narrative, drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* as well as Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic typology, in addition to a sense of canon indebted to Childs. He lands on what he calls a canonical-linguistic approach to theology, an approach that prioritizes Scripture as divine communicative act and relativizes Lindbeck's emphasis on the framework of the Christian community, though Vanhoozer appreciates the importance of ecclesial practice.

David Tracy, a Roman Catholic theologian who studied under Paul Ricoeur and spent most of his career at the University of Chicago Divinity School, is also interested in narrative, but takes it in different directions than does the Yale School.⁸⁴ Rather than constructing Christian community around a Christian story absorbed in the biblical narrative, Tracy sees narrative as a more loosely useful category for theological reflection and identity formation. Tracy does not emphasize one Christian narrative so much as he recognizes the *Plurality and Ambiguity*⁸⁵ of interpretive traditions. Tracy makes a less severe distinction between church and world than does the Yale School or Childs (though Watson and Fowl prefer more engagement with resources and insights outside the community of faith than Childs seems to). Tracy emphasizes value in narrative conversation, listening to the stories of others: "There is no...tradition of interpretation that does not ultimately live by the quality of its conversation," he writes.⁸⁶ Tracy describes the Bible as classic texts that resist domestication and challenge readers by their otherness. His article "On Reading the

work that Gunn summarizes uses narrative as a way to reconnect the Bible with theology and the life of the church. Gunn's chapter, "Narrative Criticism," is pages 201-229 in McKenzie and Haynes, eds, *To Each Its Own Meaning*.

⁸³ Vanhoozer was raised evangelical, and he and I share an undergraduate *alma mater* in Westmont College, a non-denominational institution with a reformed, evangelical heritage. Vanhoozer has spent most of his teaching career at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, with stints at the University of Edinburgh and Wheaton College.

⁸⁴ George Lindbeck characterizes Tracy's work under the "experiential expressive" model in *The Nature of Doctrine*—not at all a compliment. Tracy prefers to characterize his own work as "correlational" and likewise criticizes Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model. Tracy is able to appreciate insights gained from the work of Lindbeck and Frei, however, and sympathetically references their work at times as well.

⁸⁵ The title of a 1987 book—see next note for reference details.

⁸⁶ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), ix.

Scriptures Theologically” imagines the fruitfulness of a multiplicity of Christian readings of Scripture based on the “plain sense” of especially the passion narratives, but including other portions of Scripture as well, and the common confession of the Christian faith, which he renders, “I [we] believe in Jesus Christ with the apostles.”⁸⁷

Canon and narrative in inculturation

As a Roman Catholic, Ukpong naturally reads the Bible as canon—Scripture in tradition. His sense of canon is likely indebted not so much to the academic work of canonical criticism, but emerges from his catechesis in the church. Patristic interpretation tended to assume unity between the Testaments, and Ukpong operates with a similar framework. With narrative approaches, Ukpong appreciates the importance of stories for community identity, solidarity, and transformation, and directly references Hauerwas.⁸⁸ As expected, Ukpong explicitly makes the transformative relationship between the biblical story and community a reciprocal

⁸⁷ Bruce D. Marshall, ed, *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1992), 35-68. Tracy explains the importance of the plain sense of the passion narratives in the following passage: “Any Christian theology which confesses its faith in the presence of Jesus Christ (and the Spirit released by Christ) ‘with the apostles’ will always need the plain sense of these narratives to achieve what neither symbol *alone*, nor doctrine *alone*, nor conceptual theology *alone*, nor confession *alone*, can achieve: a theological clarification of how the reality of Christ’s presence is manifested through the identity of that Jesus rendered in the realistic, history-like narrative of the passion and resurrection, a narrative of this one unsubstitutable Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ of God” (42).

⁸⁸ Ukpong seems to appreciate both discreet stories taken from the pages of Scripture as well as an overarching sense of the whole of the biblical witness as one unified story. Vincent Wimbush makes the point that for often illiterate African-Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “the ‘letters’ of the biblical texts were not crucial in their appropriation and redaction of Christian traditions. What became important was the *telling* and *retelling*, the hearing and rehearing of biblical stories—stories of perseverance, of strength in weakness and under oppressive burdens, of hope in hopeless situations. To these stories, African-Americans related,” and though the oppressive burdens of Africans on the continent may have been different than the burdens of the legacy of slavery in America, Africans surely related to the same biblical stories in similar ways. “Biblical historical study as liberation: Toward an Afro-Christian Hermeneutic” *Journal of Religious Thought* 42.2 (1985-86), 10-11. Like Ukpong, Bediako, too, assumes a sense of canon (“Scripture is the road map interpreting our spiritual journey,” he says, for example) and finds it helpful to think of Scripture as our story, in an overarching sense beyond the words of the Bible itself. Cf. “Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4.1 (June 2001).

one, insisting that the biblical story shapes contemporary life *and* the text is reshaped in the very act of interpretation.⁸⁹ Ukpong draws on Tracy's work for the senses in which theologians are public intellectuals in society, the academy, and the church. He also attributes his use of the idea that there is no innocent text to David Tracy, at least the first time he puts it in writing.⁹⁰ Ukpong also describes the Bible as a sacred classic in more than one publication, similar to language Tracy uses, though Ukpong never references Tracy for this idea, as far as I have found. Notions of no innocent text and the Bible as sacred classic are useful to Ukpong in themselves, but I wonder if some of what Ukpong likes about Tracy is even further hidden in Ukpong's work—perhaps Ukpong draws on some of Tracy's particular ideas because he likes Tracy's preference for the poor and focus on hope, as well as the priority Tracy gives to conversation in the reality of pluralism.

Other approaches with theological potential

The canonical and narrative approaches directly contribute to theological hermeneutics as understood and practiced by the Scripture Project, but there are other strategies to biblical interpretation that relativize the historical-critical method and open up potential for more theological readings. The attention given to genre, structure, plot, characters, context, allusion, and other textual features by literary approaches can offer interpretive possibilities of a theological nature, or of a socio-historical nature different from what historical-critical conclusions offer. Similarly, semiotics can help draw out intertextual features and explore what written statements actually do or achieve.

While literary and semiotic approaches are not often found in African interpretation, Ukpong demonstrates openness toward a range of strategies and resources, and his work on parables utilizes literary tools even while reading with ordinary readers. In terms of the Scripture Project, *The Art of Reading Scripture* also demonstrates occasional use of literary analysis. Co-editor Richard Hays makes more thorough use of literary and semiotic theory in other work of his outside this

⁸⁹ See Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities" *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 157-58.

⁹⁰ Cf. Ukpong, "Rereading," 6. There are other places Ukpong subsequently uses the idea of no innocent text.

collection.⁹¹ The ends toward which Ukpong and the Scripture Project employ literary analysis may at times be different—this will be revisited in the later chapter on procedure.

Postmodern

Impulses that find the quest for objectivity and certainty unsatisfactory extend the modern questioning of authority to question the intellectual hegemony of modernist epistemology itself.⁹² In the contemporary academy, objectivity has largely given way to perspectivism and subjectivism, or at least a recognition that culture, context, and identity are undeniable factors in the search for knowledge and its comprehension. Such trends that challenge the assumptions of the Enlightenment and the epistemology of modernity, often described as postmodern, afford new challenges and opportunities for academic study of the Bible. The recognition that complete objectivity is unachievable, coupled with an interest in reading from different perspectives and traditions is a positive development that allows (at least theoretically) for a range of voices to emerge. The toppling of any notion of one objective meaning in the text also poses challenges to biblical interpretation: are all interpretations equally valid? Do interpretations emerge out of differences in culture and identity that cannot be overcome? Study of literature beyond the Bible faces similar challenges, and biblical studies often reckons with literary theory in some way.

Inculturation hermeneutics in postmodern and postcolonial times

What might postmodern and postcolonial trends mean for African biblical scholarship and other interpretive efforts that have historically occupied the margins? On one hand, over the last several years the number of publications by scholars who are in some sense on the margin have greatly increased, and this is in large part due to the postmodern and postcolonial realities and impulses in the academy that have made way for such publications. On the other hand, Knut Holter cautions, “postcolonial

⁹¹ Cf. Hays’ *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, (New Haven: Yale, 1986).

⁹² Much ink has been spilled on how best to describe the turn toward subjectivity and relativism that both extended and challenged the foundations of modernist epistemology; while this is not the place for a discussion about postmodern, hypermodern, and other such descriptions, I recognize both a break from the modernist agenda and in some ways an extension of it.

biblical interpretation hardly is any *shibboleth* by which African and other examples of marginalized scholarship suddenly can be allowed into the promised land of scholarly recognition,”⁹³ and Field sharply critiques, “the postmodern turn in theology continues to reflect the interest and context of the North Atlantic middle class...The very openness to the other claimed by postmodernity arises from an economic system that continues to exploit, marginalize, and abandon the poor and vulnerable.”⁹⁴ Thus while postmodern and postcolonial trends have to some degree opened up spaces for minority scholars, the contemporary academy is far from free of ethnocentrism and exploitation. Inculturation hermeneutics may find space from which to dialogue with partners like the Scripture Project, but does well to remain cautious about the remaining challenges.

Theological Interpretation

Out of a postmodern milieu and influenced by the trajectories of modernity outlined earlier in this chapter emerges theological interpretation of Scripture as one strategy for negotiating the uncertainties surrounding text and interpretation(s). While theological interpretation is certainly connected with the history of biblical interpretation in the West, including being steeped in modern methodologies and shaped by a postmodern context, theological interpretation tends to have an ambivalent, ad hoc relationship with both modern methods and postmodern trends. Kendall Soulen identifies a “postcritical” theological interpretation that grants the usefulness of historical criticism but not its exclusive validity, fusing premodern methods with modern acknowledgements such as the diversity present within Scripture as well as the postcolonial recognition of the possibility of ideological distortion.⁹⁵ Christopher Spinks admits that, “theological interpretation has a distinct dependence on certain postmodern perspectives...finding its bearings in a world that

⁹³ Knut Holter, “Some recent studies on postcolonialism and biblical scholarship,” *Newsletter on African OT Scholarship* 5 (Nov 1998).

⁹⁴ David N. Field, “On (Re)Centering the Margins: A Euro-African perspective on the option for the poor,” pages 45-69 in Joerg Rieger, ed, *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 50.

⁹⁵ Kendall Soulen, “The Believer and the Historian: Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation” *Interpretation* 57.2 (2003), 174-86.

has overturned many of the modernist ideals.” Theological interpretation “does not, however, wholly find its rooting in postmodernity.”⁹⁶

While various scholars in theological interpretation may acknowledge debts to modern or postmodern methods or content, an undisputed focus is on the theological character of Scripture and its interpretation. Soulen’s description of postcritical theological interpretation as Chalcedonian captures the dual sense of Scripture that characterizes theological interpretation, admitting both human and divine nature of the text.⁹⁷ Spinks summarizes how this dual sense underpins the use of historical critical tools, “From an epistemological stance, interpretation must continue to engage questions of history, grammar, culture, and the like because of the conviction that at every stage, from writing to collecting to reading, humans and their history are involved. Christian readers, from a theological perspective, are obliged to encounter these same questions because of the belief that God acted and acts by God’s Word coming and God’s Spirit residing in history.”⁹⁸ Theological interpretation, then, relativizes tools of modernity or postmodernity, subjecting them to the human/divine nature of the biblical text. The horizon of theological interpretation seeks to integrate premodern insights with modern methods and postmodern sensitivities.

With its focus on the theological nature of Scripture, it is easy to see why Karl Barth often receives credit for an early role in contemporary theological interpretation, even being “an important patriarch of theological interpretation of Scripture.”⁹⁹ Barth, a stickler for starting with God, saw Schleiermacher’s alternatives to historical-critical methods as anthropocentric.¹⁰⁰ Primary is not our understanding

⁹⁶ Christopher Spinks, “Theological Interpretation: Some Traits, A Key, and a List” in the April 2009 issue of *Catalyst*.

<http://www.catalystresources.org/issues/354Spinks2.htm>.

⁹⁷ Soulen, “The Believer and the Historian.”

⁹⁸ Spinks, “Theological Interpretation: Some Traits, A Key, and a List.”

⁹⁹ Hans Madueme, “Theological Interpretation after Barth,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.1 (2009), 143.

¹⁰⁰ Due to Barth’s insistence on starting with God, and the impetus of contextual theology to begin with context, “Barthian theology and contextual theology tend to be construed as theological antipodes,” explains David Congdon, but Congdon finds this “unfortunate,” and sees “unexplored possibilities here for mutual enrichment and ecumenical understanding that could have immense implications for the mission of the church in the twenty-first century.” “Afterword: The Future of Conversing with Barth,” pages 255-278 in W. Travis McMaken and David W. Congdon, eds, *Karl Barth in Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 258. This thesis attempts to contribute to such mutual enrichment.

or experience of God or Scripture, but rather God's self-revelation. The Bible is about God, and the best way to understand various parts of the Bible is to read the parts out of this sense of the whole—a theological understanding shapes historical and grammatical details, rather than vice versa. Barth's recovery of patristic sensibilities, including a notion that understanding Scripture demands the participation and self-sacrifice of the reader, also anticipates contemporary theological interpretation.

All of this sets the scene for the Scripture Project and its publication, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, within broader trends of theological interpretation. From the beginning of *The Art of Reading Scripture*, the Scripture Project affirms the human and divine character of the Bible in the Nine Theses. The Theses and their explanations acknowledge "the voices of many different witnesses" in the human element of the Bible, as well as emphasizing that "Scripture truthfully tells the story of God's action" in its theological character.¹⁰¹ The introduction to the publication, as well as the essays themselves, evidence use of modern and postmodern tools subjected to the theological character of the Bible and its interpretation. The introduction to the volume situates it immediately and explicitly in a postmodern ethos, admitting, "in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place."¹⁰² Broader Western culture and the church experience this uncertainty, as well as the academy. More specific to the academic thrust of the Scripture Project, the aim of the group "was to overcome the fragmentation of our theological disciplines by reading Scripture together" with specialties in Old Testament, New Testament, systematic and historical theology, as well as parish ministry.¹⁰³ The introduction also distances the endeavor from modernist methods, as the group came to think of reading Scripture as an art, "a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, in contrast to the Enlightenment's ideal of detached objectivity."¹⁰⁴

A Postcolonial and Globalized World

Simply by being African interpretation, inculturation hermeneutics inhabits postcolonial space. Inculturation hermeneutics does not intentionally prioritize the

¹⁰¹ *The Art*, 1.

¹⁰² *The Art*, xiv.

¹⁰³ *The Art*, xv.

¹⁰⁴ *The Art*, xv.

postcolonial portion of African contexts at the expense of any other contextual description, however. Ukpong does not often explicitly take up postcolonialism in his own work, though he does at times speak of decolonizing African readings by making them *African* readings and not simply a recasting of Western methods. Informed readers of his work find that he inhabits a postcolonial reality and addresses it as part of his inculturation approach. Ukpong would likely be comfortable categorizing postcolonial interpretation under a larger inculturation paradigm,¹⁰⁵ though others see it the other way around, dubbing inculturation “a species of postcolonial discourse.”¹⁰⁶ The larger “revolution” under which Ukpong categorizes his own work

¹⁰⁵ In a review of Aliou Cisse Niang’s *Faith and Freedom in Galatia and Senegal* Ukpong calls it “a useful contribution to the newer contextual approaches,” though the author describes the approach as “sociopostcolonial.” Review in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 140 (2011), 95-96. In an earlier piece on inculturation (1996), Ukpong says, “Through inculturation such [inhuman social] practices can be challenged by the Gospel Message so that eventually they can be eradicated”; inculturation must speak to “economic, socio-moral, and political orders in society.” “Inculturation: A Major Challenge to the Church in Africa Today,” *African Ecclesial Review* 38 (1996), 264, 265. Ukpong often acknowledges liberation and feminist paradigms as occupying their own significant space due to their singular focus on certain kinds of oppression, though inculturation also has room for similar concerns. Postcolonial concerns would occupy similar space.

¹⁰⁶ I found this phrase in two essays that include much identical material in word for word form, making up the bulk of both pieces, even including some identical footnotes. They are: Chapter one in Edward P. Antonio, *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology*, New York: Peter Lang, 2006, and Norbert Hintersteiner, “The Postcolonial Claim for Culture: Inculturation and Africanism,” in Jacques Haers, ed, *Postcolonial Europe in the Crucible of Culture: Reckoning with God in a World of Conflicts* New York: Rodopi, 2007. Neither text acknowledges the other as a source or a collaborator, so I do not know whose work is original, or whether it was initially collaborative. Hintersteiner’s seems better organized and at times offers slightly more clarity.

At any rate, Hintersteiner explains, “the possibility of inculturation itself and thus its significance as a project depends on the history of colonialism out of which the postcolonial has emerged as both memory (anamnesis) and protest” (80). While colonial and postcolonial realities obviously have plenty to do with the tasks of inculturation in Africa over the last several decades, Hintersteiner and Antonio heap unfair criticism on inculturation, saying inculturation’s persistent naiveté regarding developments in postcolonial theory has resulted in “errors on identity, culture, and the nature of colonialism itself” (Antonio, 2). Hintersteiner and Antonio do not, however, demonstrate a broader understanding of inculturation as a factor in the growth and spread of Christianity since New Testament times. They dehistoricize the concept, saying it reflects “a crisis situated somewhere between the founding of Christianity and its subsequent elaborations by indigenous peoples so that any crossing from the one to the other turns out to be problematic” (Hintersteiner, 90; Antonio, 12). Lest this could apply to the reception of Christianity by other

is that of “the contextual approach practised in the Third World...marked by a movement away from the context of the text and the text itself to the context of the readers.”¹⁰⁷ Inculturation hermeneutics generally is “an approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African, and for that matter any socio-cultural context the *subject* of interpretation.”¹⁰⁸ Inculturation shifts the focus to the subject and his or her context, postcolonial or otherwise. It can be useful in other socio-cultural contexts as well; inculturation does not define itself regionally, politically, or historically in the same way that postcolonial hermeneutics does, and does not pursue with the same centrality the polemics that are embedded in postcolonial theory, though Ukpong does set up inculturation hermeneutics decisively over and against Western methods and priorities in his own way. This posture leaves more generous space for inculturation hermeneutics to dialogue with a contemporary Western effort like the Scripture Project than would a more militant stance.

Ukpong consciously addresses the reality of globalization in his work, though again it is one aspect of context among others. He sees globalization, among other things, as an opportunity for positive global interactions in biblical studies. Inculturation hermeneutics, as Ukpong proposes it, is open to “the rest of the world as partners in the one hermeneutical project of biblical elucidation,” and also wants to “make our own contribution to global biblical studies by maintaining our specific orientation and vision.”¹⁰⁹ From the perspective of inculturation hermeneutics, globalization “calls for dialogue and interchange with other readings,” and also entails risks and power imbalances in such interactions. “African Bible readings grew of a situation of struggle and have remained a resistant strain,” Ukpong points out with pride and hope, and thereby “should therefore be well equipped to meet this

indigenous groups throughout Christian history, Hintersteiner and Antonio clarify, “The crisis originated in the radical interrogation and devaluation of traditional modes of thought by and through the colonial project” (90 and 12). At the point where they describe African theologians in the inculturation vein as employing “aggressive methodological polemics against missionaries, and, indeed, against all forms of western theology,” I’m not sure what African theologians they have in mind (94, 15). Charles Nyamiti is the only one specified, and is one who Ukpong described as following an adaptation approach rather than inculturation. See Ukpong, “Emergence of African Theologies,” 518.

¹⁰⁷ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 148. The other two revolutions he cites are the shift from the primary context of the church to that of the historical context of the text, and that of the “New Criticism” that shifts from a historical to a literary paradigm.

¹⁰⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 164.

challenge.”¹¹⁰ Inculturation hermeneutics is ready for a dialogue with the Scripture Project, then.

The Art of Reading Scripture never directly engages a postcolonial world with that terminology; there is one reference to globalization in one of the essays.

Bauckham identifies a “very powerful, late-modern grand narrative of consumerist individualism and free-market globalization” and says insofar as postmodernism “[valorizes] consumer lifestyle choices” without recognizing socio-economic and environmental consequences “it continues the kind of oppression that the modern metanarratives of progress have always legitimated.”¹¹¹ Thus there is recognition, however slim in terms of the overall volume, of a world context where globalization and postmodernism still have their victims, or at least their losers. Bauckham believes the biblical story is an alternative to these modern metanarratives and wants the Bible to be used to resist oppression.

The last two of the Nine Theses indicate openness to hearing from others, even a need to do so, though postcolonial and globalized identities do not receive mention.¹¹² To some degree the Scripture Project embodies listening to others, as members consist of men and women from different scholarly and ministerial fields, representing a range of church backgrounds. *The Art of Reading Scripture* does not exhibit much listening to the global South or to hermeneutical concerns of liberation or postcolonialism, however. Overall, the Scripture Project seems very self-reflective regarding its own position within the Western academy and church, but with little sense of being part of a global conversation. Daniel Treier’s introduction to theological interpretation devotes an entire chapter to social locations and the global church.¹¹³ Treier acknowledges that while other topics “are frequently addressed at length by advocates of theological exegesis, globalization is not,” and that this could be the death of theological interpretation as a movement, if it fails to engage the

¹¹⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 164.

¹¹¹ *The Art*, 46.

¹¹² Thesis Eight: “Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church,” and Thesis Nine: “We live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the kingdom of God; consequently, Scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, continually fresh rereadings of the text in light of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world.”

¹¹³ Donald Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). The title of chapter six is, “From the “Western” Academy to the Global Church? Engaging Social Locations.”

“hermeneutical realities at the intersection of Scripture and globalization.”¹¹⁴ Andrew Lincoln’s review of *The Art of Reading Scripture* asks “whether the group might not have drawn on a somewhat broader range of theological ecclesiastical traditions...from different church and socio-cultural settings than those represented here.”¹¹⁵ A dialogue with inculturation hermeneutics, then, will extend the Scripture Project into a conversation like those it says it wants to have, but somehow did not manage to do in *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

This chapter has outlined the historical horizons of *The Art of Reading Scripture* as well as Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics. While they in some ways emerge out of very different histories, there are points of contact, both historical and theoretical, that set the stage for a dialogue and offer parameters for going forward. While inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project do not intentionally embark on an open and direct conversation with one another in the ways Gadamer envisions, there is sufficient space for a project like this one to bring the two together at least in a preliminary manner toward each “trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them.” Gadamer goes on, saying if “each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counter-arguments, it is finally possible to achieve, in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other’s position (we call this an exchange of views), a

¹¹⁴ Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 157, 161. Treier posits postcolonial thoughts and pentecostal faith as the two realities he sees at this intersection. Treier finishes chapter six by saying, “thanks to the Holy Spirit, non-Western voices can no longer be marginal as they once were. We must listen” (186). Treier himself could demonstrate better listening to once-marginal voices from outside the West, however, as his main source is Philip Jenkins’ *New Faces of Christianity*, and Craig Ott’s (et al) book *Globalizing Theology* also features in several footnotes. Sugirtharajah and Lamin Sanneh are the main non-Western voices in Treier’s chapter, though they both earned doctorates at Western institutions and have held professorships in the UK and the US, respectively, for decades. Trier mentions Andrew Walls and Grant LeMarquand, inhabiting spaces as respected outsiders. Adeyemo’s Africa Bible Commentary receives one reference, as do Segovia and Moonjang Lee. Segovia has taught in the United States for most of his career, and Lee also has Western degrees and a teaching post at an American evangelical institution (Gordon-Conwell).

¹¹⁵ Andrew Lincoln, *Theology Today* 61.4 (2005), 550.

common language and a common statement.”¹¹⁶ As a mediating third party, this project will stop short of fusing horizons to the point of a common language and statement,¹¹⁷ but it aims to facilitate an exchange of views where each weighs the other and recognizes the value therein.

The remaining chapters will facilitate this dialogue, focusing on various aspects of the task of interpretation as articulated by Ukpong. Each chapter will take up, in the order of Ukpong’s phrasing, a key term in his description of the task of interpretation, “Interpreting a text...involves an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*.”¹¹⁸ The next chapter begins with *interpreter*, exploring how inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project each conceive of the interpreter.

¹¹⁶ Gadamer, *T&M*, 348.

¹¹⁷ Whether such a thorough fusion of horizons is possible or even desirable remains a question, but this project assumes the lesser goals of understanding and valuing the other to be a positive endeavor for both dialogue partners. See chapter one for a more thorough justification for the pursuit of such goals.

¹¹⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5.

Chapter 3: Interpreter

Introduction

After exploring the historical backgrounds of inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation in chapter two, this chapter begins drawing the specific dialogue partners of Justin Ukpong and the Scripture Project together. Constructing a dialogue between defined partners with attention to the interpretive work each do on the Bible offers opportunity for specificity and detailed dialogue that would not be possible in a general comparison of interpretive traditions. In other words, Ukpong and the Scripture Project will shed more light on engagement between inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation in a defined and deep dialogue with one another than would a simple look at the two reading strategies in general terms.

Grant LeMarquand's article on whether biblical scholarship in Africa and the North Atlantic are "siblings or antagonists" takes Ukpong's "five distinct features" of inculturation hermeneutics and begins to explore the implications for and points of connection with North Atlantic sensibilities.¹ The following chapters take up LeMarquand's sketch and expand it into dialogue with the Scripture Project. Ukpong's description of the task of interpretation lends itself to manageable portions of dialogue in a logical sequence. Allowing Ukpong's framework for interpretation to lead and shape the dialogue is fitting for a thesis that aims, among other things, to persuade theological interpretation to listen and learn from inculturation hermeneutics. Beginning with this chapter for a total of five chapters, each of Ukpong's key terms will successively offer basis for dialogue: "Interpreting a text... involves an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*."²

¹ Grant LeMarquand, "Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from the North Atlantic and African Worlds," pages 62-80 in David Tuesday Adamo, ed, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

² Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 5.

The inescapable nature of the interpreter

It is helpful to begin a dialogue on the role of the interpreter with some theoretical help from Gadamer. There is no such thing as interpretation without an interpreter, and the interpreter will necessarily bring his or her own contingencies to the text in order to dialogue with the text and discern meaning. “In relation to a text it is indispensable that the interpreter involve himself with its meaning,” Gadamer summarizes, again noting the subjective and conversational nature of the hermeneutical task.³ Interpretation is the interplay between text and interpreter, with both contributing to the dialogue and to the meaning that is emerging.

[Understanding the text] means that the interpreter’s own thoughts have also gone into the re-awakening of the meaning of the text. In this the interpreter’s own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that one holds on to or enforces, but more as a meaning and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one’s own what is said in the text.⁴

The interpreter, then, occupies a central place, along with the text, in the hermeneutical task. The interpreter’s horizon, including culture, identity, experience, and location, is *decisive* in the interpretive act while simultaneously being *at risk*. Who an interpreter is will affect the interpretation, but the interpretation may also affect the interpreter.⁵ Hermeneutics is thus a mutually constituting endeavor, with the dialogue between text and interpreter at the center.

Gadamer describes the hermeneutical process as a dialectic that consists of questions and answers. The text opens up questions to the interpreter, and the interpreter identifies questions for the text. These questions and answers adapt and change in the process of interpretation, based on the dialogue that is taking place between text and reader. Questions require openness to the other (in this case the text) and to the answer, and emerge out of tentative knowledge of that other. There is a multiplicity of good or right questions and answers based on how the horizon of the

³ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans eds. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 349.

⁴ Gadamer, *T&M*, 350.

⁵ James Cochrane puts it this way: “The text projects a world of otherness into which the reader is invited. If the resulting encounter is not one of sameness but of otherness, then the self of the reader is thereby also constituted anew, both mentally and practically.” *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 109.

interpreter encounters the horizon of the text, but not all questions and answers are good or right. A conversation that includes questions and answers must have some kind of order that follows logic and takes cues from the other, even while pursuing one's own interests and directions.

The revolution of the reader in inculturation hermeneutics

Given the central nature of the interpreter and his or her horizon, it is philosophically appropriate for Ukpong to make *interpreter* the first term in his description of the task of interpretation: "Interpreting a text... involves an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*" (Rereading, 5). This is not simply one way of constructing a sentence that names the factors in interpretation; for Ukpong *interpreter* comes first in terms of chronology and priority. "In epistemological terms," says Ukpong, "the human mind does not perceive reality from a universal but from a particular perspective" and the contingencies of the interpreter will always be brought to bear on the interpretive process.⁶

In multiple pieces Ukpong situates himself and inculturation hermeneutics in the historical context of biblical studies as a discipline, both in the West and in the Third World. In the most specific treatment of inculturation hermeneutics in a broader context of biblical studies, Ukpong calls a focus on the readers a "revolution" in biblical interpretation along with the two revolutions identified by Peter Macky. Macky's first revolution "came with the use of the historical critical method at the end of the 18th century" and took the Bible out of the primary context of the church and instead gave priority to the historical context of the biblical text.⁷ (See chapter two of this thesis for a more thorough treatment of the historical-critical revolution.) A second revolution was a "movement from a historical to a literary paradigm" with a renewed focus on the text itself. The third⁸ revolution that Ukpong discerns emerging out of the contextual approaches of the Third World is "a movement away from the

⁶ Justin Ukpong, "Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings," pages 9-39 in Justin Ukpong, et al, ed, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 20.

⁷ Justin Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities," *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 147.

⁸ Not chronologically third, as it "took place even before the second revolution" that Macky identifies ("NT Hermeneutics," 148).

context of the text and the text itself to the context of the readers” where the primary concern is “the functioning of the Bible in contemporary society.”⁹

The dialogue with *The Art of Reading Scripture* begins here, considering the interpreter in the hermeneutical task as conceived by the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics. Both parallels and key differences will emerge, as the ways both envisage the interpreter emerge out of their respective histories summarized in chapter two. The desire of the Scripture Project to recover the importance of the interpreter and the location and community of that interpreter mirrors to some degree the contextual focus and emphasis on the reader of inculturation hermeneutics. Points of departure emerge, however, regarding what should characterize interpreters and who is best placed to engage and interpret Scripture. The Scripture Project gives the interpreter more attention than Western approaches often do, thereby offering common ground for a comparison. Even with an eye toward the church, that diverse and often “untrained” interpreting community, however, the way the Scripture Project conceives of the interpreter is often different from the directions inculturation hermeneutics will go on this topic. This chapter will focus on specific interpreting individuals or communities, reserving a more general look at context and historical horizon for the next chapter.

New interpreters, new questions, new answers

Both dialogue partners acknowledge the importance of the interpreter, then, though the preunderstandings of each with regards to how they understand and elevate the interpreter will be different. Ukpong insightfully observes that an interpreter’s pre-understandings serve both to open and to close the text. Exegetical approaches “help us understand the text, [and] they also set limits to what we can understand of it, that is, to the sorts of questions we can pose to the text and the results we can get.”¹⁰ Inculturation hermeneutics understands with Gadamer that, “A person who possesses the ‘art’ of questioning is a person who is able to prevent the

⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 148. Other scholars have made similar observations about the turn toward the reader. Terry Eagleton describes the third age of criticism as a “Reader’s Liberation Movement,” and acknowledges that it can empower the oppressed. Ukpong draws on McKnight’s work here (1985), and several others could also be noted.

¹⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 150.

suppression of questions by the dominant opinion.”¹¹ Ukpong knows that “[using] the lenses of our cultural and existential life contexts, our African biases and interests to read biblical texts against the grain of traditional understanding” will “*uncover something new* of [the] inexhaustible dimensions” of the text.¹² Again, this is why “the world needs Africa,”¹³ since African questions, resisting suppression by the dominant opinion, will help reveal the messages and meanings of the biblical texts in more of their fullness, uncovering something new, hitherto not seen without the contributions of African interpreters with their unique perspectives and questions.

Ukpong describes how these African questions emerge: “In the bible African Christians] discovered a Jesus who healed the sick, made the lame to walk, and restored sight to the blind...They discovered a Jesus who drove out demons from people and confronted the power of Satan...all these and other similar issues were very much part and parcel of their daily existence.”¹⁴ This Jesus has everything to do with the felt needs and everyday concerns of African peoples. Spiritual powers, the evil eye, health and survival are wrapped up together and often at the surface of African consciousness.¹⁵ That these words are in the first paragraph of Ukpong’s earliest effort to reflect with methodological specificity on inculturation hermeneutics indicates his compelling sense that Jesus and the Bible can and must connect with the existential concerns and experiences of Africans. Ukpong begins with the understanding that his proposal has much more at stake than academic argument or even therapeutic spirituality¹⁶—inculturation readings literally have to do with life and death and the everyday concerns of Africans around those realities. While these

¹¹ Gadamer, *T&M*, 330.

¹² Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 158, emphasis mine.

¹³ Kwame Bediako, “‘In the Bible...Africa walks on familiar Ground’: Why the World Needs Africa,” *AIMCAR Bulletin* 6 (2007): 32-50.

¹⁴ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 3.

¹⁵ See Allison M. Howell, *The Religious Itinerary of a Ghanaian People: The Kasena and the Christian Gospel* for ethnographic/theological descriptions of the ways the Kasena navigate the world and experience sickness and vulnerability. See especially pages 85-94 on “Unexpected events” followed by an analysis of problem solving including “The supernatural realm,” “Those who mediate between humans: the departed and other supernatural powers,” and “Authorities with power.”

¹⁶ “Spirituality” in Western cultures tends to refer to personal sensitivities that transcend the physical, often with therapeutic undertones. In contrast, there is no separate realm of “spirituality” in Africa apart from robust worldview that incorporates and explains everything, seen and unseen. See chapter six of this thesis for more on components of African worldview and conceptual framework.

moments in the biblical text seem most real and important to Africans, traditional church authorities who experience the world differently tend to downplay this kind of biblical stories or relegate them to history, failing to connect with these African questions and realities.¹⁷ Ukpong summarizes:

African Christians in the mainline churches today are asking about the meaning and significance of the Jesus of the gospels for them; they are asking how the gospel message might be made to come alive in their communities and personal lives, and be really good news to them in their concrete life situation. . . . But the general experience so far has been that at best old worn out answers are repeated for these new questions and therefore do not just fit, and at worst answers given are in response to questions that were thought asked but which in reality had not been asked. To sum up, the general experience is that the traditional mode of the official church's reading of the bible is not capable of responding adequately to the questions that African Christians are asking about their life in Christ and their experience with the bible.¹⁸

Thus, the asking of African questions not previously considered ushers in, for anyone paying enough attention, an epistemological crisis, where old, previously accepted answers are suddenly insufficient. When African Christians ask how the Jesus they encounter in the Bible might "come alive in their communities and personal lives" they must pursue with perseverance previously untapped creative strategies and resources.¹⁹ The upside of an epistemological crisis is that when a tradition confronts questions it is unable to answer, new space and new understanding must necessarily arise within the tradition if it is to survive the crisis and get through it. Inculturation hermeneutics aims to equip African Christians to do exactly this. The burden and the hope of pushing through this crisis falls on the African interpreter.

¹⁷ LeMarquand notes that Samuel Abogunrin similarly laments the failure of Christian missionaries by and large to preach the power of Jesus with "existential dynamism" able to connect with African concerns and worldviews. Abogunrin says that "African biblical scholars must not repeat the mistakes of the West. . . in emptying Jesus of his power." "Siblings or Antagonists?," 67.

¹⁸ Ukpong, "Rereading," 3-4.

¹⁹ Ukpong, "Rereading," 3.

Situating and Exploring Interpreters

The postmodern interpreter

Biblical studies in the Western academy face a similar epistemological crisis, as postmodern readers also find traditional modes of reading the Bible not capable of responding adequately to their questions. The previous chapter summarized the modern to postmodern context out of which *The Art of Reading Scripture* emerges, and into which the contributors intentionally see themselves speaking. The introduction of the volume begins with the observation, “in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place” (xiv), and the same could be said, perhaps ironically, about the interpreter. Modern attempts to read objectively without a “place” give way to questions about what the place of an interpreter can or should be.²⁰ Postmodern readers must acknowledge a “place,” but in so doing face the danger of reifying distance between their place and the places of others, historical or contemporary, and may be no closer to correct interpretation than any other place, or lack of place for that matter. Postmodern philosophers resign themselves to incommensurability, while literary theory finds irreducible interpretive undecidability.

Before a kind of radical skepticism threatens to erode all confidence in the possibility of interpretation, Gadamer proves helpful. Gadamer acknowledges fundamental differences in the “places” from which people read—the horizons of the text and of various readers may be very different from one another. These differences are not insurmountable, however, and, similar to the process of getting to know another human being, however different, through conversation, patient dialogue with a text will yield meaning. The horizon of an interpreter, the place from which she or he reads, is not a liability in the process of interpretation, an unfortunate reality that cannot be escaped. Instead, the presence of one’s horizon is what makes engagement with another (text or person) possible at all.²¹ The Scripture Project’s efforts to address the crisis of communication, authority, and place brought on by postmodern

²⁰ See Kevin Vanhoozer’s chapter on “Undoing the Reader,” [in *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998): pp 148-195] for a thorough treatment of a range of issues along these lines.

²¹ Somewhat similarly, Bauckham’s essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture* acknowledges, “a perspective that recognizes and claims truth can be genuinely open to dialogue and the truth of the other” (52-53).

questions take shape in (re)claiming the church as the appropriate space for interpretation, giving the interpreter experience, identity, community, and language that make conversation with others possible. The burden and the hope of pushing through this crisis falls on the ecclesial interpreter.

The Christian tradition faces epistemological crises surrounding interpretation of the Bible as sacred text both in Africa and in the postmodern western academy. Inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation are strategies for facing these crises, and both put significant burden and hope on the interpreter-in-context to do the work of pushing through these crises. This chapter will now explore the African interpreter in inculturation hermeneutics and the ecclesial interpreter for the Scripture Project.

The African interpreter

Ukpong knew from the time of his early writing about inculturation that in African settings it had to be a “grassroots method.” In a 1984 article on the “Emergence of African Theologies,” Ukpong grappled with how inculturation could “help the people at the grassroots to give expression to their experience of faith and life, how to help them attain the freedom necessary for this self-expression; for if they do not possess such freedom, they cannot live out the faith in terms of their cultural milieu.”²² While he could not yet articulate how trained readers with biblical and theological education such as himself and the grassroots could work together, he knew, “The process of social liberation is not an elitist thing. Liberationists must, therefore, look for ways of involving the grassroots.”²³ Gerald West would later surmise that any perceived problem of how to help the grassroots express themselves was a problem limited to an inability to see what was already there, as the marginalized always find safe, hidden spaces to “practice their arts of resistance,” and therefore “there is no silence to break or a language to create.”²⁴ The point, however,

²² Justin Ukpong, “The Emergence of African Theologies,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 517.

²³ Ukpong, “Emergence of African Theologies,” 530.

²⁴ Gerald West, “Disguising Defiance in Ritualisms of Subordination: Literary and Community-Based Resources for Recovering Resistance Discourse with the Dominant Discourses of the Bible,” pages 194-217 in Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran, eds, *Reading Community, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002), 199. West and the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB, now the Ujamaa Centre) faced similar questions at first as

is that even prior to knowing exactly how to read with and listen to ordinary readers, Ukpong was concerned about the expression of the grassroots. Over time and with the help of Gerald West's work, Ukpong's sensitivity to the ordinary reader would develop and mature, but Ukpong instinctively knew academic interpretation in Africa had to include everyday Africans and respect them as interpreters.

As noted above, Ukpong describes the shift toward the reader as a revolution, giving the interpreter or the interpreting community a primary position. As summarized in chapter two, there were a number of reasons and methods for focusing on African readers and contexts in academic settings. Africans resisted missionary interpretation and looked for alternatives, and comparative studies upheld and defended African religion and culture. Experiences of oppression and patriarchy brought liberation concerns to the forefront, and evaluative studies recognized African religion and culture as constructive resources for interpretation. Ukpong summarizes, "In Africa, the change came about from a desire to make academic study of the Bible relevant to the existential situation of the people," and scholarly trends reflected wider African struggles and needs.²⁵ This revolution, then, partly emerged out of the academic features of biblical studies in Africa summarized here, but it also easily connects with wider African values and worldviews. Throughout the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, people and relationships tend to be more important than information or facts. Knowledge is valuable when it is practical and worked out in life and community—of what use to the village or even the individual is head knowledge that never means anything outside the confines of one's brain? Human existence is a unified whole: elements of study or scholarship, faith, family, politics, organized

well, it seems. In an early article on contextual Bible study, ["The Relationship Between Different Modes of Reading (The Bible) and the Ordinary Reader," *Scriptura* 9 (1991), 87-110] West's reading group admitted that "contextual Bible study could play an important role in breaking the 'culture of silence' (Freire) of the poor and oppressed, by enabling them...to see themselves as active subjects and co-workers in God's project of liberation" (95). By 1996 ["Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated," *Semeia* 23 (1996), 21-41] West was questioning the need to break the culture of "alleged" silence, recognizing the possibility of an existing "hidden transcript" and speaking of the role of the trained reader as "enabling a structured articulation." West's chapter in *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts: Contributions from the Social Sciences to Biblical Interpretation* [ed. M. Daniel Carroll, (London: Continuum, 2000): 75-105], "Gauging the Grain in a More Nuanced and Literary Manner," is a more thorough consideration of hidden transcripts, drawing on James C. Scott's work.

²⁵ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 148.

religion, social issues, physical needs, etc. are not separate realms compartmentalized from one another, but rather all work together and draw on each other as individuals and communities pursue a life well lived.²⁶ Traditions of palavers in Africa often allow all members of the community to have a voice in the discussion of the issue at hand. Though increased attention to reading communities and their issues is not solely an African phenomenon, contextual readings and inclusion of ordinary readers naturally arise in African settings, based on particular experiences of African peoples as well as wider cultural values.

Ukpong is not the only one to write about how inculturation emerges in African contexts. In addition to other scholars (see chapter two of this thesis), missionaries in Botswana observed something like inculturation hermeneutics taking place. Prior to most of Ukpong's work, these missionaries described the definitive role of the interpreter in the process of interpretation, such that the product retained the indelible mark of the interpreter. They described witnessing a phenomenon they called "grassroots African theology" that they could not find in any books at the time, (though Ukpong and others would shortly begin writing extensively about something very similar): "Certainly what we were and are finding," they wrote, "is that when the Gospel meets a person and that person is encouraged to engage the whole of himself or herself with it, something dynamic and new develops."²⁷ The missionaries describe this as an ever-continuing and changing process; the horizon of the interpreter is inextricable from the new interpretation, and both the horizon of the interpreter and their understanding of Christianity and the Bible will continue to change.

²⁶ Ukpong says it this way, "Contextual hermeneutics...is grounded on an epistemology that is integrative and holistic: it does not separate objectivity from subjectivity, the spiritual from the material, history from eschatology, but holds them in symbiotic tension and makes them function in a dialectical relationship." "NT Hermeneutics," 151. For more on African epistemology and conceptual framework, see chapter six of this thesis.

²⁷ Richard Sales and Jacob Liphoko, "Emerging Grassroots Theology in Botswana," *International Review of Mission* 71.282 (1982), 167.

Ecclesial interpreters²⁸

For the Scripture Project, reading with a theological perspective from the location of the church is the primary interpretive posture for accurate interpretation. Jenson is very possessive of the Bible and states, “Outside the church, no such entity as the Christian Bible has any reason to exist.”²⁹ From a historical perspective Jenson’s argument makes sense: the church was the entity that canonized the books of the Bible into Christian Scripture. For Jenson, the Bible belongs to the church not only historically, however: “Interpretation of the Bible outside the church must be arbitrary, uncontrollable, and finally moot.”³⁰ Jenson’s strict boundaries of interpretation do not reflect the Scripture Project’s overall posture, though; in fact the Eighth of the Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture³¹ that begin the volume insists that “Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church.” While the Bible may not primarily “belong” to those outside the church, the church can in fact learn from the interpretations of others.

Other essays in the volume demonstrate a more nuanced sense of what may characterize members of the church and distinguish them (to a greater or lesser degree) from those outside the church. The two contributors who work primarily in the church rather than the academy demonstrate the most sensitivity to what contemporary churches and church-goers may look like. McSpadden admits varying levels of commitment in the church and generally acknowledges, “post-Christendom churchgoers... know less about the Bible” and are suspicious of its claims on their lives.³² She specifically mentions “seekers” and legitimates their presence: “By entering the church doors and joining the life of a worshiping community, they acted upon a desire to hear and believe.”³³ Howell posits that “our inability to imitate Christ

²⁸ As will become clear, this heading does not suggest that Ukpong’s interpreters are not frequently reading from postures of faith within the church; in fact most of Ukpong’s interpreters are Christians. The point is not to contrast “ecclesial readers” and “African readers,” but to summarize in a phrase the key identity of interpreters for each.

²⁹ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 27.

³⁰ *The Art*, 27.

³¹ Recall that *The Art of Reading Scripture* begins with Nine Theses on the interpretation of Scripture that emerge out of the work of the Scripture Project and shape their work as “core affirmations” of the group.

³² *The Art*, 127.

³³ *The Art*, 128.

can glorify God as well,” and describes the church’s “fumbling replications of a text into which we long to live.”³⁴ So the church does not have to be perfect, but it is unclear exactly what characterizes and constitutes the Scripture Project’s sense of church that is so central to their interpretive approach. McSpadden and Howell in the quotes above seem to suggest that intention looms large in a definition of church: “a desire to hear and believe,” and “fumbling replications of a text into which we long to live.” Thesis Six clarifies, however, that it is “God’s redemptive action” that calls the church into being, and concrete practices of “prayer, service, and faithful witness” characterize the community. The Scripture Project does seem to have the visible church in mind, though perhaps an individual or community could adopt postures of prayer, service, witness, and receptiveness to God’s redemptive action without formally being under the banner of church. At any rate, interpreters best suited for understanding and practicing Scripture are those who somehow fall within the church.

The church is a gathering of diverse peoples with a common unity in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5) and the Scripture Project prioritizes communal interpretation over that of individuals. Contemporary readers read in succession with those who have gone before: “The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform Scripture,” states Thesis Seven. “This chain of interpreters, the communion of saints, includes not only those officially designated as saints by the churches but also the great cloud of witnesses acknowledged by believers in diverse times and places, including many of the church’s loyal critics,” this thesis further explains. Of course the contemporary church is the primary location from which to read Scripture: “Faithful interpretation of the Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action – the Church,” states Thesis Six. Another thesis broadens the circle of interpretation: “Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church,” says Thesis Eight. There is a sense throughout the theses and the volume in general that reading with others generally makes for better interpretation than an individual left to their own whims and limited to their own perspectives and experiences.

³⁴ *The Art*, 105, 106.

Reading with a community of ordinary readers

If the frequent and immediate theme of *The Art of Reading Scripture* is the church when it comes to responsible interpretation, for inculturation hermeneutics it is “reading with” ordinary readers. Ukpong uses the word interpreter in a singular form in his summary of the task of interpretation, “an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text*...”, but when further describing inculturation readings, he always describes them as a community undertaking, including both trained and ordinary readers. The importance of ordinary readers immediately surfaces in Ukpong’s work, and he explains why ordinary readers must be reckoned with in academic interpretation in Africa. When the stronger literary culture of the missionaries came into the African oral culture, “the people would either give up and be absorbed in the new reality or struggle with and domesticate it... Since the arrival of the Bible on the continent, the ordinary Africans have been struggling using their own resources in various ways to domesticate it.”³⁵ The bulk of the history of the Bible in Africa has to do with the ways ordinary Africans have interacted with it, and the tensions of that history require Bible scholars to choose a side: “I see in the ordinary people’s development of their own interpretations of the Bible a symbol of resilience and resistance to the empire – a refusal to be co-opted,” says Ukpong, “This challenges the professional readers of the Bible to decide on which side of the struggle they are.”³⁶ Therefore, if scholars align with African appropriations of the Bible over those imposed by colonial powers, they have no choice but to pay careful attention and even defer to ordinary readers and their struggles with Scripture.

While “there is no ‘typical’ ordinary reader,”³⁷ African ordinary readers tend to be “black, poor, and marginalized”³⁸ and characterized as precritical since they have not been trained in theological or historical-sociological critical methods. “Their parameters for interpretation consist mainly of their experiences, their intuition, the insights of fellow ordinary readers, and the teaching of their church denominations

³⁵ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 162.

³⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 162.

³⁷ West, “Different Modes of Reading,” 99.

³⁸ Gerald West, “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface Between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa: Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy,” *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002), 7.

and the faith in which they were brought up.”³⁹ Since ordinary reading strategies are generally not very systematic, a good way to describe the interpretation of ordinary readers is often to analyze particular encounters with biblical texts, as a number of African scholars have done and continue to do.⁴⁰ Factors of social and economic class are important. “As a general category, the term “ordinary people” refers to a social class, the common people in contradistinction to the elite,” explains Ukpong.⁴¹ The asset of ordinary readers is their perspective and the horizon they bring to reading and understanding Scripture. Ordinary readers cannot help but be thoroughly bound up in their own contexts and often read with an eye toward practical application in their own lives and communities. Trained readers are there to assist with this process; more will be said below about trained readers.

A virtuous reading posture

Character and virtues have bearing on interpretation for the Scripture Project. “We learn from the saints the centrality of interpretive virtues for shaping wise readers,” explains Thesis Seven, “Prominent among these virtues are receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, humor, and imagination.” These are virtues in the Aristotelian sense in that they are dispositions of character created by habits formed by practice. Howell’s essay holds up the example of the “embodied reading” of St. Francis who embraced poverty “in imitation of Christ, who was poor, and simultaneously in obedience to Christ’s words to the first disciples [in Matt 10:9-10].”⁴² Even if Matthew’s Gospel does not mean to require this of all of us, Howell wonders if the humility and obedience of Francis give him some “exegetical advantage,” since “an embodied reading is perhaps the only kind of reading that is finally appropriate to these texts, which are about, and intended to provoke, changed lives.”⁴³ The hermeneutical circle is caught up in the circle of virtue: virtuous practice

³⁹ Justin Ukpong, “Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers,” *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* ed. Mary N. Getui, (Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 190.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gerald West’s summary in “(Ac)claiming the (Extra)ordinary African “Reader” of the Bible,” *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading With Their Local Communities* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), especially page 30.

⁴¹ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 23.

⁴² *The Art*, 94.

⁴³ *The Art*, 95, 100.

makes a virtuous person, a virtuous person does virtuous acts, and a virtuous person better understands the Scriptures that are intended to help make people virtuous, or holy, as the Scriptures may prefer. Ultimately, a deep sense of who the interpreter is in practice and character, individually and communally, helps determine how the interpreter reads. Virtue contributes to our receptivity to Scripture, and so does sin: “sin has epistemological and moral effects” points out Greg Jones.⁴⁴ A horizon is not just historical, experiential, and based on group identities such as the church, but also has to do with virtue and character.⁴⁵

Virtuous reading and an option for the poor

A deeper look at Howell’s discussion of St. Francis makes for interesting dialogue with inculturation hermeneutics. The picture Howell paints of St. Francis suggests that it is not primarily Francis’s poverty as a socio-economic reality that gives him exegetical advantage, but rather the self-giving of his voluntary poverty that makes for a virtuous posture congruent with Scripture. Simultaneously, Howell admits that his own socio-economic reality with “my hefty salary, the prestige of my position, the garnering of my pension, the maintenance of my vita” probably compromise his reading of Scripture.⁴⁶ If Howell’s socio-economic position likely proves a liability, it is unclear whether Howell considers the perspective of the poor to be inherently better whether voluntary or not, or whether he simply recognizes that voluntary poverty would better equip him for certain understanding. Perhaps wealth and the trappings of education and career simply make it more difficult to discern the call of Scripture on our lives, and Howell needs ordinary readers as much as African trained readers do. To his credit, Howell is willing to name his own probable shortcomings in the light of the virtuous example of St. Francis. He mentions more recent examples of contextual faithfulness to Scripture, including Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, Vernon Johns of the American civil rights movement, Dorothy Day of the *Catholic Worker*, and Mother Teresa, and receives their work as a challenge to the guild of Bible scholars and theologians. He does not,

⁴⁴ *The Art*, 158.

⁴⁵ This is an insight of the Church Fathers that theological interpretation in general recovers. After a couple post-Enlightenment centuries of objectivity for academic biblical studies, theological interpretation recognizes that virtue (or lack of) is an important component of the hermeneutical circle.

⁴⁶ *The Art*, 107.

at least in this essay, go as far as pursuing any actual relationships with living individuals or communities that may challenge or balance the encumbrances that mark Howell's own life and interpretation, however. Historical persons and postures of virtue can certainly prove instructive, but a next step for Howell to pursue would be to seek out contemporary partners to read with that would similarly challenge and supplement his own perspective, in the context of a living relationship.

The option for the poor in inculturation hermeneutics, like in liberation theologies, resists making socio-economic poverty valuable for its own sake. Poverty should not be romanticized or celebrated, but fought against! "To say that the poor are blessed," exegetes Ukpong, "does not mean that economic poverty is a blessing, but it is to affirm the poor as persons and subvert that which makes them non-persons."⁴⁷ Brazilian brothers Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, in their introduction to liberation theology,⁴⁸ identify evangelical poverty, characterized by working for the benefit of others in solidarity with the poor, as a positive posture. The economically poor can also be evangelically poor—otherwise the benefits of evangelical poverty would be reserved for those who begin with more material wealth, which is certainly not the point! Howell could perhaps clarify and strengthen his own position and discussion of St. Francis with such a distinction: while socio-economic poverty may not necessarily place one to understand the Scriptures any better and is certainly not to be desired for its own sake, evangelical poverty, like that embraced by St. Francis, embodies the virtue and humility Howell wants to uphold. Ukpong does not use the terminology of the Boff brothers, but does envision "ethical accountability" in working for "holistic empowerment of the personhood, lives and cultures of all sectors of African peoples for the realization of their full humanity."⁴⁹ Ukpong wants to "go beyond talking about impoverishment to emphasizing Africa's anthropological empowerment," and thus resists making discussions of poverty central to inculturation hermeneutics, though a fight against poverty and its dehumanizing effects is certainly among the goals of inculturation hermeneutics.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Justin Ukpong, "Option for the Poor: A Modern Challenge for the Church in Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 36 (1994), 355.

⁴⁸ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 2000) (Thirteenth printing).

⁴⁹ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 159.

⁵⁰ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 159.

Ukpong does not use language of interpretive virtue like the Scripture Project does, but frequently talks about reading with particular ideology and ethics. The reading posture Ukpong has in mind is somewhat similar to the Scripture Project's emphasis on virtue, though the Scripture Project's sense of virtue seems to be personal habits that cultivate character in an individual, whereas Ukpong's ideology is focused primarily outward rather than inward. The ethical posture Ukpong describes makes the interpreter and the interpretation publicly accountable: "The validity of readings is judged by their faithfulness to the ethical demands of the gospels which include love of neighbor, respect for one another, etc," writes Ukpong, "Better readings expose and critique power and privilege in society, support and encourage positive social change, and affirm difference and inclusion."⁵¹

Whereas the Scripture Project emphasizes virtue that bears fruit in individual character, inculturation hermeneutics focuses on ideology that bears fruit in the wider community. The two are by no means mutually exclusive and are related to one another: a person's character will be expressed in community, and ideology will be reflected in an individual. The difference in emphasis, however, may indicate the ways each perceive the interpreter: the Scripture Project primarily sees the interpreting community as made up of individuals, and inculturation hermeneutics primarily sees the interpreting community as *making* individuals. Again, the two may not be mutually exclusive, but do reflect different worldviews and approaches to the interpretive process. Finally, for Ukpong, "the point... is not *who* has authority to read the Bible but the ideology and ethics with which the Bible should be read."⁵²

Academic Interpreters and Other Readers

Almost all members of the Scripture Project are primarily academics; of those in ministerial positions, James Howell has a Ph.D and has served as an adjunct faculty member at Duke Divinity School while pastoring a United Methodist church. Christine McSpadden is the only contributor to *The Art of Reading Scripture* who did not have an earned doctorate at the time of publication, serving as a priest in the Episcopal Church. Interpreters, presumably, can be academics *and* members of the

⁵¹ Ukpong, "Global Village," 17; Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 149.

⁵² Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 161. See chapter six for more discussion of the "third pole" of ideology that mediates, along with text and context, inculturation readings.

church. The nature of the relationship between academic interpretation and church readings is never very clear, however. Perhaps academic interpretations of Christian scholars constitute voices among others contributing to the ecclesial readings that the Scripture Project upholds.⁵³ It could be the case that theological interpretation by Christian scholars presumes to read *for* the church. Such an aim does not seem very Protestant or very American, and most members of the Scripture Project are both. Relativizing one's position of interpretive authority, however, after years of study and pursuit of a devoted career is a difficult step to make.⁵⁴

“Reading with”

Inculturation hermeneutics, on the other hand, takes pains to describe the nature and purpose of the relationship between academic readings and ordinary readings. While Western scholars, even those interested in theological interpretation on behalf of the church, may find it difficult to relativize the prestige of the ivory tower, Gerald West notes that, “African biblical scholars find it harder than their Western compatriots to sequester themselves in the corridors of the academy,” and African scholars “allow our scholarship to be partially constituted by experiences and questions of those non-scholars we read ‘with’.”⁵⁵ Ordinary readers do not merely inform or consume scholarly research (though they may do these things as well), but are constitutive of and integral to it.⁵⁶ The relationship between trained readers and

⁵³ If this were the case, it would parallel Gerald West's description of the trained reader as “just another reader with different resources and skills, not better resources and skills” (“Reading the Bible Differently,” 35).

⁵⁴ Ukpong explains this difficulty: “For a long time, the academy has been seen to derive the respect and dignity it commands by being distant from the popular way of life. . . . To the academy then belongs the control of knowledge and those who want to participate in the generation of knowledge have to belong to it. This seems to explain why biblical scholars ignore, exclude and condemn non-scholarly readings of the Bible” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 160).

⁵⁵ Gerald West, “The Historicity of Myth and the Myth of Historicity: Locating the Ordinary African ‘Reader’ of the Bible in the Debate,” *Neotestamentica* 38.1 (2004), 139.

⁵⁶ This is true historically as well as in the process of “reading with.” Musa Dube [see “Circle Readings of the Bible/Scriptures,” in Johannes A. Smit and Pratap Kumar, eds, *Study of Religion in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of G.C. Oostuizen* (Boston: Brill, 2005), especially page 80] points to the hybridization of African culture and Christianity occurring in African Independent Churches (AICs) as a predecessor of academic inculturation. Ukpong agrees that, “inculturation is founded on this resilience of African cultures against Western cultural hegemony” and the

ordinary readers can be a tricky one to navigate, and Gerald West has returned to this and explored it repeatedly over the last two decades. West’s early sensitivity accurately summarizes the dangers from two sides: “the danger of ‘listening to’ is that we romanticize and idealize the contribution of the poor, while the danger of ‘speaking for’ is that we minimize and rationalize the contribution of the poor.”⁵⁷ The concept of “reading with” attempts to strike a balance between these dangers, a model where trained readers and ordinary readers come together as equal partners and read together. “The ‘reading with’ process,” Ukpong explains, “entails academically trained readers reading the Bible with a community of ordinary readers, within a specified contemporary context, using a conceptual framework that is informed by the people’s culture....It is an interactive, participatory and dialogic process...a community, not an individual, sets the agenda for the reading and does the reading.”⁵⁸ Committed to this process, inculturation hermeneutics includes both trained readers and ordinary readers as interpreters, and necessarily so. Interpreters work in partnership with one another, and must share a concrete context.

Ordinary readers in *The Art of Reading Scripture*?

In the first essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Ellen Davis writes on “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” as the title says. This essay, then, is predicated on the assumption that lay people can be taught to read the Bible well. But, the essay implies, until they are taught to read like their teachers, their interpretations are likely inferior. Davis offers an example of a first-year Hebrew student that ultimately altered Davis’s own reading of a particular verse, and she says, “The more uncertainties we are willing—or constrained by ‘ignorance’—to entertain, the more texture appears in the text.”⁵⁹ This example is incongruous, however, rather than illustrating her primary posture toward uneducated readers, as it begins a

“creative appropriation” Africans demonstrate in fusing their own identities with their commitment to the Bible (“Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa,” in S. O. Abogunrin, ed, *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 37, 38).

⁵⁷ West, “Different Modes of Reading,” 100.

⁵⁸ Ukpong, “Bible Reading with a Community,” 188

⁵⁹ *The Art*, 14. Notably, this “ignorance” is well on its way to being among elite trained readers, as it comes from a seminary student with an earned undergraduate degree. I wonder how Davis would receive and describe the readings of Ukpong’s ordinary readers, with whom she shares considerably more distance, and if those too could enliven the text for her.

discussion on the importance of studying Greek and Hebrew in order to cultivate “fruitful unsettledness” with the language of the Bible and our own language. Davis’s primary audience in this essay are those who preach and teach the Bible to ordinary people in the church. Unfortunately, she stops short of drawing up academic and theological jargon into the language that needs to be unsettled. She seems to have instincts and minor experiences that suggest that readers who in some respects may be considered “ignorant” (in her scare quotes) have important insights to offer, but these get lost in her exuberance for literary skills and language study. Similarly, she exhorts preachers and teachers “to begin by suspecting our own interpretations,” but at this point she does not encourage reading with others to learn from their interpretations, but rather suggests, “reading with a view to what the New Testament calls *metanoia*, “repentance”—literally, “change of mind.”⁶⁰ While the text itself could certainly challenge our interpretations of it, an obvious tactic for suspecting our own interpretations would be to expose ourselves to the interpretations of others.

Davis does get as far as a final section that suggests dialogue and friendship with Jews to counter “the risk of reading alone.”⁶¹ This is a good start, and one Davis appropriately thinks necessary after her essay calls for “reading with an understanding of the Old Testament witness to Christ.”⁶² Davis demonstrates instincts not to ignore, silence, or co-opt the readings of others, but her imagination as to what that could mean and how it could look remains rather narrow. Exhortation to read more broadly with others and to consider the interpretations even of ordinary or ignorant readers in unsettling our own readings could fit well in this essay, but her rather firm categories of those who *teach*—her named audience in the title of the essay—and those who *learn* must be destabilized before she is ready for moves like this. Ukpong’s model and example push Davis not only to extend dialogue and friendship, but to rethink her very idea of what teaching in confessional settings could mean.

Howell’s essay envisions academic disciplines of biblical interpretation and theology that “incorporate biography” as witness to the transformative power of the text.⁶³ Howell suggests,

⁶⁰ *The Art*, 16.

⁶¹ *The Art*, 22. “Alone” in this case seems to refer to confessional and experiential insularity more than solitary personal reading.

⁶² This is the subheading of the third section of the essay that makes up pages 18-22.

⁶³ *The Art*, 103.

our commentaries...could bear stories of the saints – and not of the whitewashed, pastel-colored variety. The gospel is incarnational, even messy, and we learn as much from the foibles of saints as from their luminous moments of genuine imitation of Christ. We are well served by stories that expose how our own kin, real flesh and blood, have both embodied the faith and misshapen it as well.⁶⁴

Writing such commentaries that draw on the stories of others “would probably require collaborative efforts,” Howell writes, though collaboration with whom is unclear.⁶⁵ Collaboration with church historians, other academicians, who can share stories from the lives of canonized saints? Collaboration with everyday saints, the “real flesh and blood” of ordinary readers who interpret through the lenses of their own lives and experiences? There is room here for collaborative readings that acknowledge the interpretive power of the stories of ordinary saints, though it is not clear that this is what Howell has in mind.

⁶⁴ *The Art*, 103.

⁶⁵ *The Art*, 103.

Trained readers and ordinary readers⁶⁶

The role of ordinary readers, even members of the church that the Scripture Project takes so seriously, is unclear in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, and academic disciplines still take the lead. In stark contrast, the burden of proof in inculturation

⁶⁶ Gerald West's work with the Institute for Study of the Bible (ISB, now Ujamaa Centre) pioneered the concepts and methods involving trained readers and ordinary readers, and Ukpong's work on inculturation hermeneutics makes use of West's ideas. Other African scholars (and scholars outside the continent) claim, adapt, and/or challenge these terms and concepts in a range of ways. Musa Dube has done some work along these lines with Gerald West and is also involved in the Circle of Concerned African Woman Theologians. Dube claims African women often take a "reading with" approach. Johnson Kiriaku Kinyua's dissertation ("The Agikuyu, the Bible, and Colonial Constructs: Towards an Ordinary African Readers' Hermeneutics," submitted to the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham in 2010) proposes *Sokoni*, marketplace, as a model for interpretation on an equal field, rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people. Werner Kahl prefers the terms critical and intuitive interpreters to trained and ordinary readers (see "Growing Together: Challenges and Chances in the Encounter of Critical and Intuitive Interpreters of the Bible" in Gerald O. West (ed) *Reading Other-Wise*). Jean-Pierre Ruiz, along with Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, critiques the language and distinction: "It is quite safe for academic readers of the Bible to write with great sincerity of their engagement with "the poor" who are "ordinary readers" of the Bible, and who are said to have much to teach "us," even though that very language perpetuates the othering and instrumentalization of those dialogue partners in reading the Bible who happen to be academically undocumented, so to speak" (*Reading from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 31). Multiple critiques fall along the lines of wanting to give ordinary readers their own space without the trained reader at all. As Godwin Akper puts it, ordinary readers should learn to "walk by themselves" ("The Role of the 'Ordinary Reader' in Gerald West's Hermeneutics," *Scriptura* 88 (2005), 10). Magomme Masoga more aggressively wants the center to move itself to the periphery, allowing "the periphery to occupy its own space without the interference of the centre" ("Redefining Power: Reading the Bible in Africa from Central and Peripheral Positions" pages 134-47 in Larry Kaufmann and McGlory Speckman, eds, *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster, 2001)). Sarojini Nadar, on the other hand, advocates for a more thoroughly "interventionist" model than West's methods allow; Nadar's observations that she is likely better placed for such methods given West's privileged position as a white male are probably accurate. See Nadar's "Hermeneutics of Transformation? A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities" pages 389-406 in Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, eds, *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012): 389-406. Andrew Village has done some work on Western ordinary readers, though his book *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) never mentions the work with ordinary readers that has been going on in Africa for decades! Gerald West wrote an overly kind review of Village's book that finds it "worrying" that Village does not know about or acknowledge this work.

hermeneutics may be on the presence of the trained reader. Ordinary readers, as already mentioned, make up the bulk of the interpretive history of the Bible in Africa. What does the trained reader have to offer, then? Trained readers offer tools for “analysis and the orientation to read the biblical text from the perspective of the concerns of society.”⁶⁷ They have a “*critical awareness* of both Christianity and the culture” that goes beyond what naturally takes place on a popular level as African cultures interact with Christianity.⁶⁸ Trained readers must have extensive and critical knowledge of both the context of interpretation as well as the biblical text. They should be “insiders” to the culture that is the subject of interpretation. One does not have to be indigenous to that culture, but must have “acquired knowledge, experience, and the insights of the culture and [also be] capable of viewing it critically.”⁶⁹ Academic readers must not be “mere armchair theoreticians but active pastoral agents who are involved in the life of the people.”⁷⁰ Scholars must honestly and critically evaluate the context of the reading, looking to “unmask the structures and mechanisms of the status quo...that rest on oppression” and work for change and empowerment.⁷¹

Similarly, they must honestly and critically approach the biblical text, which may include “[uncovering] those texts that could be used to legitimate exclusion and oppression in society” and critiquing them so as “to avoid unconsciously absorbing them as normative, and adopting them as a basis for action.”⁷² Such texts should be viewed as a challenge with respect to broader biblical values. Scholars can also help

⁶⁷ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 155.

⁶⁸ Ukpong, “Decolonization,” 38. Ukpong at times mentions the tragic historical moments of apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Rwanda. The biblical interpretations related to the ideologies that came to fruition in these ways may have been of little interest to many ordinary readers, as they were largely theoretical and historical and failed to connect readily with the existential realities of ordinary readers. (For a summary on how the Tower of Babel, the Curse of Ham and other texts have been read to support segregation and racial superiority/inferiority, see Elelwani Farisani, “Interpreting the Bible in the Context of Apartheid and Beyond: An African Perspective,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40.2 (2014): 207-225.) Here are two extreme examples of what can happen when ideology and the Bible intersect in unhealthy ways. Trained readers, with knowledge of and sensitivity to context and the Bible are in a position to unmask these kinds of dangerous readings in ways that ordinary readers may not.

⁶⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5.

⁷⁰ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 22.

⁷¹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 154.

⁷² Ukpong, “Decolonization,” 45; Ukpong, “Bible Reading,” 191

draw out the underside of biblical texts by “identifying with and reading from the perspective of the most disadvantaged and unimportant characters in the text (those whose voices are not “heard” or who are passive) and bringing out their “voices”.”⁷³ They also may direct attention to texts that may not be as well known. Ultimately, the role of the trained reader is to assist in “[appropriating] the biblical message for a contemporary context using African resources.”⁷⁴ In order to be relevant in African contexts, biblical studies cannot stand alone or remain in an ivory tower. “Academic Bible reading is inadequate if it is not inserted within the dynamics of a people’s committed action.”⁷⁵

Ukpong justifies a partnership with ordinary readers in academic endeavors. “What authority has the common untrained people’s reading of the Bible in the light of the fact that in the past (and even the present) they have misread the Bible? In my opinion we could also ask the same question of “the scholar” and “the institutional church” for both groups have indeed “misread” the Bible, as we know from history.”⁷⁶ In the absence of a compelling reason why ordinary readers should *not* be included as fellow interpreters in inculturation hermeneutics, along with the established presence and importance of ordinary readers in historical interaction with the Bible in Africa, Ukpong affirms the value of popular interpretation for the academy. Ukpong, along with Gerald West, also pushes the opposite question, “the question of where academic readers stand in that process [of reading with], whose interests their readings serve and whose questions they seek to answer.”⁷⁷ There is only an “active role for the biblical scholar” because “the particular resources [scholars] commonly employ as part of their trade provide additional useful resources for ordinary ‘readers’ in their attempts to articulate, to own, and to bring into the public realm their inchoate and incipient working theologies.”⁷⁸ Ukpong and West agree that the relationship must be useful and practical for the ordinary readers, and

⁷³ Ukpong, “Bible Reading,” 189.

⁷⁴ Ukpong, “Decolonization,” 46.

⁷⁵ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 22.

⁷⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 161. Even with a profound turn to the reader, Ukpong does not reduce interpretations to whatever any reader thinks, but preserves the possibility of “misreading.” As later chapters will address, the reading context and the text itself are also forces to be reckoned with responsibly, and not all readings are equally valid.

⁷⁷ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 162.

⁷⁸ West, “Historicity of Myth,” 130.

must empower people toward “the sharing of power and privilege based not on social status but on the personhood of people, an empowerment that is inclusive and recognizes difference.”⁷⁹ In so far as ordinary readers desire to work with trained readers, and as long as the trained readers contribute toward collective empowerment, Bible scholars may also retain an appropriate interpretive role.

The life and health of the community must take precedence over the scholarship of the individual. Ukpong insists that trained readers “are accountable in the first place to the basic human and biblical principles of love and justice...In the second place, we are accountable to the community of God’s people that constitutes the church, people whose day-to-day lives are shaped by reading the Bible...only in the third place,” he says, are “we accountable to the professional guild.” This is because “ethical accountability” is more important to Ukpong than “professional acceptability,” though the two are by no means mutually exclusive and he does participate in the global scholarly conversation and allow the guild to scrutinize his work.⁸⁰ An interpretation may be judged a good reading if it emerges out of a collaborative reading effort and is accountable to the wider context by virtue of the social implications of the interpretation.

Working together

Even as trained readers and ordinary readers work together as equals in the interpretive process, differences between the two remain. Trained readers need ordinary readers precisely because they do not have the same perspectives, experiences, and insights.

In becoming biblical scholars we must, by definition, I would argue, become somewhat distanced from the realities of the poor and marginalized; consequently, even...organic intellectuals, once they become *biblical scholars*, even socially engaged ones, lose something of the sharpness of sight granted to those more deeply embedded in the struggle for survival, liberation, and life,

explains Gerald West, “So our expertise must constantly be in the service of their sight, if the struggle for survival, liberation, and life is our primary purpose (and not

⁷⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 159.

⁸⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 160

scholarship).”⁸¹ To some degree, the boundaries must be preserved in order to retain the “sharpness of sight” that characterizes the horizon of ordinary readers.⁸²

The horizons of each are dynamic, however, and the boundaries between trained and ordinary reading communities are at least partially permeable. A partnership of interdependence means that both will be “partially constituted by each other’s subjectivities.”⁸³ Different horizons embody invitation to a changed perspective: encountering another viewpoint challenges one’s own and invites one to adopt in some way the insights of the other. Ukpong envisions the “conversion” of the elite rather than their exclusion in the preference of inculturation hermeneutics for the reading conditions of ordinary readers.⁸⁴ This conversion is ethical and epistemological, as learned from liberation theologies: “An option for the poor is more than an ethical choice. Solidarity with the poor also has consequences for the perception of social reality, insisting that the experience of the poor and marginalized is a necessary condition for biblical interpretation and theological reflection... This involves an epistemological paradigm shift.”⁸⁵

Ukpong is primarily concerned with the ideology and ethics with which one reads, rather than a reader’s social or financial situation. One’s position as an ordinary reader, an African reader, and/or a poor reader does not necessarily make one a better reader, and such readings certainly remain open to critique. As Cochrane puts it, “It would be romantic idealism to imagine that the faith and reflection of local Christian communities, because they may be black, poor, or oppressed, is free of distortion, of entrapment in increasingly dysfunctional paradigms, or of contradictions not yet experientially significant.”⁸⁶ In addition, to take ordinary readers seriously means to engage them, not to romanticize them. A partnership between trained readers and ordinary readers should be mutually challenging and enriching.

A complete fusion of horizons may be only eschatologically possible, but dialogue and partnership allow trained readers and ordinary readers to cross-fertilize one another and work together for purposes of life and empowerment. Each will

⁸¹ West, “Disguising Defiance,” 210.

⁸² West, “Disguising Defiance,” 210.

⁸³ West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 38.

⁸⁴ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 23.

⁸⁵ Gerald West, *Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogic Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield Academic, 1999), 14.

⁸⁶ Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 4.

likely use and understand collaborative interpretations differently, and that is to be expected and need not be problematic.

Reading with others outside the mainstream

The best example in *The Art of Reading Scripture* of engaging readings outside the (white) Western academic mainstream is L. Gregory Jones's treatment of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a "saintly exemplar" whose commitment to Scripture allowed the word to "journey with" him.⁸⁷ Jones acknowledges that perhaps a "loss of the sense of the Bible" is true only among "people from middle-class, white (and perhaps Protestant) America."⁸⁸ Jones's use of Martin Luther King, Jr. is the sole instance of serious engagement with any liberation readings in *The Art of Reading Scripture*.⁸⁹ Jones does a good job with the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. and he uses the opportunity to acknowledge briefly the reading context and strategies of the broader black church. Latin American base communities receive mention as a context among others that may "produce a deep engagement with the texts" in the "wake of particular experiences of joy and grief, triumph and suffering, blessing and oppression."⁹⁰ Better than other essays of the volume, Jones makes an effort to follow his own recommendation to "read Scripture in the midst of a wide company of interpreters who both nurture and challenge us."⁹¹ "We need to read, hear, and perform Scripture 'in communion' with the whole company of disciples of Jesus Christ," Jones writes, "understood diachronically through time and synchronically around the world."⁹²

The section in *The Art of Reading Scripture* on difficult texts could have offered opportunity to engage liberation paradigms, postcolonial perspectives, or any

⁸⁷ *The Art*, 146, 147.

⁸⁸ *The Art*, 144.

⁸⁹ Even if working primarily in an American setting and looking to traditions in this locale, the Scripture Project could have further engaged the black church as an outpost of socially engaged reading in America. Interpretation of Scripture in the black church often conforms to the preferences of the Scripture Project: undertaken in and for the church by a community of interpreters, considering the past and other saintly interpreters, and with an effort to live out the claims of Scripture in the challenges of everyday life, judging interpretations by the fruit they yield in individuals and communities.

⁹⁰ *The Art*, 152.

⁹¹ *The Art*, 155.

⁹² *The Art*, 155.

interpretations outside the Western mainstream. In the first essay of that section of the volume, Ellen Davis mentions Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, acknowledging reading strategies toward a certain kind of (feminist) liberation just briefly enough to question them. Davis then mentions that Anglicans in Asia and Africa often do not think that the Episcopal Church takes the Bible seriously, but she does not further engage these other church members and their perspectives. R. W. L. Moberly writes, “Scripture consistently...deals with basic and perennial issues of life,” and wants us to read the Bible toward “life-giving transformations.”⁹³ Examples of contextual interpretations out of the global south could have bolstered and illustrated this use of Scripture. The authors missed opportunities by failing to look to interpreters in other settings.

The Art of Reading Scripture exhibits a general lack of awareness of interpretation efforts in portions of the church in the global south or even in sectors of the church that exist in the West outside the establishment. This is somewhat puzzling given the attention the volume gives to the church, an institution that transcends time and space. *The Art of Reading Scripture* does a good job considering historical members of the church, but fails to broaden the concept of church to include the vast Christian communities that exist presently outside the West. For all the concern the Scripture Project demonstrates regarding ecclesial unity and identity, the oversight is significant. Several of the Nine Theses imply a relationship between ecclesiology and interpretation, and the inattention to interpretation in the global south makes readers wonder about the role of non-Western Christians in the ecclesiology of *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Christians in the global south are extremely significant numerically in a sociological description of the church around the world, but *The Art of Reading Scripture* seems to see them as inconsequential for an ecclesiological description, or at least for their own interpretive efforts in the West. The Scripture Project could use to be reminded, it seems, of the contingencies of their own interpretive horizon, and the reality that they embody one perspective among many. Perhaps such a reminder would help the Scripture Project live more fully into the humility they recognize as an interpretive virtue.

Inculturation hermeneutics and African perspectives more broadly have had no choice but to face the reality of inhabiting one contingent perspective, always acutely aware of other, more dominant, perspectives. Ukpong reflects awareness of

⁹³ *The Art*, 189.

his historically effected consciousness, as Gadamer calls it, making use of the traditions in which he finds himself, even the traditions he finds inadequate and at times oppressive or hegemonic. Ukpog both uses and critiques the tools of his academic training and Roman Catholic background, while simultaneously claiming and challenging portions of his African culture. On the global stage Ukpog is not primarily concerned to contribute to the academic conversation or gain recognition for cutting edge research; rather, what inculturation hermeneutics offers the world is furthering “understanding of the Bible” in more of its “inexhaustible dimensions.”⁹⁴ By drawing on and drawing out African experiences, questions, issues, and realities, inculturation hermeneutics “read[s] biblical texts against the grain of the traditional understanding and so uncover[s] something new... This is how and where we can make a difference and a contribution to the understanding of the Bible.”⁹⁵ Other interpreters are welcome to use the reading strategies and particular interpretations of inculturation hermeneutics as they find helpful for their own contexts. Likewise, inculturation hermeneutics is willing to engage with and learn from different interpretations emerging out of other contexts, and in fact has a need to do so. “Tight circulation between a culturally determined hermeneutic design and interpretation processes by ordinary readers in that same culture may reinforce captivity and intensify it,”⁹⁶ Hans de Wit summarizes, illustrating the necessity of “dialogue and interchange with other readings.”⁹⁷

Summary of the interpreter in *The Art of Reading Scripture*

The Art of Reading Scripture succeeds in recovering the importance of the interpreter in overcoming some of the boundaries of academic biblical interpretation in the West. The Scripture Project does not confine proper interpretation only to those in biblical studies, but recognizes the insights those in other fields may have, bringing together historians, theologians, and pastors as well as Bible scholars. The Scripture Project at least gestures toward challenging the hegemony of academic interpretation by legitimating the church as proper space for interpretation. The Scripture Project’s

⁹⁴ Ukpog, “NT Hermeneutics,” 158.

⁹⁵ Ukpog, “NT Hermeneutics,” 158.

⁹⁶ Hans de Wit, “It Should be Burned and Forgotten!” Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another,” in Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andinoch, eds, *Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 68.

⁹⁷ Ukpog, “NT Hermeneutics,” 164.

primary description of the best interpreter is one who operates within the church and in some way reads together with others. Whether academics are still the best interpreters, as long as they read in and for the church, is inconclusive, but seems to remain the case in the absence of alternative practice or models. Similarly unclear is the role of ordinary church members who do not have theological training, but seek to embody Scripture as they work out their faith with fear and trembling. There are degrees of openness to the readings of others throughout the essays, though all stop short of directly engaging the global south or even ordinary readers in their own communities.

Summary of the interpreter in inculturation hermeneutics

Inculturation hermeneutics is an academic strategy for biblical interpretation, and as such includes ordinary readers and their resources as well as trained readers and their critical perspectives. When these individuals come together and read with one another, the results can be surprising, and most importantly should transform the community and the lives of individuals for the good. Other interpreters-in-context are also important, and while Africa's first priority is Africa, mutual exchange with other interpretive contexts and communities is valuable for all.

Comparison and Evaluation

Faith and criticism

Both *The Art of Reading Scripture* and inculturation hermeneutics would have interpreters read the Bible from a perspective that balances faith and criticism.⁹⁸ Neither one is very specific about what they mean by faith or Christian commitment. The Scripture Project upholds the historic faith of the church, and while they never specify precisely what they take that to mean, perhaps interpreters should affirm the ecumenical creeds and historic practices of the church. Thesis One offers general affirmation of God's "creating, judging, and saving the world." Ukpong mentions the community of faith and talks about seeing the Bible as good news and a sacred classic, also without explicitly summarizing how these bear on interpreters. While

⁹⁸ Each has their own reasons for this balancing effort, given their respective histories. See chapter two for more insight on the importance of faith and of critique for both interpretive traditions.

these somewhat blurry lines could be frustrating for those who want a hard and fast definition of who is “in” and who is “out” of the posture or community of faith, both resist assuming absolute powers of discernment, thereby leaving some flexibility for what the faith of interpreters can look like while providing general guidelines.

Ukpong and the Scripture Project adopt critical views of the Bible, history, and sometimes the church and suggest interpreters benefit from doing the same.

Concern for the present

The Art of Reading Scripture, alongside its heavy use of the historic church, also wants interpreters to read the Bible for the present. “What is most important are not the past meanings the [biblical] stories are thought to contain, but the present meanings they continually provoke in the community of faith,” summarizes William Stacy Johnson.⁹⁹ Inculturation hermeneutics entails a turn toward the reader, with the present context of the reader taking precedence over the contexts of the author or the text itself. The next chapter will take up how each conceive of contemporary reading contexts; in this chapter both desire interpreters to read primarily in and for their own historic situations.

Faithful interpreters

Who qualifies as a faithful interpreter is an epistemological claim for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project: reading from within the church is an epistemic position, and allowing ordinary readers to be partially constitutive of academic interpretation requires an epistemological shift. Both envision individual interpreters to be accountable to the church, the community of God’s people, for faithful interpretation. Ukpong wants to extend “into the arenas of political, social and economic discourses,” believing that “limiting our discursive frontiers within the church or the academy makes us fall short of realizing the full implications” of responsible Bible reading.¹⁰⁰ While both would have interpreters read in and for the church, Ukpong assumes other arenas are just as important, and implies that a narrow ecclesial claim on interpreters stunts the possibilities for interpretation. More will be said about this in coming chapters. Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics also requires an option for the poor; while individual authors in *The Art of Reading Scripture*

⁹⁹ *The Art*, 116.

¹⁰⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 153.

occasionally venture into consideration of the exegetical advantage of voluntary poverty (Howell) or reading with a movement toward the Other (Johnson), a commitment to the perspectives and experiences of the marginalized is not considered as an overall orientation of the Scripture Project.

Interpreters and interpretations at risk

Inculturation hermeneutics and *The Art of Reading Scripture* agree on the subjective nature of exegesis and, along with Gadamer, see the interpreter as conditioned by traditions.¹⁰¹ These traditions thoroughly contribute to the interpretive horizon of the reader, equipping the reader with tools and skills of language, a worldview, and virtue or ideology. Even as these subjectivities are decisive in interpretation, both *The Art of Reading Scripture* and inculturation hermeneutics admit to some degree that they are simultaneously at risk, as Gadamer says. Both acknowledge the power of interpretation to form and transform individuals and communities for good or for ill.

Ukpong explicitly says that the interpretations of inculturation hermeneutics are vulnerable and the self-conception of the community is at risk in the process of interpretation, and in conversation with others who engage in their own interpretations. Ukpong understands that contextual interpretation relativizes all interpretation, with each reading simultaneously being one reading among many and having the potential to “uncover something new.”¹⁰² Interpretations are at risk in that there are other, different interpretations that may supplement or challenge one’s own. African interpreters have always been aware of other ways of reading, and acutely experience contestation about the Bible and biblical interpretations. Ukpong the academic is aware of the need for collaboration with ordinary readers so as to push interpretations in directions and toward results he could not arrive at on his own. The text, too, retains a voice and power to change the reader and the reading context.

The transformative power of Scripture is a frequent theme in theological interpretation, with the act of reading bringing about change in the reader. Joel Green quotes David Kelsey, who explains, “Part of what it means to call a text ‘Christian

¹⁰¹ Ukpong regularly references Western academic sources, and on this point he credits Rudolf Bultmann for understanding that “even the critical exegetical methodology is based on certain presuppositions that are ultimately grounded on the existential experiences of people in relation to the text” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 159).

¹⁰² Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 158.

Scripture' is that it *functions* in certain ways or *does* certain things when used in certain ways in the common life of the church," and this includes the power of Scripture "to shape persons' identities so decisively as to transform them."¹⁰³ Any concrete transformation has to be contextual to some degree, beginning with the contingent identities of those who encounter the transformative power of Scripture. While *The Art of Reading Scripture* acknowledges the "situated" nature of all interpreters, the importance of contingent identities of contemporary readers does not receive much direct attention, apart from Howell's admission of his own privileged reality discussed above. Similarly, *The Art of Reading Scripture* at times notes that the lives and interpretations of others can challenge our own readings, but the idea that one's interpretation and very identity are "at risk" upon encounter with other contemporary readers rarely receives developed attention.¹⁰⁴ In a discussion on interpreters, *The Art of Reading Scripture* privileges the text in the dialogues between reader, biblical text, and other readers. Most of the power in this process lies in the transformative power of the text, though the power of readers in shaping texts and

¹⁰³ From Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, as quoted in Green, "Modernity, History, and the Theological Interpretation of the Bible," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.3 (2001), 308-29.

¹⁰⁴ William Stacy Johnson's essay has a brief section on "movement toward the Other," where he argues that faithful reading of Scripture must "employ a rule of love" (122). His short discussions of the philosophical Other, ethical Other, and temporal-political Other offer little sense of practically how to move "toward the Other" in a way that will contribute to "shattering the protective totality I have constructed around myself" (123). Johnson believes encountering the Other, both human and divine, will help one "move beyond the foundations of my own selfhood, beyond the limitations of my own version of the totality of meaning and truth, and toward the Other who claims me from on high," but exactly how this comes about remains unclear, with Johnson failing to offer practical examples of what it could look like to have "the stranger or neighbor...[make] a moral claim upon my sensibility and compassion" (123).

David N. Field has a cautious approach to the postmodern interest in difference and the other. "The discourse of otherness and difference is not necessarily liberative; it can be oppressive and even genocidal," Field reminds us, though he also sees "its potential for deepening and broadening the conceptualization of the option for the margins." "On (Re)Centering the Margins," in Joerg Rieger, ed, *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 54. Similarly, in the same volume, Joerg Rieger says, "Everything changes once we come to realize that some forms of otherness produced on the underside are clearly the result of repression and that nothing is romantic or exotic about them." "Introduction: Opting for the Margins in a Postmodern World," 15. I do not mean to suggest that Johnson romanticizes the Other, but especially with the highly theoretical nature of his essay these cautions are appropriate to keep in mind.

other readers occasionally receives mention. The primary hermeneutical lens of *The Art of Reading Scripture* is for interpreters to read the Bible as Scripture, sacred text with a role in the formation of individuals and Christian community.

A Dialogue with One Another

General openness to engage

Ukpong makes use of Western scholarship in general, and envisions a global village where biblical scholars respectfully interact with one another's work on equal terms. Inculturation hermeneutics seeks "dialogue and interchange with other readings," and as interpreters share their insights, resources, and questions with one another, scholarship will be enriched and global contexts will benefit.¹⁰⁵ In *The Art of Reading Scripture*, William Stacy Johnson agrees, "The boundaries that separate different traditions are not absolute and incommensurate, which means that there is still the possibility of making common cause in knowing and choosing to do what is right, in seeking justice, and in holding ourselves and others morally accountable."¹⁰⁶ Dialogue with others can thus lead to collaboration and "making common cause," and dialogue will simultaneously challenge interpreters "critically and constantly [to evaluate] our presuppositions and premises" with a posture that is "open to accept criticism in a way that ethically deconstructs and reconstructs our self-construction," as Ukpong puts it.¹⁰⁷ Openness to others can help guard against stagnation and misuse, as Daley observes in his essay. He suggests, given that historical criticism itself "offers relatively little interest or promise to the community of faith" and that on the other hand we are in danger of "theological misuse...to shore up sectarian interests," that "Christian exegesis must become not only more theological but more theologically ecumenical if it is to nourish those who continue to read the Bible in faith."¹⁰⁸ The global south and inculturation hermeneutics more specifically could certainly be beneficial to this ecumenical inclusion toward challenging potential misuse or sectarian interests elsewhere. It seems, then, that Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture* possess openness and desire to engage one another in dialogue at

¹⁰⁵ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 164.

¹⁰⁶ *The Art*, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 158, 160.

¹⁰⁸ *The Art*, 86.

least to some degree and toward some ends, Ukpong more intentionally and broadly, members of the Scripture Project more implicitly, as they seem unaware of the promise and potential of dialogue with inculturation hermeneutics, while having instincts that they need dialogue partners from other communities and traditions.

Sticking points of critique

While a degree of openness exists between the two, they also will have critiques of one another. This is to be expected, and will be part of a rich dialogue as each considers other perspectives and priorities. Since *The Art of Reading Scripture* never directly engages reading strategies from the global south, any critiques they would offer inculturation hermeneutics must be inferred. Joel Green, speaking to a potential concern that theological interpretation as a wider movement may share, mentions a fear that some readers “reject the historical enterprise altogether in favor of more radical forms of perspectivalism, reader response, and vernacular hermeneutics.”¹⁰⁹ This does not describe inculturation hermeneutics at all, as Ukpong does careful historical work, but this comment reveals a worry that contextual readings “radically” forefront the reader at the expense of history and/or the text. Ukpong recognizes his profound turn toward the reader as a revolution, and the Scripture Project still operates somewhere among paradigms that prioritize the historical context of the text or the text itself rather than the context of the reader. The reader has a place for the Scripture Project, as this chapter has explored, and some agency in bringing about interpretations (an admission not made by more ‘radical’ historical critics) but they likely are not ready for revolutionary reader- and context-centered strategies. Ukpong’s capable work on dimensions of the text and the world behind the text could ease any concern that a focus on the reader in front of the text diminishes these other dimensions, as later chapters will reveal.

Ukpong, then, expresses the opposite critique of the Scripture Project. While he recognizes that the “classical Western Bible reading methodologies” are changing, he sees that “epistemological privilege is given to the academy” and there is “no dialogue with ordinary readings.”¹¹⁰ This is largely true for the Scripture Project; even in highlighting church as an epistemic category, the world in front of the text remains populated with those who “learn” from trained readers who have the skills and

¹⁰⁹ Green, “Modernity, History, and Theological Interpretation,” 318.

¹¹⁰ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 22.

training to focus on the text and/or the historical world of the text. As long as the world of the readers, the dimension in front of the text, does not enjoy equal status with the world of the text or the world behind the text, the Scripture Project will be left with cursory consultations with ordinary readers and the “diverse others” with whom the Scripture Project desires to read. With an inability or unwillingness to admit the world in front of the text is equally important in the production of meaning, the Scripture Project suppresses untrained readers-in-context.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

Ukpong envisions a time “when the different voices of biblical interpretation in the globe are acknowledged, heard (not out of curiosity but with full seriousness and respect), and accorded a place side by side with each other.”¹¹¹ What will it take to dialogue with one another toward Ukpong’s vision? A basic move of inculturation hermeneutics is to make Africa the subject of interpretation, and this must happen on a wider scale within academic conversation (and Christian fellowship): others must see Africa not as an object to be studied and mastered (or “helped”) but a subject with whom to interact and better understand. Beginning steps in this process include listening and openness.¹¹² Charles Taylor, in an essay on “Gadamer on the Human Sciences,” demonstrates that understanding others and relativizing yourself are necessarily linked. As true understanding of another comes about, there is “always an identity cost,” Taylor says, and there is “no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self.”¹¹³ This is often a painful process, Taylor recognizes, though, “We are also enriched by knowing what other human possibilities there are in our world.”¹¹⁴ Bradford Hinze pursues a similar vein in more theologically robust terms:

Only by facing and working through the brokenness and distortion of dialogue, when that which has been denied or repressed, totalised or dismissed

¹¹¹ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 35.

¹¹² “A hermeneutically-oriented person will always need to cultivate a receptive disposition, of which listening is a central aspect,” says Elie Holzer. “Listening to Significant Others in the Process of Text Interpretation: An Instance of Applied Hermeneutics” pages 115-126 in Andrzej Wiercinski, ed, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2011).

¹¹³ Charles Taylor, “Gadamer on the Human Sciences,” in Robert J. Dostal, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 141.

¹¹⁴ Taylor, “Gadamer on the Human Sciences,” 141.

has been brought to light, can personal and collective differentiation occur. This way of the cross that dialogue will inevitably entail is the pathway toward mutual understanding and recognition, and inevitably includes ongoing repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.¹¹⁵

Thus, in order for true dialogue and understanding to take place, Western scholars, including those in the Scripture Project, must with honesty and humility examine where other interpretations have been marginalized and seek to change and to pursue a reconciled relationship with those others. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation require relationships and direct communication between parties. This thesis cannot offer these on behalf of others, but seeks to pave the way for increased understanding and communication between interpreters in the center and at the margins. This thesis may also serve as something like an act of penance for myself and on behalf of the Western tradition that I stand within: may those interpreters on the margins forgive my ignorance and self-centeredness, and accept my halting efforts to expand my own horizon in openness to others.

This chapter has drawn out the nature and role of the interpreter in the task of biblical interpretation as conceived by Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Having found some common ground in turning to “situated” readers, tension remains about how the world of the interpreter can and should relate to the world of the text and the world behind the text. The next chapter focuses more specifically on that world of the interpreter, comparing Ukpong and the Scripture Project on *context*.

¹¹⁵ Brandford Hinze, “Dialogical Traditions and a Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” in J. Haers and P. De Mey, eds, *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven UP, 2003), 316.

Chapter 4: Context

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on interpreting individuals or communities as Ukpong and the Scripture Project conceive of them. Both see the space of the interpreter as epistemic space that is decisive for interpretation. While Ukpong insists on an option for the poor and reading with ordinary readers, the Scripture Project roots interpreters in the life of the church. Questions remain about the degree to which the Scripture Project really upholds the ecclesial interpreter, when compared with Ukpong's turn to the reader. This chapter will take a thorough look at the space of the interpreter, broadly conceived, taking up the second of Ukpong's terms in his description of the task of interpretation: context.

Gadamer continues to be helpful in theorizing the space for the reader-in-context to face the respective epistemological crises that inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project encounter. This chapter takes up broader contexts as historically located horizons, embodied in a collective culture or form of life that Gadamer calls a tradition. "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point," Gadamer says.¹ Where a person stands when encountering a text—his or her context—shapes the point of view he or she inhabits and determines the range of vision or the realm of possibility in interpretation. This is true on a collective level as well: a culture or tradition also inhabits a horizon that makes certain things possible. While Gadamer has helped persuade many that all readers have contexts, not all readers acknowledge contexts with the readiness that inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project do in claiming and prioritizing a particular tradition or historical horizon. This chapter will draw out the similarities and differences in how each conceive of context and how they each seek to engage it.

¹ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans eds. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 269.

What is context?

Inculturation hermeneutics is often classified as a contextual method, seeking to read and claim the Bible within and for a particular cultural context. Though the work of the Scripture Project is unlikely to be labeled contextual, the group does, in their own way, also forefront context: in their case, the context of the church. The Scripture Project also occasionally explicitly refers to the wider cultural context in which they operate, and more often implicitly.

What does context mean? Context can be a slippery term, even in the form of a noun; once it becomes an adjective, describing theology or interpretation as contextual, there is a range of meaning for such phrases, depending on which particular facet or definition of context receives emphasis. A clarification of terms will be helpful for the ways this chapter will use them: generally speaking, a horizon is the range of vision of a particular vantage point. A broad notion of context is more or less synonymous with horizon—the all-inclusive vantage point from which a reader encounters a text. Tradition is also a crucial concept here, and is the collective horizon of a linguistic community. Though tradition is a communal concept, it definitively shapes individuals, whether individuals like it or acknowledge it or not.² More specific components of context include contingent factors that shape the identity of a community or individual, such as geographic location, social/cultural factors, and historical formation. At this more specific level of context, individuals tend to have several overlapping communities and contextual identities, drawing on multiple traditions; this is increasingly true in an age of globalization, communication, and

² As Merold Westphal puts it, “We belong to history (tradition) before and throughout our belonging to ourselves.” *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 97. As the subtitle indicates, Westphal attempts in this volume to make philosophical hermeneutics accessible and helpful to lay people. He does a wonderful job presenting Gadamer (and others, but Gadamer is his primary focus) in understandable terms and his efforts to draw conclusions for the church’s reading of Scripture are commendable. This volume complements what the Scripture Project is doing, using philosophical tools and thinkers to offer direction for reading the Bible in the church. Westphal ends up seeing “The Church as Conversation” as one of the last chapters is called, and upholds the virtue of friendship. His proposal is modest: “seeing those from other traditions not first and foremost as those with whom we disagree, but as fellow Christians who are trying to be faithful to the Gospel” (140). The title of Westphal’s book and its clear parallel with *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* suggests Alasdair MacIntyre shapes Westphal’s understanding of Gadamer, communities, and traditions, too. See note 5 below.

mobility. This chapter will begin with a broad look at context as constituting the horizons from which readers encounter texts, moving to consider more specific facets of context throughout the chapter.

In a basic sense, the horizon or context readers inhabit just is: the self-evident realities of immediate surroundings make up the first level of context. “Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination,” explains Gadamer, “we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live.”³ Context is “the situation in which we find ourselves,” but it need not be a static or unreflective situation, for there is always “a process of distinguishing” that makes it a dynamic situation, where the reader-in-context helps determine the future of the situation.⁴ An individual is thus inextricable from his or her context and the ensuing horizon she or he inhabits, but not purely determined by this horizon or reduced to it. This chapter on context is very much related to the previous chapter on interpreters, but these terms are not identical.

Language as the framework of traditions⁵

Language is a key component, in fact *the* crucial aspect of context that makes individuals and communities so thoroughly situated, or context-based, or tradition-laden.⁶ Language and the form of life of a human community are inseparable, for,

³ Gadamer, *T&M*, 245.

⁴ Gadamer, *T&M* 269, 273.

⁵ I am undoubtedly even if indirectly indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre for the ways I understand Gadamer and for the language of tradition I use here. Cf. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). For a specialized comparison of Gadamer and MacIntyre along these lines see Christophe Rouard, “MacIntyre’s Rationalities of Traditions and Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015), 177-196. Rouard finds numerous convergences between the two, but argues that MacIntyre does not give language as central a place, preserving a space for metaphysics that Gadamer does not.

⁶ Though language is a critical component of context for Gadamer, he by no means reduces context to narrow linguistic context. As this paragraph attempts to demonstrate, language is part of a robust sense of specific socio-historical context. Language is a building block for a particular lived culture, a form of life, to use a similar (for my purposes) Wittgensteinian concept, a tradition as Gadamer and this paragraph use the term. The breadth and depth of Gadamer’s sense of language is illustrated in the following quote: “Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all” (*T&M*, 401). In other words, there is no context without language, but language helps build an entire “world” and Gadamer’s sense of language is much more than words. For more on

“you understand a language by living in it.”⁷ This crux of language and community life is a tradition: Gadamer recognizes the “unity between language and tradition.”⁸ Traditions or linguistic communities are a large part of context or the horizon from which an individual or a community approaches and understands a text, even navigates life.⁹ As Merold Westphal puts it, “We belong to tradition by virtue of our thrownness into it, our immersion in it, and our formation by it. This is an ontological claim about our being and an epistemological claim about our understanding of ourselves and our world.”¹⁰ Gadamer appropriately recognizes the determining power of history and tradition while also preserving the agency of the interpreter—interpreters are unavoidably historically conditioned, but the resulting fusion of horizons in the encounter between text and interpreter may take on a range of trajectories according to the interpreter’s disposition and purposes. A reader is not reduced to his or her context, but the space created in that reader’s understanding of a text, “is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.”¹¹

Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project accept a Gadamerian framework along these lines, sharing thick notions of tradition and context, while preserving interpretive agency. They both adopt explicitly communal reading contexts, methodologies, and goals—inculturation hermeneutics making

language in Gadamer’s ontology, see Martin Nosál, “The Gadamerian Approach to the Relation Between Experience and Language,” *History and Theory* 54 (2015), 195-208.

⁷ Gadamer, *T&M* 346.

⁸ Gadamer, *T&M*, 400.

⁹ In an era of globalization and a time when an increasing number of subcultures thrive, individuals may have several overlapping traditions or communities that contribute to their identities and contexts, and this chapter does not mean to suggest that persons or communities are shaped by one monolithic tradition. Tradition(s), language(s), and social group(s) profoundly shape readers-in-context even when they overlap, and even when there is tension among them.

¹⁰ Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* 70.

¹¹ Gadamer, *T&M*, 263. Johann Graaff sees Gadamer as helpful along these lines for postcolonial and critical theory. Gadamer preserves the agency of the marginalized, the voice of the subaltern, what Graaff calls, with Fanon, space for the peasant, even while it does not escape colonial influence. “Fanon and Gadamer in their different ways allow us to escape from the inside-outside dilemma of postcolonialism,” concludes Graaff, and contribute to efforts to “reinstall notions of agency, of intellectual insight, and of resistance to the constitutive power of knowledge, discourse, and tradition.” See “Struggling with the Impasse: Has Development Theory Been Able to Re-Invent Itself?” at <http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/graaff.pdf>.

Africa the subject of interpretation and the Scripture Project reading in and for the church. Strict determinism, where all interpretation is dictated by a combination of language, tradition, and historical situation, would render any discussion of method or goals meaningless, if there is no real possibility that a text could be understood or used differently in any given historical moment.

Horizons and History

Understanding happens in a fusion of horizons between text and reader.¹² The hermeneutical situation includes not only the horizon of the reader but also the horizon of the text in that historical moment. Gadamer's term is *Wirkungsgeschichte*, translated "effective historical consciousness," "history of influence," "history of effect" or "reception history." James E. Crouch describes *Wirkungsgeschichte* as "the ongoing life of the text...after the author has, as it were, 'let it go' and released it into the world."¹³ Even though this description of *Wirkungsgeschichte* places the text in the center, it is contextual reception in a multiplicity of historical-cultural settings that shapes the life of the text. Every encounter between reader and text marked by understanding necessarily opens up new space: the horizon of the text expands and reveals something new, while the horizon of the reader takes in this new understanding. The historical horizons of the text and the reader are constitutive of

¹² There are, of course, hermeneutical theories that describe the process (or processes) of reading, interpretation, and application much differently than this. Cf. Johnson's essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture* and his discussion of the subject/object split that characterizes modernist exegesis and "assumes that meaning is a property that the text possesses" (19). For my purposes here, Gadamer's framework is helpful in facilitating a dialogue between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, and discussions of other theoretical frameworks are beyond the scope of this project.

Westphal's description of a fusion of horizons is helpful: "When we say that they have understood each other, we do not mean that they have become identical so that the difference between them has been obliterated and there is now only one person or point of view. What we mean is that the two worlds, which we can think of as circles, are no longer eccentric to each other or merely tangential but they have overlapped sufficiently that we somehow feel warranted in saying that they understand rather than misunderstand each other. This need not mean that they agree about the truth of the matter under discussion, only that they understand the truth claims inherent in each other's discourse." *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* 107.

¹³ James E. Crouch, "Augustine and Gadamer: An Essay on *Wirkungsgeschichte*," *Encounter* 68.4 (2007), 11.

any understanding between the two, and those horizons must simultaneously be transcended. Another way to say it is that horizons are necessary for a fusion of horizons to take place, but neither horizon will stay the same. The very act of interpretation changes the horizon of both the text and the reader. This chapter focuses on the role of the horizon of the reader-in-context, while the next chapter will take up the role of the horizon of the text. The dialectical relationship between text and tradition constitutes the “effective historical consciousness” of the text. Biblical studies frequently uses the term “reception history” for this concept.

Gadamer’s sense of *Wirkungsgeschichte* assumes a significant degree of unity within traditions that receive a text even across a multiplicity of contexts, and this unity is linguistic in nature.¹⁴ In order to understand a text at all, an interpreter or interpretive community must stand in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text; there must be a degree of shared language and experience in order to interact with the text in any meaningful way. Simultaneously, there will be distance and difference between text and interpreter, and the text must be understood anew.¹⁵ Presumably there can be different trajectories within the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text, though Gadamer does not explicitly take this up in *Truth and Method*. Such a reality would amount to a tradition of contained multivalency. A broad tradition could contain interpretive strands, each sharing a degree of language and experience with the text, while appropriating it in different ways. No one interpretive strand is necessarily better or worse than another within the *Wirkungsgeschichte*. This is one way to understand the relationship between inculturation hermeneutics, the Scripture Project, and the biblical text: inculturation readings and the Scripture Project stand in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Bible, both falling broadly within the Christian tradition and thus sharing some language and experience in common with the text, as well as

¹⁴ “Receiving a text” is not limited to direct encounter with the primary source. A text can certainly have a *Wirkungsgeschichte* that spills beyond the bounds of direct reading; indeed, many texts that qualify as classics enjoy such a degree of general familiarity. The Bible, or at least certain assumptions about the Bible, have permeated much of Western culture even in modern times. Many people in the United States or Western Europe up to the mid 20th century had a sense of what the Bible is and some of what it says even without reading it themselves. My experience in Uganda suggests a parallel phenomenon in the ethos of Uganda Christian University and Mukono town, where most people had a sense of the Bible whether or not they identified as Christian and whether or not they had ever read it.

¹⁵ “The understanding of something written is not a reproduction of something that is past, but the sharing of a present meaning” (*T&M*, 354).

some language and experience in common with one another. Each also approaches the text with their own unique perspectives and purposes, out of the more specific contexts and horizons they inhabit. Indeed, the purpose of this section on interpretive horizons, textual horizons, and reception history has been to locate both Justin Ukpong and the Scripture Project broadly in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the biblical text in that they both receive certain senses of the text and experiences with it (see chapter two) and contribute to the ongoing life of the text from within their particular contexts.

Hermeneutics, power, and ethics

Gadamer's hermeneutical theory garners critics around his understanding of language, tradition, and open horizons within the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text. Several see Gadamer as too optimistic about the ways dialogue works toward understanding and an eventual fusion of horizons; some say Gadamer fails to account for imbalances of power and the human will to dominate.¹⁶ Gadamer does demonstrate theoretical optimism and an assumption of human charity, and those with a more critical approach to inculturation may want to go beyond Gadamer. However, Gadamer is sometimes too easily dismissed as failing to account for human tragedy or abuse of power. Though he does not address these issues directly, his theory certainly has an ethical impulse and can explain hermeneutical and ethical failure. "The primary hermeneutical condition," he says, is "when something addresses us."¹⁷ This 'something' originates outside our own subjectivity—a text levies claim on us, or others challenge us by virtue of being other. Listening is therefore a 'rigorous' ethical praxis for Gadamer.¹⁸ Such an encounter of the other requires giving the other space,

¹⁶ See footnote 48 on page 24 for summaries of the critiques of Habermas, Derrida, and Caputo along these lines. Christian language for critique here would say that Gadamer fails to appreciate the depth of human depravity and capacity for sinful interaction with self, others, and the world.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *T&M*, 266.

¹⁸ "The hermeneutical experience also has its own rigor: that of uninterrupted listening." The Seabury Press translation I have been using exclusively thus far says, "its own logical consequence" rather than "its own rigor," but in context Gadamer is explaining that the hermeneutical experience, while it is something that happens to you, is not merely passive, and the sense of work that "rigor" portrays is helpful here. It is the A&C Black translation (2013, page 422) that renders it "rigor." Anthony Thiselton says Gadamer emphasizes the "place of the ear" in hermeneutics. "Resituating Hermeneutics in the Twenty-First Century," the third chapter in

and adopting a posture of openness to the other that entails suspension of our own prejudices. A hermeneutic experience requires Aristotelian *phronesis*—practical wisdom that includes ethical interaction with the other and is sensitive to context.¹⁹

While there are those, from philosophers to Bible scholars, who may wish to go beyond Gadamer, there are also those who find Gadamer’s vision of openness, mutual listening that entails risk to one’s self, and dialogue attractive even (and especially) in a world fraught with inequality and power struggles. Charles Taylor believes Gadamer offers a “fruitful” model for human interaction beyond interpretation of texts, including for politics and social science, a model that “shows promise of carrying us beyond the dilemma of ethnocentrism and relativism.”²⁰ Fred Dallmayr is persuaded that Taylor demonstrates that Gadamer’s hermeneutics entail ethical praxis and do not need supplemental critical theory.²¹ The question remains, however, how to proceed if one’s dialogue partner is unwilling to adopt a Gadamerian posture: how does one relate to the other (and to one’s self) if the other desires control and pursues complete conversion or annihilation of anything different from itself?

There may be times, then, when drawing on the work of more critical scholars to supplement Gadamer’s framework could be helpful. A hermeneutic of thorough

Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works and New Essays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁹ Riccardo Dottori summarizes Aristotelian *phronesis* as “the practical knowledge which is typical of the politician...who can perceive or pursue his own aim but which includes...also the gain of the city,” and “in this gain the good has to be comprehended” and the politician “capable to produce [it].” Dottori believes “the concept of *phronesis* was the basis of [Gadamer’s] thought, right from the beginning,” and this is why Gadamer resists method, since *phronesis* is never pure theory but always entails praxis sensitive to the context at hand. “The Concept of Phronesis by Aristotle and the Beginning of Hermeneutic Philosophy,” *Ethics and Politics* 11 (2009): 305, 301.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, “Gadamer on the Human Sciences,” *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (2002), 126. This is no dilemma for those committed to a particular ethnic cultural context, uninterested in anything unrelated. Ukpong is not insular to such a degree, however (cf. the final paragraph of section 2.11, *The challenge of globalization*, in “New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa, where Ukpong instructs that inculturation hermeneutics should be conscious of the global context and contribute to it, calling for “dialogue and interchange with other readings” with feet firmly planted in African contexts), and this thesis assumes the value of dialogue (see chapter one).

²¹ Fred Dallmayr, “Hermeneutics and Inter-Cultural Dialogue,” pages 59-72 in Andrzej Wiercinski, ed, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2011).

suspicion, however, is contrary to what Gadamer seeks to describe.²² More than letting the other be, Gadamer's ethic entails being toward the other.²³ Failure to adopt such a posture results in distorted perspective and distorted language, which serve as their own condemnation in their failure to describe and create a world that can account for the other as the other in any real sense. When such a failure occurs, there was no hermeneutic experience in the first place.

In what he calls "A Critical Discussion of *The Bible in Africa*," Gerrie Snyman expresses misgivings along these lines about some of the methodology he discerns in the volume edited by Gerald West and Musa Dube. He concludes that "the threat of reading the Bible for divine legitimation for one's own ideology and thereby disregarding the texts' own context of production as well as the context of those who will bear the marks of one's reading, has not disappeared." In fact, he continues, some of these African scholars fall prey to the very same methodological sins as the archetypal villain of the continent: "The same process that enabled apartheid a theological sanction may be repeated."²⁴ To sanctify one's own context or horizon to the point where there is little openness to the text or to other contexts of reception can be dangerous, indeed. Even so, the power dynamics among African scholars in the academy remain significantly different from the power dynamics among those who propped up the structure of apartheid.

²² I find a posture that is overly suspicious of the other and unwilling to suspend its own prejudices and listen to the other potentially suspicious in itself. A world where past wrongs are never engaged and segments of the human population fail to recognize others as human is not a very attractive (or Christian) world to me. At the same time, I understand and am sympathetic to some who may not be interested in hermeneutic experiences with certain others, particularly victims of abuse with their abusers. In such cases suspicion and an unwillingness to listen or speak can be an appropriate form of self-preservation, and finding other ways of going on, beyond Gadamer's model, may be required. Examples of people and societies choosing to pursue truth telling and listening even about experiences of abuse and violence are certainly powerful and perhaps supererogatory, even if imperfect, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa or Gacaca Courts in Rwanda.

²³ Jens Zimmerman uses this language to describe Gadamer's ethical posture versus that of Heidegger. "The Ethics of Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Challenge of Religious Transcendence," pages 383-94 in Andrzej Wiercinski, ed, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2011).

²⁴ Gerrie Snyman, "Hermeneutics, Contexts, Identity: A Critical Discussion of *The Bible in Africa*," *Religion and Theology* 10.3-4 (2003), 410.

For the purposes of this thesis, Snyman's caution is worth attention,²⁵ while recognizing the potential need for scholars reading in and for marginalized contexts to reach beyond Gadamer to find a semblance of Gadamer's vision of equal footing for all contexts and dialogue partners. The dialogue pursued in this thesis between Ukpong and the Scripture Project enjoys Ukpong's generally charitable posture, conducive to Gadamer's framework, though Ukpong's work in later years does demonstrate increasing resistance to imperialist power.²⁶

The Wirkungsgeschichte of the Bible

Multiple engagements, multiple meanings

The *Oxford Handbook on Reception History of the Bible* acknowledges that “no individual, school, or group does or can own biblical reception,”²⁷ and the introduction to the volume acknowledges Gadamer at length. An extended quote is helpful in explaining a Gadamerian understanding of reception history of the Bible:

The more history of reception of the Bible one does, the clearer it becomes that the human importance of the Bible does *not* lie in a single foundational meaning that, by dint of scholarly effort, may finally be revealed. This is not a resignation to postmodernism, but an acknowledgement that both inside and outside the doors of academia all of us live in a changing world in which engagements with the Bible are themselves ever changing....there are always new engagements between readers and the Bible (or ‘Bibles’, as that text shifts according to manuscript translation and tradition), and those engagements will never stabilize. No amount of taxonomical or theological effort will alter this,

²⁵ I am persuaded Snyman's caution is appropriate, even if he is, as runs through multiple of his publications, struggling as a white South African of Dutch descent with the changing times and power structures in a post-apartheid country, continent, and world. Snyman seems to be doing his best to find an appropriate space and hermeneutics as part of a “colonial remnant” in South Africa. His hermeneutics of vulnerability seeks to unmask exclusionary readings and assert an ethical obligation to the other.

²⁶ Ukpong's early work does not hesitate to point out the damage colonial missionaries did to the African continent, but as his work progresses, and as he continues to interact with other scholars throughout the continent, he begins to root himself more thoroughly in the developing postcolonial discourse.

²⁷ Jonathan Roberts, *Oxford Handbook on Reception History of the Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 7.

as the matter is ontological, not pragmatic: individually and corporately, we change through time; in its singleness and multiplicity the Bible changes too.²⁸ Projects like this one, then, that aim to bring different trajectories of biblical interpretation into conversation with one another, will remain pertinent, revealing more of “the human importance of the Bible” and elucidating what communities of faith have to offer one another around a shared sacred text.

Located readings

Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project recognize critical, intentional space in a hermeneutical situation. Both read knowingly in and for contexts, and the claimed contexts of each are intimately related to their concerns, methods and goals. It is also the case that methods and concerns lend themselves to certain contextual sensitivities, or lack of contextual sensitivities. Gadamer, for example, demonstrates how the horizon of modernity directed the methods and goals of natural science, and how epistemology in modernity alienated people from their histories and contexts. (See chapter two of this thesis for a more thorough treatment of modernity along these lines.) Louise J. Lawrence, writing specifically about contextual Bible study in the wake of modernity, summarizes, “The majority *modus operandi* of the Western exegete is still dialoguing with printed texts, not people in their own environments,” and she argues that this hinders any real attention to context. Lawrence also ties narrative to a sense of place, and says that shared stories are much better for gaining contextual knowledge than other abstract forms of learning and knowing, like technological knowledge.²⁹ Thus the differences between the horizons of the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics are not limited to geographical distance, with one primarily in the United States and the other in sub-Saharan Africa; rather, the differences extend to the very way the horizons are constructed and understood, and how each classifies and pursues knowledge. Horizons, then, are epistemological and ideological, emerging out of disparate traditions. This chapter on context focuses more on historic location, the self-evident dimensions of a horizon, and a later chapter on conceptual framework will further explore the epistemological and ideological.

²⁸ Roberts, *Oxford Handbook on Reception History*, 8.

²⁹ Louise J. Lawrence, “Being ‘Hefted’: Reflections on Place, Stories, and Contextual Bible Study,” *The Expository Times* 118 (2007), 532.

Africa as the Subject of Interpretation

Ukpong describes self-evident context as “an existing human community,” and goes on to include more specifically “the people’s world-view, and historical, social, economic, political and religious life experiences,” noting it is “a dynamic reality with its values, disvalues, needs and aspirations.”³⁰ Inculturation readings “consciously take socio-cultural context as a point of departure” and insist African contexts serve as the “subject” of biblical interpretation.³¹ With Africa as the subject of biblical interpretation, inculturation hermeneutics gives methodological priority to the contexts of readers over the historical context of the text. This does not mean history is ignored, but rather that attention to present context directs historical research, resulting in interpretations that are primarily for the present, but take the past into account.

Anticipating objections to this methodological preference for current context, Ukpong explains that making Africa the subject is “different from reading the context into the biblical text.”³² Insisting that inculturation hermeneutics is not eisegesis, Ukpong admits that “exegesis is not a disinterested exercise; it is indeed very interested and biased.”³³ The unapologetic bias of inculturation hermeneutics is accepting African contexts as ‘given’ and interpreting the Bible in light of these contexts and for the sake of these contexts. That Africa is the subject of interpretation has methodological implications and has to do with the goals of interpretation. Ukpong explains that a goal of inculturation hermeneutics is “social-cultural

³⁰ Justin Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 6.

³¹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5, emphasis in original.

³² Ukpong, “Rereading,” 5. Indeed the assumption that inculturation hermeneutics is simply eisegesis remains the primary objection from conservative Bible readers, including African scholars. Philemon Yong, a Cameroonian with a Ph.D from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, for example, is afraid of “subjecting Scripture to culture.” Yong seems to fear that any attention to context compromises a pure essence of the Bible that stands alone and holds true for all cultures. See Yong’s web log at trainingleadersinternational.org.

³³ Justin Ukpong, “New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities,” *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 159.

transformation focusing on a variety of human situations and issues.”³⁴ Bible scholars must be public intellectuals who engage the issues of African societies. With a focus on the present, Ukpong understands interpretation to be political and pushes “taking sides.”³⁵ Language can create or destroy worlds, and “our interpretation of the Bible is a participation in public interaction with the use of language.”³⁶

Ukpong intentionally keeps wider African contexts in mind; he does not want to reduce contextual readings to discussions of poverty, for example, but the inculturation paradigm has room for liberationist attention to economic and political realities as well as issues and experiences of oppression related to gender and sexuality or other identities, while also paying attention to religious/theological features.³⁷ Attention to wider realities in Africa makes the holistic social transformation Ukpong has in mind possible; it also resists reducing African contexts and communities to the problems they face. His general acceptance of the concept of Africa in adopting it as the subject of interpretation garners critics. He does, however, recognize a range of diversities throughout Africa, including religious diversity, and contends that “exegesis should bear the imprint of contemporary ecumenism,” given the strong presence of African traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity.³⁸

Ukpong drives home the necessity of contextual readings in Africa in a wonderfully concise paragraph that summarizes reception history on the continent, beginning with missionary exploitation and domination, moving to point out that “the structures of domination are represented today in the centrist approaches of reading the Bible.” Ukpong claims contextual readings “belong to the margins...resist[ing]

³⁴ Justin Ukpong, “Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed Justin Ukpong et al (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 12.

³⁵ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 153.

³⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 153.

³⁷ As chapter two of this thesis noted, Ukpong does not see the inculturation model at all at odds with liberationist paradigms, as he seeks to integrate the concerns and insights of liberationist postures into inculturation’s “holistic approach to culture.”

³⁸ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 155. That Africa is “notoriously religious,” as John Mbiti famously described it, seems to be among the reasons that Ukpong retains hope for redemptive biblical interpretation. “Religion is such an irreducible dimension of the human psyche,” Ukpong writes, “that people’s perspectives on religion determine most of the perspectives of the culture they create” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 154).

Ukpong understands that while the history of biblical interpretation in Africa often had a negative impact on culture and community, there is also positive potential that must be pursued, given the undeniable power of religion.

co-optation by the centrist way of reading.” They “bring to focus issues of interest to the margins but unimportant to the centrist approaches, and seek to unmask the hidden motives of domination in readings.”³⁹

Though Ukpong never discusses them at length, his mentioning of apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Rwanda are critical illustrations of why Africa must be the subject of interpretation. These historical realities demonstrate what can happen when Ukpong’s attention to African communities and concern for their thriving do not take precedence in the ways the Bible is applied in Africa. Realities of imperialism throughout missionary history (see chapter two) and these two examples from the late 20th century drive home the need to “re-examine our ideological presuppositions as critical elucidators of the Bible.”⁴⁰ There is hope for positive Christian witness in Africa, however, and Ukpong situates his own work here.⁴¹

Cultural Context for the Scripture Project

Situated readings

The Scripture Project as a whole admits reading context plays a critical role in interpretation, with implicit use of Gadamer. Johnson writes, “It is now generally agreed that the reader always comes to the biblical text with a certain preunderstanding, including certain questions and expectations,” and Daley summarizes, “*Understanding* a text is precisely the event of the interpenetration of horizons: the author’s and the reader’s, along with the entire set of cultural and community assumptions, intellectual models, and religious value systems through which each comes to participate in the world of intelligent discourse.”⁴² With the admission that, as Johnson puts it in his essay, “We have no access to truth apart from

³⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 151.

⁴⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 155. Biblical interpretation did, tragically, play a role in both situations, though Ukpong does not go into that. He follows his own methodological priorities and mentions the past in order to find more positive ways forward, focusing on the present over the past, even the recent and tragic past, though the ways these events shape the present are important.

⁴¹ “As Christians and professional readers of the Bible, we are participants in the entire project of Christian witness in Africa, and must see our engagement in academic Bible study as part of our Christian witness,” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 155-56).

⁴² Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 123, 73, emphasis in original.

our own situatedness,” interpretation is unavoidably contextual.⁴³ The ways *The Art of Reading Scripture* tends to characterize this situatedness are often with more abstract features of culture or disposition of character and not so much with concrete issues and experiences of daily life. Whereas Ukpong prioritizes lived experience in making Africa the subject, the Scripture Project acknowledges cultural/ecclesial/ethical situatedness.⁴⁴ Both see themselves doing “unavoidably contextual” interpretation, but highlight different aspects of context and understand ‘contextual’ in different ways.

In a piece other than his essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Moberly quotes Nicholas Lash to help explain why interpretive context must figure into even a historical understanding of the biblical text:

If the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be ‘heard’ today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be ‘heard’ as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness. And if they are to be thus heard, they must first be articulated in terms available to us within *our* cultural horizons. There is thus a sense in which the articulation of what a text might ‘mean’ today, is a necessary condition of hearing what that text ‘originally meant’.⁴⁵

⁴³ *The Art*, 111.

⁴⁴ These different senses of situated contexts emerged in the previous chapter on interpreters, where *The Art of Reading Scripture* focuses on the character and virtues of the interpreter and reading within the church and Ukpong focuses on ordinary readers and their questions emerging out of lived African experiences. Ukpong and the Scripture Project significantly share a concern for ethics in the chapter on interpreters, with both articulating the need for an ethical or virtuous reading posture, and in this chapter on context, with both acknowledging the necessity of ethics as part of context.

⁴⁵ Lash as quoted in Moberly, “Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2008), 96, emphasis in original. Lash goes on to say, and Moberly would agree, “there can be no *a priori* guarantees that this condition is or can be fulfilled” as “certain features” of the past and/or present “may be rendered quite opaque or illegible.” Again, this sentiment is in line with Gadamer’s understanding of religious texts: “a religious proclamation is not there to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in a way in which it exercises its saving effect. This includes the fact that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly, ie according to the claim it makes, must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application” (*T&M*, 275). Gerald West makes a claim similar to Lash’s with regards to the use of liberation readings for academic interest in

Moberly thus makes attention to context a necessary starting point for any interpretive understanding, even for interpretation efforts with a historical focus. It is in fact more faithful to the text and more historically responsible to read in and for our own contexts than to minimize them in deference to textual and historical contexts.

While not as centrally contextual as inculturation hermeneutics, the Scripture Project does engage context, both as a whole and in individual essays, acknowledging different components of context than does Ukpong. The introduction to the volume of essays begins by summarizing a cartoon from the *New Yorker*, concluding that, “as the cartoon suggests, in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place, and citizens in a pluralistic, secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it.”⁴⁶ It is into this reality that the Scripture Project seeks to speak in meaningful and faithful ways.

Context of the Church

In the confusing and often groundless postmodern ethos, with Enlightenment objectivity no longer a feasible framework, the Scripture Project and theological interpretation more generally claim the church for the safest, most appropriate context to choose for reading. This reading context is only self-evident by voluntary association, and that is part of the point of theological interpretation. If the Bible is read anywhere by anyone, it can be taken to mean just about anything. For

the historical events behind the text: “What we may see through the eyes of poor and marginalized communities may, incidentally, make some contribution to the concerns of the academy for what ‘really happened.’ . . . The poor and marginalized may offer those of us in the academy with ears to hear new questions to ask of our texts and the socio-historical contexts that produced them.” “Disguising Defiance in Ritualisms of Subordination: Literary and Community-Based Resources for Recovering Resistance Discourse within the Dominant Discourses of the Bible,” in Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran, *Reading Communities, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 212.

In the relationship between particular reading contexts and interpretive histories, the reverse is also true: “To ask what a text means should also involve the question what it has meant,” as B.R. Heffner put it, as quoted in Jeremy Punt, “From Rewriting to Rereading the Bible in Post-Colonial Africa: Considering the Options and Implications,” *Missionalia* 30 (2002), 429. More of a discussion of the relationship between textual/interpretive histories and contextual readings will follow in chapter five.

⁴⁶ *The Art*, xiv. “A cartoon in the *New Yorker* shows a man making inquiry at the information counter of a large bookstore. The clerk, tapping on his keyboard and peering intently into the computer screen, replies, “The Bible?...That would be under self-help.”

interpretation to have meaning and continuity, thereby lending some integrity to the outcome, a certain *Wirkungsgeschichte* is required. The Bible has been produced, copied, circulated, translated, read, and lived by primarily in contexts of faith communities. If the Bible ‘belongs’ anywhere, it is in such contexts. The preceding chapter took up a discussion of what this means for individual interpreters—see the sub section in chapter three called “Ecclesial interpreters.”

For the central role the church plays in theological interpretation in general and in *The Art of Reading Scripture* more specifically, there is little explanation or description of what the church is or how the Scripture Project conceives of it, either in the Theses or in the bodies of the essays. Thesis Six is the only one directly about the church; it says, “Faithful interpretation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action – the church.” This brief sentence contains deep theological claims. Notably, the church is singular. Given the range of individuals that make up the group, the Scripture Project is well acquainted with the realities of denominationalism, but makes a theological claim that there is only one church—all churches throughout time and space together form the one church. The origin of this community is God’s redemptive action—in the words of the Apostle Paul, the church consists of “those who are being saved” (Phil 1:18). The paragraph that comments further on Thesis Six indicates “communities of prayer, service, and faithful witness.” Thesis Seven identifies a biblical lineage through a “chain of interpreters” beginning with “the earliest communities of the church.” Theological interpretation tends to be orthodox, that is, in line with historic Christian doctrine, and presumably the Scripture Project would affirm the ecumenical creeds and practices of baptism and Holy Communion⁴⁷ as means of continuity and connection among the communion of saints throughout time and space. Thesis Three indicates both Testaments, Old and New, need the other in

⁴⁷ “Practices” is a weak term for historic sacraments of the church, but maintains a definition broad enough to contain post-Reformation free church communities as well as deeply traditional Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities; language of sacrament or symbol would be divisive, even if these more robust terms better describe what these practices actually are and what they do in these communities. The questions for on-going discussion with regards to Thesis Six about the church indicate the Scripture Project is aware of issues surrounding sacraments and creeds. The essays do not take up the discussion, other than to describe the act of preaching as sacramental. This is, likely, in order to maintain a general enough platform so as to engage all Christian communities.

order to be rightly understood. Thus, the church should be marked by engagement with and adherence to both the Old and New Testaments. A general sense of the church as preferred reading context, then, is sketched: a community connected with the Christian community throughout time and space, marked by practices of prayer, service, and faithful witness, affirming and using both the Old and the New Testament.

Specific engagement with lived experience?

McSpadden intentionally writes for and from a “post-Christendom church” and she demonstrates sensitivity to context, acknowledging a “multiplicity of voices in surrounding culture,” and she does think one can learn from context and surrounding culture and make use of them in biblical interpretation and ecclesial activities.⁴⁸ McSpadden mentions that the story of Jephthah’s daughter “highlights the same oppressive gender dynamics that are evident in various forms in our world today,” and then quickly moves on to casting Jephthah’s daughter a martyr, even a precursor to Christ.⁴⁹ Mention of parallel contemporary oppression in this case serves to illustrate our difficulties with hard texts more than to take up contemporary contextual application. McSpadden uses the term “souls” to refer to those who listen to a sermon, which obscures a sense of context, corporate or individual, beyond a spiritual plane.⁵⁰ A reduction of life and personhood to “souls” makes it difficult to engage the kinds of real-life issues and everyday needs Ukpong wants to prioritize. Bauckham’s essay clearly speaks within a contemporary intellectual climate, defending the “coherent story” of Scripture against the postmodern critique of metanarratives.⁵¹ Johnson includes discussions of foundationalism and deconstruction, also firmly situating his work within postmodern intellectual concerns.⁵²

The volume pays little attention to social issues or conditions in wider society, though Jones’ essay has some good comments about how Scripture embodied in a community context can serve as a witness, and Davis mentions current issues of the

⁴⁸ *The Art*, 139.

⁴⁹ *The Art*, 136.

⁵⁰ *The Art*, 127.

⁵¹ “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” pages 38-53 in *The Art*, see especially 45-49.

⁵² “Reading the Scriptures faithfully in a Postmodern Age,” pages 109-124 in *The Art*.

ordination of women and homosexuality in her critical traditioning essay, without following up on exactly how she would see critical traditioning contributing to these conversations. Engagement with issues of lived experiences like poverty and oppression is limited to holding up a few specific examples of interpreters who have had these sensitivities in American contexts, including Martin Luther King, Jr, Dorothy Day, and Millard Fuller, as well as a few others in non-American contexts, from St. Francis to Mother Theresa. See chapter three for more on how *The Art of Reading Scripture* engages these interpreters.

The Scripture Project as a whole does not acknowledge that despite methodological challenges to mainstream modern and postmodern interpretation, they remain firmly within what Ukpong calls “centrist” conversations and identities. Even amidst broader trends of increasing attention to realities of neo-colonialism and scholarship emerging in other centers, members of the Scripture Project remain uncritically steeped in structures of domination and thereby “unconsciously promote the ideology of dominance,” as Ukpong puts it.⁵³

Promises and perils of a postmodern ethos

In some ways, as mentioned in earlier chapters, postmodern shifts create space for contextual hermeneutics, and the Scripture Project’s postmodern ethos could help bring them along to recognition and perhaps appreciation of other readers and contexts. Gerald West is at times optimistic about what the advent of postmodernity means for biblical studies and marginalized communities, explaining, with the help of Cornell West, that “the postmodern shift allows biblical scholars to abandon their quest for the certainty of ‘the right’ reading in favour of the more humane concern for useful readings and resources...postmodernism gives opportunity to the different subjectivities of others, including the poor and marginalized—the most ‘other’.”⁵⁴ The question remains, however, whether postmodern sensibilities go beyond acknowledging the existence of different contextual perspectives to actually valuing or engaging with them. Jeorg Rieger says, “even though there is an emerging interest in pluralism and multicultural diversity...the margins are more or less fun places that

⁵³ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 151.

⁵⁴ Gerald West, “Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated,” *Semeia* 23 (1996), 27.

allow for playful transactions with life and the traditions of yesterday,” with dynamics marked by charity projects or “firm belief in the free flow of differences.”⁵⁵

Indeed, the economic realities of the postmodern global village and an artificial leveling of the field in which everybody is an ‘other’ often do no favors for those on the margins. For those caught up in navigating crucial issues of everyday life, such as whether their crops thrive and have a fair market, this is no game. Kwok Pui-Lan discusses the perceived relationship between postmodernism and liberation theologies from different perspectives; there are affinities that some see as helpful and promising, others think the liberation paradigm as it has been known is over, and still others see postmodernism as a threat to liberation and particularly to the agency of the marginalized.⁵⁶ While Ukpong’s work (by his own description) is not best characterized as liberation hermeneutics, he does prioritize lived context in similar ways and seek to empower everyday African people. David N. Fields retains hope that popular and academic African theologies may “[reassert] the agency of African people in resistance to the dehumanizing forces of modernity...and the self-indulgences and frivolity of postmodern consumer capitalism.”⁵⁷ While there are no clearly defined dynamics that hold true between postmodern and African contexts, there is potential for African readings in a postmodern world, while challenges persist.

Pursuing the Dialogue

Relativized contexts

The centrality of the African reader-in-context extends to an affirmation of other readers-in-context, and each will have their own insights that can be useful to one another. Likewise, the Scripture Project sees the need to read in community with other Christians and in dialogue with diverse others outside the church. “The more perspectival readings of a text we are aware of, the more dimensions of the text are

⁵⁵ Joerg Rieger, *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 4.

⁵⁶ See Kwok Pui-Lan, “Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” especially pages 75-77, in Joerg Rieger, ed, *Opting for the Margins*.

⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-Lan, “Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” 77.

disclosed to us, and the better off we are in appreciating it.”⁵⁸ The content of any particular interpretation is local and therefore not universally normative. However, contextual readings can be “understandable and meaningful” in other contexts due to overlap of human communities and human experiences.”⁵⁹ They can also “serve as reference points for self-criticism for other contexts.”⁶⁰ Thus the readings of inculturation hermeneutics are not insular to African communities, but in their particularity become instructive for other communities and settings. In serving a local context inculturation hermeneutics makes global contributions. Similar things can be said of theological interpretations. The value of particularity for broader conversations also gets at the usefulness of this case study dialogue—in its thick attention to specific dialogue partners it draws out things of heuristic value more generally applicable.

The necessity of dialogue among contexts

Dialogue is a theme running throughout this thesis, and here is *why* dialogue is required: an interpreter or interpreting community is stuck in their own subjectivity if there is no dialogue among contexts. “The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror,” writes Gadamer, and several Bible scholars have made similar observations about the dangers of being uncritically steeped solely in one’s own horizon. Jeremy Punt summarizes, “The realization that contextuality implies partiality, requires not only dialogue with other contextual situations, readings and communities, but also that the avenues for that dialogue should not be closed off prematurely.”⁶¹ Dialogue can serve 1) to clarify one’s own context, priorities, and goals; 2) to sensitize readers to other reading contexts, methods, and goals, and 3) as fodder for the creation of something new—a kind of fusion of horizons in the space between.

Inculturation hermeneutics is largely formed here in this dialogical crux: exposure to other reading contexts and strategies helped demonstrate that Africa by and large requires something different. African contexts are not Western contexts, and the needs and goals of African communities mean different ways of reading. Ukpong is able to fuse horizons in a sense to create inculturation hermeneutics as something

⁵⁸ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 20.

⁵⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 151.

⁶⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 151.

⁶¹ Punt, “From Rewriting to Rereading,” 417.

new, utilizing some Western methods while allowing the African subject of interpretation to guide the approach, process, and outcomes of reading.

The Scripture Project, in occupying the center, has not in the same way had to pay attention to other reading contexts and strategies, and has room for growth in each of the three areas that dialogue helps achieve. In the next section, dialogue with Ukpong helps clarify the Scripture Project's awareness of and sensitivity to their own contexts, priorities and goals. This thesis includes an aim to sensitize the Scripture Project to what inculturation hermeneutics is doing, and chapter eight will begin to imagine and summarize how a dialogue between the two can change each for the better.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

The Scripture Project and Ukpong in dialogue about context

Recognizing a postmodern intellectual climate and an increasingly biblically illiterate culture, the Scripture Project makes efforts to carve out a space between illusions of objectivity and certainty on one hand and surrender to nihilism on the other. (See chapter two for a more thorough discussion of transitions away from modernist epistemology and related issues.) Gadamer's theory is helpful to the Scripture Project, offering and legitimating a theological horizon from which to approach the text, while sustaining hope that a kind of fusion of horizons between text and reader is possible.

Ukpong describes and attends to context, including "the people's world-view, and historical social, economic, political and religious experiences" as the subject of interpretation. Compared to this, *The Art of Reading Scripture* demonstrates rather thin notions of context. While the occasional nods to context may achieve the theoretical space the Scripture Project wants to occupy, there is not substantive engagement with context. Perhaps *The Art of Reading Scripture* avoids much contextual specificity so as not to limit what they are doing to certain features or experiences, but the volume demonstrates opposite sensibilities in other cases. Attention to specific biblical passages often helps illustrate what they are doing more broadly rather than confine it to that passage, and even sample sermons given in a particular location have exemplary value for other homiletical settings. That *The Art*

of Reading Scripture desires to be applicable throughout a range of diverse contexts and expressions of church does not mean the essays cannot engage more specific issues or experiences. Ukpong in his theoretical work is able to highlight economic, political, and social aspects without being so context-specific as to alienate or exclude some. In his first order exegetical work he engages very specific parallel contexts for reading parables—for example, reading the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-13) with Nigerian day laborers. There is opportunity for the Scripture Project to expand attention to particular features of context.⁶²

In response to Ukpong’s push for more contextual attention, the Scripture Project would emphasize that the context and story of the Bible *are* our context and story as people of faith. Rather than primarily looking for ways the Bible speaks to contextual issues, the Scripture Project would encourage looking for ways to conform our lives to the story and witness of Scripture. At the end of his essay on “Scripture’s Authority in the Church,” Jenson sees that in Karl Barth’s “laboring between his identification with the oppressed workers of his congregation, and the spectacle of liberal Europe’s self-destruction, and his obligation to preach...[he] discovered that the Bible opens into a world of its own and that, however surprising and upsetting the discovery, *that is the real world.*”⁶³ Attention to context and justice in preaching can be done well and faithfully in prioritizing the world of the text. The most context-specific things one can do are Christian practices: what does it mean to pray, preach, and/or witness to the truth of the gospel in one’s own day? These are the questions and tasks for those who desire to read and practice Scripture in grounded, contextually sensitive ways. Howell’s essay illustrates how St. Francis pursued these things in his day, offering a portrait of contextual discipleship and interpretation. “The

⁶² Precise places in the volume conducive to more specific engagement with context include the following:

- In “Reading the Bible Confessionally in the Church” Davis notes that biblical interpretation can be dangerous, with attention to anti-Semitism. She could also offer a positive example of how to make the Bible come alive in the church with connection to contemporary issues.

- McSpadden offers a preaching suggestion to “engage the multiplicity of voices from the surrounding culture” (139). This could be a good section to offer an example of engaging a specific voice on a particular issue, but she really does not, limiting her comments to how to navigate the realities of pluralism.

- Moberly writes that the Bible “deals with basic and perennial issues of life” (189). An example of how to avoid “trite and moralistic” readings with attention to life issues would be helpful.

⁶³ *The Art*, 37.

texts are all about trust, living, and following,” says Howell, and these things are necessarily practical and contextual, with St. Francis serving as an example.⁶⁴ The Scripture Project reminds people of faith that the text and its proclamation or interpretation are about God, and secondarily about us and our contingent contexts. Hays summarizes that the Bible “is not a story about self-help, not a story about human wisdom, not a story about shaping our own identity. It is a story about God...anthropocentric readings are at best flattened and truncated accounts of the story.”⁶⁵ Any reading strategy that may put our issues and contexts ahead of God’s story is in danger of domesticating Scripture and limiting its power in our lives.

The dialogue between the two suggests that the Scripture Project could pay more attention to specific features of context, while inculturation hermeneutics could benefit from a reminder that the Bible is primarily about God, and only after that about us and our contexts. These two things are not mutually exclusive: attention to context does not necessarily mean displacing the centrality of God’s story. Each could perhaps strengthen their efforts with increased sensitivity to the priorities of one another, without compromising the focus and purpose of their work. The next chapter will continue this discussion, taking up the question of how each sees the Bible.

Other contexts and looking ahead

A postmodern ethos and their own self-evident horizons are not the only contexts with which Ukpong and the Scripture Project interact. The horizon(s) of the text have been mentioned in this chapter, and will be further explored in the following chapter on text. Judging from *The Art of Reading Scripture*, the members of the Scripture Project are more comfortable and adept at navigating textual contexts including historical, authorial, and theological ones than they are at getting at contemporary reading contexts. The essays demonstrate good work on contextualizing biblical passages in various ways. When the Scripture Project hears the word “context,” they probably immediately think of facets of textual context, whereas Ukpong specifically prioritizes African contexts in making Africa the subject of interpretation.

The wider context of Christian tradition or theological history largely *is* African, with church fathers including Origin, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria,

⁶⁴ *The Art*, 102.

⁶⁵ *The Art*, 232.

Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine from the continent. Though Ukpong does not often invoke this, it is certainly important, and amounts to some kind of shared Wirkungsgeschichte. While not particularly close to Ukpong and his interpretive context or posture, Patristic interpretation begins to make a way to the African continent for the Scripture Project and may help as a stepping stone between contexts. *The Art of Reading Scripture* and theological interpretation more broadly value and recover significant things from the Church Fathers, and African interpretation, including inculturation hermeneutics, remains largely pre-critical. Though both theological interpretation and inculturation hermeneutics differ greatly in many aspects from Patristic interpretation, it is a significant moment in a shared Wirkungsgeschichte.

Additional specific components of context, including those more theological and ideological will surface in later chapters on theoretical framework and procedure.

Chapter 5: Text

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the nature and role of context for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, with the Scripture Project pressed for rather thin attention to context, despite a desire to bring the text to bear on contemporary settings and communities. Inculturation hermeneutics may forefront human context to the point of domesticating Scripture and limiting its divine power, though African experiences of marginalization and divine legitimation of oppression help explain the desire to elevate context and make Africa the subject of interpretation.

After chapters with attention to located readers, focusing on the interpreter (chapter three) and context (chapter four), this chapter turns to the text. Any interpretive effort, and surely what Gadamer calls a hermeneutical experience, occurs in the space of encounter between text and reader. There is a need for interpretation due to distance between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader.¹ Again, this is not a bad thing, as the act of interpretation continues the life of the text and brings it to bear anew for the situation of the reader. Though the structure, grammar, and sentences of a text may remain, the act of interpretation entails new understanding, which can even be described as the text proclaiming something new, even without the words on the page changing at all. “What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author,” says Gadamer, “and made itself free for new relationships.”² This freedom of detachment for any number of ‘reattachments’ manifests in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* or history of influence—the reception history of the text, as it is often called in biblical studies. This chapter takes up a discussion of the biblical text, arriving at the next of Ukpong’s terms in the

¹ Certainly there are varying degrees of cultural, historical, and experiential distance between texts and readers, but there is always an element of distance. Even when an author revisits his or her own work shortly after writing it, the reception framework will be different from the mindset of composition, with perhaps new thoughts, connections, or questions coming to mind.

² Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans ed. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 357.

description of the task of interpretation: an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*.

What is the Bible? Introducing authority, importance, and relevance for the Scripture Project³

As chapter two summarized, the Scripture Project emerges out of the legacies of the Enlightenment. With the skepticism of the Enlightenment, along with the Protestant Reformation, Christians in the West began to emphasize the biblical text over the authority of tradition and the church. The modernist quest for objectivity minimized the role of the interpreter and focused on historical and textual analysis. Authority often came to be a property of the text itself in a modernist ethos.

Scholars and more liberal veins of Christianity often engaged the text as a historical suppository that contained experiential and theological perspectives from Judaism and early Christian religion; historical critical tools and demythologization could help make the biblical message relevant to contemporary people. More conservative forms of Christianity also engaged the text and its origins, but, concerned about the undermining of Christian authority and influenced by the Enlightenment need for certainty, found it necessary to make an airtight case for the reliability of the Bible, and began to describe the text as inerrant or infallible due to its divine origin. This description often extended to many kinds of truth or knowledge: The Bible is reliable and inerrant in details of history and science as well as matters of faith and practice.⁴ In both approaches the text and its history occupy central positions in articulating the relevance of the Bible, even if their arguments vary greatly. The

³ The nearly exclusive attention to the text that characterizes much of biblical studies in the legacy of the Enlightenment, summarized in the first paragraph of this section, is why I have chosen to begin this chapter with the Scripture Project rather than Ukpong, as in other chapters. The Scripture Project, in an ethos that prioritizes the dimension of the text, offers helpful direction to a dialogue on the Bible itself.

⁴ The Christian tradition from its earliest days upheld the importance and inspiration of books eventually included in the canon, but insistence on the historical and scientific as well as theological accuracy of details is uniquely modernist. (This is not to say that early Christians were not interested in accuracy—they were of course interested in things that actually happened. Their criteria for what qualified as true, however, would have been in different terms than post-Enlightenment fundamentalism or foundationalism.) I have often recalled the relief I felt when an undergraduate theology professor of mine flippantly, or at least rhetorically, stated that Augustine would have little use for or interest in the question of whether creation occurred over a literal period of six 24-hour days.

case has often been made that the two sides of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy occupy opposite sides of the same coin, or at least are different ways of addressing the same challenges and concerns of the Enlightenment tradition.⁵

Deep divisions within Christianity about the purpose, authority, and use of the Bible in the modern period give way to increasingly fractured notions of many things, and *The Art of Reading Scripture* begins by acknowledging, “in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place.”⁶ The Scripture Project, contending with the baggage of modern conflicts and a lack of footing in postmodernity, aims to recover why and how the path of the Bible is worth attention at all. The Project sets the scene by describing the Bible as “relentlessly *theocentric*,” saying, “it is about *God’s* action to rescue a lost and broken world.”⁷ The general posture and position of the Scripture Project seem to uphold the Bible not so much because of a divine origin as divine content, or perhaps better yet, the story-telling power of the Bible to make sense of our stories as part of, or potentially part of, a God-centered story. This description speaks into the postmodern situation by allowing fragmented peoples their own stories without alienating them from one another or from God.⁸ Johnson redirects modern concerns and finds hope for our stories in the biblical stories: “The Christian Scriptures set themselves up not so much as truth claims to be defended by philosophical foundations but as witnesses to the transforming power that no truth claim itself can contain,” he says.⁹

The Nine Theses use repeated language of narrative, drama, and story to describe the Bible; other describing words include truthful, witness, canon, tension, cohere, and unity. There is no mention of inerrancy or infallibility, and when the word “authority” appears it describes the lives of the saints who faithfully perform Scripture in holiness of living. “Scripture discloses the word of God,” says the

⁵ There are also those who dispute this frequently told story, insisting Christian biblical interpretation operated under a framework of inerrancy prior to the Enlightenment. Cf D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁶ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xiv.

⁷ *The Art*, 21, xiv. Emphases in original.

⁸ *The Art of Reading Scripture* never quite says it this way, but the narrative emphasis that permeates the Nine Theses and frequently surfaces in the essays points in this direction.

⁹ *The Art*, 112.

explanation of Thesis One in postliberal fashion.¹⁰ Theological interpretation is influenced by other trajectories responding to the fundamentalist-modernist legacy of the Enlightenment, including the Yale narrative approach (though Hans Frei does not make the short “Selected Bibliography,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, I am certain there is a straight line here), canonical criticism (notably Brevard Childs), and biblical theology *à la* Francis Watson.

Establishing Scripture first as God’s story beyond our fickle and fragmented stories, Jensen’s essay reminds contemporary readers that the Bible is in a real and important sense not about us, before it is about us and is our story. “Before we ‘apply’ a passage to ourselves,” says Jensen, “we first have to grasp it insofar as it is *not* about ourselves.”¹¹ Among the reasons that the Scripture Project finds history important is, as Daley explains, that “a historically sophisticated sense of where a text comes from...makes us realize the distance the text has traveled to be God’s word to us.”¹²

As I see it, a Gadamerian preservation of distance between text and contemporary readers functions in (at least) two key ways for the Scripture Project, beyond reflecting a particular understanding of philosophical hermeneutics. For one, this affirmation of distance guards against anti-Semitism in reminding us that the (Hebrew) Bible first belonged to the Israelites. Ellen Davis in particular, as an Old Testament scholar, has a vested interest in challenging anti-Semitism in the Bible and in the use and interpretation of the Bible. In her essay on “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” she writes that it is important for Christian seminary students to be exposed to what she calls “‘confessional anti-Semitism’ that has been, from ancient to modern times, a persistent element of Christian theology.”¹³ In

¹⁰ Individual essays use language of the Word of God, usually qualified in some sense. Ellen Davis mentions generational differences in the attempts of the church to read the Bible as the Word of God (10). Jensen identifies a voice of the Word of God, the incarnate Word, in Scripture, and cites, “Listen for the Word of God” as a liturgical introduction to Scripture reading (34). Brian Daley mentions how patristic exegesis looked to receive the Word of God through Scripture (78). Christine McSpadden’s essay frequently mentions hearing the Word of God through preaching.

¹¹ *The Art*, 31, emphasis in original.

¹² *The Art*, 87.

¹³ *The Art*, 24. In her essay here she says exposure to this confessional anti-Semitism demonstrates to seminarians “that biblical interpretation can be genuinely dangerous.” In my experience as a student of hers at Duke, she does a good job in her classes of sensitizing her students in this way.

another essay in the volume, Davis admits “the Bible has been read in ways that seemed at the time to authorize appalling abuse, even murder, of women, Jews, slaves, colonized peoples, homosexuals.”¹⁴ If the Bible first belongs to others and contemporary Christians are grafted in, to use a Pauline image, it is harder to use the Bible to oppress others.

The second bit of work this does, contextually relevant to postmodernity, is that it gives the Bible a ‘grounding’ simultaneously contingent and reliable as God’s story. The First of the Nine Theses on interpreting Scripture is that “Scripture truthfully tells the story of God’s action of creating, judging, and saving the world.” People in postmodernity are skeptical of anything that does not acknowledge contingency, but crave something beyond their own particularity and fickleness. Describing the Bible as God’s story with some distance from us preserves the contingency of narrative while lending it the strength and security of being bound up in the Divine. “The biblical stories tell us not merely about the nature of God in the past; they constantly reveal to us in new ways the identity of God in the present.”¹⁵ In Gadamerian fashion, the distance between text and reader narrows when the text asserts itself on the reader and the reader “belongs to the text that he is reading,”¹⁶ as Gadamer says, or when, as Jenson says, when “someone addresses us.”¹⁷ The Scripture Project is not overly concerned about the horizon of the biblical authors and discerning the ideology behind the text, drawing out instead the invitation issued by the witness of Scripture.

¹⁴ *The Art*, 164.

¹⁵ *The Art*, 115.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *T&M*, 304.

¹⁷ *The Art*, 34. Jenson identifies this someone as “the Logos, the second identity of the Trinity.” Jenson does not equalize Jesus and the Bible, however, but has a sense of the Bible giving voice to God’s life with us, made possible primarily through Emmanuel. Though Jenson personifies the Bible here as someone addressing us, changing Gadamer’s word from something to someone, he does preserve a sense of the unique voice of Scripture as text. In some real way the text addresses the church and lays claim to readers, via the reality of God With Us. Also pertinent to the narrowing of distance between text and reader, Anthony Thiselton [*New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 32] says that a text due to its nature (not only its reception and use) can be what he calls “transactional.” “It entails acts of acceptance, sometimes commitment, and probably deeper bonding,” Thiselton explains. This too seems to be part of what it means that a text asserts itself.

What is the Bible? Introducing authority, importance, and relevance for inculturation hermeneutics¹⁸

When the Bible came to Africa with the modern missionary movements, it was initially perceived and received as one more foreign object among many, and Africans easily observed the use of the Bible by missionaries and colonial powers both for good and for ill. Thus Africans perceived the text as ambivalent, and tended to be more interested in the *use* of the Bible as a tool rather than its nature or origins. Africans sometimes added the Bible to the resources they had for pursuing protection, healing, and success, and later to support liberation, equality, and empowerment. Studies as recent as 2015 suggest the Bible continues to function as an object of power for ritualistic engagement in African churches, with the African existential experience especially concerned with powers of protection, healing, and blessing.¹⁹ Thus as Gerald West demonstrates, *appropriation* of the text in context is an important factor for biblical interpretation in Africa, historical and contemporary, lay and professional.

Africans have had different ways of conceiving of the text, sifting through it, and using it. Emmanuel Martey's early 1990s research on African theology finds that liberationists tend to "acknowledge the ambiguity of scripture," while inculturationists have been focused on finding continuity and discontinuity between the Bible and African cultural life and thought; Ukpong, however, primarily identifies as an inculturationist but embraces and discusses an ambiguous sense of Scripture.²⁰ In addition to being influenced by African liberationists, Ukpong draws on scholars outside the continent as well, attributing a sense of "no innocent text" to David

¹⁸ See chapter two for a more thorough discussion of the history of the Bible in Africa.

¹⁹ See Herbert Moyo's "The Importance of the Physicality of the Bible in African Churches," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 153 (2015): 128-40. Grant LeMarquand also well-documents his own research and experience and that of others regarding the Bible as talisman up through the first several years of this millennium. "The Bible as Specimen, Talisman, and Dragoman in Africa: A Look at Some African Uses of the Psalms and 1 Corinthians 12-14," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22.2 (2012): 189-99.

²⁰ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis (1993), 106.

Tracy²¹ and quoting Carlos Mesters on the Bible as a force for liberation or oppression.²²

Given this ambiguity and Ukpong's commitment to Africa as the subject, Ukpong wonders if the Bible can still be read "with profit" and concludes that the Bible is "too important in molding the lives of people...to give up on it: there is too much at stake"—primarily too much practically at stake for the well-being of Africa in this case, not primarily what is at stake theologically or ecclesiastically.²³ Of critical importance to Ukpong is the Bible's life-giving potential: sociologically, economically, and politically as well as theologically and ecclesiologically. But the Bible can be used as a weapon and/or as a tool, Ukpong is convinced, and therefore "what texts have is not actual definitive meanings but potential meanings or meaning potentials" that can manifest in very different ways.²⁴

Ukpong occasionally uses the phrase "word of God," but makes the point that the word of God is always inculturated in human language.²⁵ He prefers other terms and descriptions, including sacred classic, a very Gadamerian description. With this phrase, Ukpong captures a sense of authority and claim on a reader without delving into issues of infallibility. Ukpong explains how the Bible as sacred classic affirms the value of popular interpretation even for the academy:

²¹ Cf. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 6.

²² Justin Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities" *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 156.

²³ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 156. Ukpong does express concerns for theological and ecclesiastical issues through his work, but his commitment to Africa as the subject means he forefronts the practical issues in the lives of everyday Africans.

²⁴ Ukpong, "NT Hermeneutics," 157.

²⁵ Cf. a whole section on "The Bible as God's word in human language" in Ukpong, "Inculturation and Evangelization: Biblical Foundations for Inculturation," *Vidyajyodi Journal of Theological Reflection* 58 (1994), 298-307. The Bible as word of God has received attention and discussion among African scholars. In *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford, 1986), John Mbiti claims the Bible as the Word of God and some African scholars continue to use this description, including some who appreciate and utilize inculturation methods, including Fidon Mwombeki. Others, including liberationists Mofokeng, Mosala, and Maluleke find oppressive elements in the biblical texts and challenge equalizing the Bible with the Word of God. Later in his career Ukpong writes, "As a sacred text the Bible is the word of God in human language which implies that human culture with its world-view, values, and disvalues is *intertwined* with the word of God" ("Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed. Justin Ukpong, et al (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 19, emphasis added).

If we see the Bible as primarily a classic, an ancient literary text worth attention beyond its time then the privilege could go to the academy....On the other hand, if we see it as primarily a sacred text...then the privilege could go to the institutional church...If however, we see it as primarily a sacred classic, which it is – a collection of the ordinary people’s experience of God in their lives and communities reflected upon and expressed in stories, prayers, etc before it came to be written down... then we [clerics and academics] must think twice before claiming for ourselves the exclusive privilege to interpret the Bible.²⁶

The Bible as sacred classic is a minor part of what Ukpong is doing, but it is a significant doctrine of Scripture that does particular work for him.²⁷

While likely spared much of the baggage of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy in his primary community of African Catholics, Ukpong comments briefly on inerrancy.²⁸ Ukpong affirms the Bible as inspired and inerrant as the word of God, but says these terms “have to be seen to work both [sic] in the biblical author,

²⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 161. Francis Schussler Fiorenza [“Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task,” *Theological Education* 23 Supplement (1987)], while finding strengths in a hermeneutical approach to a classic, worries that a Gadamerian assumption of the nature of a classic “does not take sufficiently into account the limitations of our religious classics,” and often fails to critique them (115). Ukpong’s work demonstrates that even in accepting the authority (a word Schussler Fiorenza uses) of a classic there is room for critiquing that classic.

²⁷ Moberly of the Scripture Project also uses language of the Bible as classic in another article outside *The Art of Reading Scripture*, noting we do not discover classics ourselves but are directed to them, and we approach classics with certain expectations. Moberly draws a parallel between appreciating classics and the emphasis of theological interpretation on character and virtue in order to read and understand the Bible well: telling a student they must become a deeper person to understand a classic would not seem strange. See Moberly, “Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2008) 71-100.

²⁸ Rob James [“Doing It Differently: The Bible in Fundamentalism and in African Christianity,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 34 (2012), 45] reports that African ordinary readers have “not absorbed the vast sea of Fundamentalist philosophy” and have “no philosophical imperative to make the text inerrant. Its factuality has not had to be established, but may simply be assumed.” Catholics throughout the globe, African and otherwise, have been less caught up in the whole debate than have Protestants. That Ukpong uses the term inerrant at all, even on rare occasion, perhaps demonstrates desire to engage in a broader conversation, even without getting bogged down in it.

the biblical text and the reader.”²⁹ Inculturation hermeneutics assumes the Gadamerian point that text is never by itself, but always “interactive”, and if there is no text qua text, any theological claims about the nature of the text are impossible to locate in the text by itself, but have to be applied to the whole process of textual transmission and interpretation.³⁰ Ukpong retains regard for the Bible as the Scripture of the church and affirms its divine origin. African experiences with the text lead him to understand and articulate the authority, importance, and relevance of the text in different ways than the Scripture Project, though there are similarities and even shared convictions among the two that make for considerable common ground.

Similarities on Text between the Dialogue Partners

The Bible as open text and the contingency of interpretation

Within a Gadamerian understanding of hermeneutics, the contingent nature of interpretation is clear. Not all biblical scholars and ordinary readers, however, admit that biblical interpretation has any factor of contingency in it.³¹ Thus it is significant that both inculturation hermeneutics and *The Art of Reading Scripture* generally acknowledge the horizon of the reader as constitutive in the process and outcome of interpretation. Both admit the open nature of Scripture, and that new meaning can emerge in different interpretations. This is as opposed to methodology that prioritizes authorial intent (of God and/or of the human author) and admits only one meaning to

²⁹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 156.

³⁰ There has, of course, been plenty of heated discussion about what inerrancy means, where it is located (ie in the sentences of the Bible, the propositions contained in the sentences, etc), and how it is preserved (only in the original autographs, in certain translations, etc). I, for one, find Ukpong’s sense of inerrancy helpful with a more comprehensive notion of the Bible and its history and contingency, along with general faith that God’s communication is somehow right and true, even if, as Ukpong says, “the human mind can go wrong” somewhere in the process. Here Ukpong also has commonalities with theories of ‘social inspiration’ that see God at work throughout the processes of writing, transmission, and canonization.

³¹ There are those who argue, for example, that to admit different interpretations “would be saying that God didn’t actually mean anything specific when He inspired the writers of the Bible. If we were to say that God’s word can mean different things, then the word of God doesn’t mean anything at all.” Matt Slick, President and Founder of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry.
<https://carm.org/christianity/devotions/what-does-verse-mean-you>.

Scripture: what the text meant when it was written is what it means today, and there is one meaning to be discerned by all people in all times and places.³²

Living and active in the present

If interpretation is contingent and open to new meanings, both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project seek interpretations that speak beneficially into the current realities of contemporary readers. Both expect the Bible to be living and active in new settings. Both acknowledge that contemporary readings of the Bible may have social, political, and economic implications. As the previous chapter on context sought to draw out, however, while the Scripture Project is open to the Bible on current issues of gender, sexuality, and poverty, they do not show much inclination to make use of the Bible very specifically or thoroughly on these or other contemporary issues. The Scripture Project does demonstrate some desire and ability to listen to the lives and interpretations of others who have done a better job bringing Scripture to bear on such issues, upholding St. Francis (Howell) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Jones) at some length and mentioning Millard Fuller, Dorothy Day, and Mother Teresa. Ukpong, of course, makes contemporary issues the point of biblical interpretation. Again, that the Bible can and should speak to current social and political issues, in addition to matters of faith or spirituality, is not accepted by all Christians.³³ While Ukpong and the Scripture Project end up with very different abilities and priorities in using the Bible this way, that they both expect biblical interpretation to some degree to touch contemporary issues of society is significant.

Jesus and the Bible as divine revelation

Both Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture* recognize the person of Jesus Christ alongside the Bible as locus of divine revelation. Both inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation have room for beneficial readings of the Old Testament that interpret it for the before-Christ text that it is, and Ukpong and the Scripture Project would admit good interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures must not overtly reference Jesus. They both simply recognize that God reveals Godself both in

³² I continue to encounter this conviction among ordinary American Christians in church settings.

³³ I am certainly not the only preacher to receive criticism for bringing the Bible to bear on contemporary political and social issues from the pulpit.

the Scripture of Old and New Testaments as well as in the person of Jesus Christ. Both Jesus and the Bible are in some sense the Word of God in Christian tradition, and Kevin Vanhoozer writes that early interpretation in Antioch and Alexandria reminds us that “the way one views the literal and spiritual sense of a text is related to the way one envisages the incarnation of the Word of God; one’s commentary is connected to one’s Christology.”³⁴ The Christian Bible is not the sole or even primary site of God’s revelation—God primarily reveals Godself in the person of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity.³⁵ Ukpong writes passionately about how Africans encounter the witness to the person of Jesus found in Scripture; it is Jesus that compels inculturation hermeneutics to the task of interpretation: “The central issue therefore that preoccupies inculturation hermeneutic may be stated thus: if Jesus is alive today, as indeed he is having risen from death, how do we make him and his message challenge contemporary society and the lives of individuals?”³⁶

The Art of Reading Scripture identifies “God’s revelation in Christ” as “the climax of the drama” of the whole of the Bible, Old and New Testaments.³⁷ Richard Hays, in his essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture* and multiple other places, argues based on Luke’s telling of Jesus’ appearance to the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) that, “In this episode Luke highlights Jesus’ role as exegete of the biblical story: the risen Lord becomes the definitive interpreter of ‘the things about himself in all the scriptures’ (v. 27).”³⁸

While inculturation hermeneutics finds Jesus’ actions in the stories of Scripture compelling (healing, restoring sight, driving out demons, setting the downtrodden free), and the Scripture Project theologically and exegetically affirms the centrality of Jesus, they share the conviction that good interpretation is done with a certain view of and commitment to the Jesus found in Scripture. This is promising

³⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998): 113.

³⁵ Interfaith work with other ‘people of the book’ brings this to the surface. See, for example, Johnny Awwad’s response to “A Common Word,” the 2007 open letter to Christian leaders from prominent Muslims. “Who is My God and Who is My Neighbor? A Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’” *Theological Review* 30 (2009), 78-88.

³⁶ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 3.

³⁷ *The Art*, 2.

³⁸ *The Art*, 229. See also Moberly’s chapter on “Christ as the Key to Scripture” in a separate publication. *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 45-70.

space for dialogue: if Christians are people of the Word, more specifically the Word-made-flesh, this is solid ground for inculturation hermeneutics to demonstrate that theological interpretation can and should, based on the “canon” of the Word-made-flesh, embrace those who are “excluded, minoritized, and marginalized,” as Jean-Pierre Ruiz puts it; Ruiz suggests here is “the hermeneutical edge of the preferential option for the poor.”³⁹

Best read in a community of faith

If a relationship with the Word-made-flesh significantly shapes reception of the Bible for both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics, then it is most appropriately read among people of shared commitment to Jesus Christ. That the Bible belongs to the church in a unique way is a central tenet of theological interpretation and upheld by the Scripture Project. Thesis Six summarizes that “faithful interpretation of scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action—the church.” “Inculturation hermeneutic sees the bible as a document of faith and therefore demands entry into and sharing the faith of the biblical community expressed in the text,” writes Ukpong.⁴⁰ African Independent Churches that broke away from foreign missionary denominations frequently operate under an assumption that the Bible is a shared document of faith that belongs to each member gathered in faith, regardless of literacy.⁴¹ Anyone present is “free to stand up and expound on the text in their own

³⁹ Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Reading from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 33.

⁴⁰ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 10.

⁴¹ Hilary B.P. Mijoga’s work [“Interpreting the Bible in African Sermons,” pages 123-44 in Mary N. Getuis, et al, *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton, 2001)] on preaching in AICs reveals preference for inductive methods that encourage congregational participation, both internally in receiving and applying the biblical message to one’s own life, and externally, in responding to biblical texts and preaching exposition with prayers, songs, and testimonies. Musa Dube’s field work in Botswana AICs [Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into ‘Demons’ in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999), 33-59] demonstrates that the Bible can be a divining tool for anyone, and that the Spirit can empower anyone to interpret the word of God.

understanding” or may interrupt with a song that helps explain or apply the text.⁴² Even in more traditional high-church settings in Africa the Bible often takes on a life of its own in any given setting or service. I have visited several Anglican and Roman Catholic services in rural Uganda, and the liturgy often allows for lay participation and ownership. I have seen a group of lay Catholics dance as they bring the Bible forward for the reading of the Gospel. The sung liturgical responses are nearly always lay-led and seem somewhat flexible for the setting. Sometimes there are opportunities for church attendees to share testimonies or Scriptural application in their own lives.

Both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics find a local church setting very appropriate for reading and interpreting scripture together. Word and sacrament each elucidate the other for those gathered. As Moberly summarizes in a separate publication, “Christian understanding is inseparable from a certain kind of ‘eucharistic’ lifestyle and practice. It is to those who are willing to live and act as Jesus did that the way Jesus understood God and scripture is most likely to make sense.”⁴³ Further dialogue on this point could clarify how and to what degree each is open to extending a reading community of faith beyond a local congregation. Is the global church just as appropriate for interpreting together? If so, both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics have much to offer one another as part of the same interpreting community of faith.

Taking the Bible as a whole

Several of the Scripture Project’s theses affirm the whole of the story of Scripture. Thesis Three reads: “Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the New Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor the Old be rightly understood apart from the New.” From early on, Ukpong argued, “any meaning derived from a text must be judged in the light of the meaning of the entire bible.”⁴⁴ Jeremy Punt describes inculturation as generally seeking to appropriate the “full canonical use” of the Bible, while liberationists tend to “select biblical texts with perceived liberative moments,”

⁴² Musa Dube, as quoted in Gerald West “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface Between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa: Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy,” *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002), 13.

⁴³ Moberly, “Christ as the Key to Scripture,” 66.

⁴⁴ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 10.

though some liberationists disagree with this assessment.⁴⁵ Ukpong does have preferred themes and portions of the Bible, as discussed later in this chapter, but he also has a sense of responsibility to the whole. Again, this is promising for dialogue, as theological interpretation (while also having preferred themes and/or portions of text) insists on the entire narrative of Scripture as a framework for interpretation. Ukpong's shared commitment to the whole witness of Scripture makes for common ground that theological interpretation may not have with other African interpretive trajectories.

A theological approach

The Scripture Project is part of the theological interpretation movement, seeking to read the Bible from a position of faith in order to gain insight for the faith and practice of the church. Ukpong has no problem with such a summary of biblical interpretation, and writes similarly that, "The goal of exegesis is to actualize the theological meaning of the text in a contemporary context."⁴⁶ What Ukpong means by 'theological,' however, may be different from the theological emphases of the Scripture Project. The Scripture Project does not limit theology to abstract truths, but they are often content to leave interpretation on cognitive, doctrinal, or spiritual levels. While the Scripture Project does want to see these truths "embodied," they often leave readers to figure out what that means for themselves. The "theological meaning of the text in a contemporary context" for Ukpong is always very much a practical endeavor. His unified sense of the human experience means that theological meanings *must* manifest in concrete ways in everyday life.

Dimensions of the Text

Gerald West identifies and explores three overlapping modes of reading in South African biblical hermeneutics: reading behind the text, using historical and sociological tools to reconstruct or analyze the world behind the text from which the text emerges; reading the text, focusing on the received text with literary, rhetorical,

⁴⁵ Punt, "From Rewriting to Rereading," 414.

⁴⁶ Ukpong, "Rereading," 7.

or structuralist tools; and reading in front of the text, focusing on themes, symbols, and patterns in the text and the world the text projects, and how these intersect with the world of the reader. Western Bible scholars use similar language; West's contribution is to explore how these modes of reading surface in trained scholarly readings and in ordinary readings in contexts of struggle. Though West's South African context of struggle is unique, much of his work can be extended to other African contexts, which are sites of daily, practical struggle themselves. West argues that no one mode has privilege, all contribute to hermeneutics of liberation, and all have their weaknesses for contextual reading toward liberation.

What dimension of the text receives priority has implications for the tools and goals of reading, and thus impacts the thrust of any given interpretation. It could be helpful, then, to discern what modes of the text frequently surface in inculturation hermeneutics and in *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

Ukpong's attention to dimensions of the text

Contextual hermeneutics are often associated with reading in front of the text, as contextual readings foreground their own contexts and read the text primarily for their world in front of the text. Ukpong summarizes, "Perhaps the strongest and most specific feature of inculturation hermeneutic (and other contextual hermeneutics) is critical analysis of the interpreter's context."⁴⁷ In making Africa the subject of interpretation, reading in front of the text is the most important aspect of interpretation for Ukpong, as the world in front of the text, that is, African contexts, is the impetus for reading the text at all. Without the world in front of the text as *the* significant player, there is no need for interpretation efforts. This dimension of the text is what drives Ukpong to spend a career on inculturation hermeneutics: "the purpose of interpretation is to appropriate a text's meaning in a contemporary social-cultural context."⁴⁸

Ukpong often utilizes a comparative approach, using historical and sociological tools to get at the world of Bible times so as to compare it to a particular world in front of the text. Indeed, Ukpong says attention to historical context "is important...for making the text logically resonate in the present context."⁴⁹ In a

⁴⁷ Ukpong, "Rereading," 7.

⁴⁸ Ukpong, "Global Village," 17.

⁴⁹ Ukpong, "Rereading," 7.

wonderfully concise piece, Ukpong answers a qualified yes to the question of whether African biblical scholarship needs the historical critical method. Ukpong admits inculturation hermeneutics “is heavily dependent on the historical critical method of the analysis of the context of the biblical text,” and one of the reasons is because it is historical work that meaningfully and responsibly connects the context of the text with the context of interpretation so as to avoid imposing meaning on the text.⁵⁰ In his own work consisting primarily of exegesis on a particular passage, including his work on parables, Ukpong demonstrates careful work behind the text, investigating the setting of the parable with African contexts as the subject of his interpretation.

This is a strategy “significantly different,” he maintains, from classic historical critical work that is an end in itself.⁵¹ Whereas behind the text work has often been the only dimension to receive much attention in modern western scholarship, Ukpong puts this dimension to work for the sake of the world in front of the text. In other words, historical criticism and other behind the text work are tools to serve the interests of the African subject. Despite Ukpong’s prolific and competent attention to this dimension of the text, to equate him with old school historical criticism is to miss the point entirely of what he sees inculturation hermeneutics as doing and being. Though some of the methodology is the same, Ukpong sees inculturation hermeneutics as fundamentally different in key ways;⁵² the next chapter will explore the ideology, conceptual framework, epistemology, and worldview out of which inculturation hermeneutics operates.

Reading the text may be the dimension that usually gets the least attention in contextual readings, but Ukpong insists on the importance of this too. From early in his inculturation efforts, Ukpong said the Bible should be “interpreted holistically” with literary, historical, and contemporary contexts in mind.⁵³ There are examples in his work of attention to the text, especially in topical exegetical pieces, where he mines the text for portions of Scripture that speak to his question or theme. In

⁵⁰ Justin Ukpong, “Can African Old Testament Scholarship Escape the Historical Critical Approach?” *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* Issue 7 (1999), 2-5.

⁵¹ Ukpong, “Can African OT Scholarship Escape the Historical Critical Approach?,” 4.

⁵² “Methods are not so irredeemably steeped in their original ideologies that they cannot serve other purposes...any method can be pressed into the service of any ideology” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 150).

⁵³ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 6-7.

“Pluralism and the Problem of the Discernment of Spirits,” for instance, he pays careful attention to what Paul is doing in a discussion of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church, explores Hebrew and Greek words *ruah* and *pneuma*, and investigates instances in the Bible that do not contain these words but still have to do with discerning of spirits.⁵⁴ He does a survey of Old and New Testament texts on poverty and the poor in his article on “Option for the Poor: A Modern Challenge for the Church in Africa.”⁵⁵ His work on parables also draws on literary features, locating the parable in the wider work the Gospel is doing with the themes of the parable; his work on the Shrewd Manager, for example, puts the parable in a wider Lukan discussion of riches and what is valuable.

There is certainly more room for the use of literary tools in Ukpong’s work. Ukpong claims that “a careful analysis of the structure of the argument or narrative in the text in order to grasp the inner logic of the text is emphasized in inculturation hermeneutic,”⁵⁶ but he does not pay much attention to narrative as a literary feature. This is somewhat curious, especially since stories are a large part of African culture and an important component in shaping worldview.⁵⁷ This is perhaps an area of missed opportunity, where Ukpong has a sense that attention to narrative could be helpful, but he rarely gets to it. Gerald West makes the point that literary tools, even if not primary in the reading strategies of ordinary readers, “offer more egalitarian entry

⁵⁴ Justin Ukpong, “Pluralism and the Problem of the Discernment of Spirits,” *The Ecumenical Review* 41.3 (1989), 416-25.

⁵⁵ Justin Ukpong, “Option for the Poor: A Modern Challenge for the Church in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 36 (1994), 350-65.

⁵⁶ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 7.

⁵⁷ The importance of stories in African culture and worldview is well documented. Chris Ampadu writes on the *William Carey International Development Journal* website (“Reconsidering African Worldview and Development,” Nov, 2011) that “Stories are powerful in Africa...[they] shape our way of thinking, attitudes, motivations, behavior, our do’s and don’ts and actions....The stories that people tell or stories they hear determine the kind of people they will be: their success and prosperity, whether they live in ignorance or have knowledge of the true value of Africa’s resources, whether they choose mediocrity or excellence, corruption or integrity, a mindset of dependency or a mindset of responsible interdependence.” Ampadu concludes that the church, with the help of the Bible, can assist with “reshaping minds.” <http://www.wciujournal.org/blog/post/reconsidering-african-worldview-and-development>.

points” for collaboration between ordinary and scholarly readers.⁵⁸ West, following James Scott, also sees promise in “more nuanced and literary reading” for recovering or amplifying “the resistance of subordinate groups [that] is present in the public transcript” of the Bible. Again with the help of Scott, West explains, “subordinate groups have typically learned to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure.”⁵⁹ Literary tools may help get at such disguised resistance present in the biblical texts, perhaps especially in combination with the insights of ordinary readers who have their own experience with hidden transcripts as they negotiate life from the margins of a dominant culture. Ukpong wants to level the playing field between trained and ordinary readers, and he aims to draw out “the perspectives of the most disadvantaged characters (generally whose voices are not ‘heard’ or are passive) in the text,” but he rarely capitalizes on literary methods to pursue these goals.⁶⁰ There is room for strengthening attention to the dimension of the text, which would further differentiate inculturation hermeneutics from traditional western historical criticism.

The Scripture Project’s attention to dimensions of the text

The Scripture Project, in emphasizing a narrative structure for reading the text, seems primarily to see themselves as reading the text, supplemented by historical research behind the text and occasional nods toward situations in front of the text. Bauckham’s essay on “Reading the Scripture as a Coherent Story” recognizes that not

⁵⁸ “Locating ‘Contextual Bible Study’ within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70.1 (2014).

⁵⁹ “Disguising Defiance,” 196. For instance, escape plans or tips among slaves in the American South were disguised as church hymns in Negro spirituals. Slaves could always fall back on a spiritual or religious meaning to “wade in the water” or “the gospel train,” even while the lyrics also explained or celebrated successful escape.

⁶⁰ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 163. Mark Ighile and Daniel Olowookere [“A Literary Study of the Bible and its Implications for Church Leadership & Transformation in Nigeria,” *Language in India* 13.2 (2013)] claim that in African biblical studies “devotion to the sacredness of the biblical text has placed great restraint on the much needed attention to a proper socio-literary critique” (279). Ukpong demonstrates ability to hold the sacredness of the biblical text in tension with his commitment to African ordinary readers in other ways, and I do not think his thin attention to literary readings is because of a high view of Scripture. Surely he is aware of literary tools and possesses some ability to use them; why he does not put them to use in the ways West suggests is unclear.

all of the Bible is narrative in structure, and that there is unity and diversity throughout the books and pages of Scripture. Bauckham, a New Testament scholar, looks at genres and subject of Scripture, as well as divine inspiration and human authorship, and suggests the Bible reveals itself as a pre-modern metanarrative.⁶¹ Bauckham sees the story of Scripture as an alternative to totalitarianism on one hand and on the other radical relativism that fails to offer a framework for dialogue and openness to the truth of the other in surrendering to incommensurability and abandoning a need (or even possibility) to respect difference. While Bauckham's work in this essay essentially amounts to conceptual framework, more suitable for the next chapter of this thesis, he makes efforts to follow the text of the Bible itself, in conversation with his own postmodern moment, in identifying this framework, with attention to narrative elements such as content, plot, and characters as well as other literary qualities and realities.

Especially the essays in the section on Reading Difficult Texts demonstrate attention to word studies, surveying a particular character or theme in the text, attending to the textual work of other scholars, intertextual exploration, and other work on the dimension of the text. Moberly seems to summarize the general posture of the group toward the dimension of the text a couple different times: "Rigorous exegetical study of the biblical text is necessary, but it is not sufficient," he writes toward the end of his essay on Genesis 22.⁶² Primarily a theologian, Moberly upholds tasks of textual study that are hardly directly theological, including mastery of the biblical languages: "for the rewards of theological insight, though potentially great, come only after the exercise of prolonged self-discipline and patience in the mastering

⁶¹ This metanarrative "is a story about the meaning of the whole of reality," in which history and events are "comprehensible insofar as God reveals his purposes and fulfills them" (*The Art*, 48, 49) Human agency is also very much at play, but the contingency of history is such that much of what "occurs is not the intended result of human activity" but the providence of God through "chance, coincidence, and unintended results of human activity" as much as through the obedience of humankind to divine will (*The Art*, 49). Among other things, Bauckham notes that this metanarrative is a "story of God's repeated choice of the dominated and the wretched, the powerless and the marginal," and particularly in the cross this story "breaks the cycle in which the oppressed become oppressors in their turn" (*The Art*, 52).

⁶² "Living Dangerously: Genesis 22 and the Quest for Good Biblical Interpretation," *The Art*, 197.

of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and idiom,” he writes on the first page of an essay on John 7:14-18 and knowing the truth.⁶³

The Scripture Project accepts the Bible as Christian Scripture without having to dive too deeply behind the text to discover how it came to be canonized. Still, text as canon allows for engaging the text with historical-critical tools and for accepting the ecclesiastical form, as the historical, textual, and theological are all wrapped up together.⁶⁴ Learning more about the world behind the text can serve purposes beyond finding out ‘what really happened’ as modernist criticism was often focused on; it can be helpful in understanding the Bible as Christian Scripture. Again, Moberly summarizes well what work behind the text can do, using a specific example:

To recognize that Gen 22 in historical terms tells one more about the religious norms of post-Solomonic Judah than about Israel’s ancestors in the second millennium B.C. is not to transpose biblical faith into some kind of ahistorical Gnosticism but rather to recognize that the peculiar mixture of event, memory, narrative, creative retelling, identity formation, community construction, moral seriousness, and religious principle that have gone into making Gen 22 has value on its own terms.⁶⁵

Gaining a sense of what the text is and what went into it helps shed light on it as canon, and *The Art of Reading Scripture* attends to this work as the authors, or even preachers, find helpful. Richard Hays, for example, offers a couple sentences at the

⁶³ “How Can We Know the Truth? A Study of John 7:14-18,” *The Art*, 239.

Moberly’s work, in *The Art of Reading Scripture* and otherwise, consistently exemplifies such a commitment to rigorous textual work for theological payoff. Even in a constructive study for the *Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine*, Moberly not only describes hermeneutical theory or prescribes ways of reading, but undertakes his own careful study of both Old and New Testament texts, showing by example how to give due diligence to the dimensions of the text and the world behind the text before drawing theological conclusions for the world in front of the text. See *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

⁶⁴ Joel Green [“Rethinking ‘History’ for Theological Interpretation” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5.2 (2011), 159-174] summarizes, “history writing is not for us [adherents to theological interpretation] an add-on to the theological task, nor is theology an add-on to the work of historiography. Though one might wish to speak heuristically of Luke’s or Matthew’s theological agenda or historical interests or literary artistry, these are not “parts” of a Lukan or Matthean enterprise. A narrative like Mark’s is not molecular, divisible into three parts history, two parts theology, and one part literary artistry. It simply is a theologically determined narrative representation of historical events” (172).

⁶⁵ *The Art*, 195.

beginning of a sermon to contextualize Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as a story for the nation of Israel experiencing foreign rule even after returning from exile in Babylon,⁶⁶ before turning to the more subtle pagan powers of our time and upholding the men as heroes who show us how to say no.

Joel Green, a prominent figure in theological interpretation who is not a member of the Scripture Project but often has affinities with them, wrote an interesting article on history and theological interpretation, already cited in a footnote to supplement the previous paragraph. Green even likens theological interpretation (like that of the Scripture Project) with “other forms of ‘interested’ exegesis” including African approaches, and says it is “marked less by technique and more by certain sensibilities and aims.”⁶⁷ Following some work in the philosophy of history, Green writes about the importance of attending to the dimension behind the text with words that sound like something Ukpong’s comparative sensibilities would readily agree with: “a fulsome grasp of the socio-religio-cultural complex within which Acts was produced is informative—not so that we might trap Acts within its historical world and not because Acts (or any other text) gives us uninterpreted access to that world but so that we can see how Acts embraces and undermines its world as it invites its audience to discern and participate in God’s restorative agenda.”⁶⁸

While the Scripture Project does use literary tools and attention to the text itself to supplement the historical world behind the text for such endeavors as Green describes, the Scripture Project does not often use literary tools in the ways Gerald West describes, to amplify hidden resistance of subordinate groups or characters, even though they would agree that the text simultaneously “embraces and undermines its world,” similar to Scott’s description of a public transcript. Thus, the similar interests of Ukpong and the Scripture Project to get at the ways “God’s restorative agenda” breaks through the world of the text could both use increased attention to literary features toward these ends.

The Art of Reading Scripture certainly admits the world in front of the text is a critical component in accurate and responsible interpretation. The Bible is the book of

⁶⁶ Hays specifically mentions Antiochus IV Epiphanes. “Who Is the God that Will Deliver You?” *The Art*, 306.

⁶⁷ Green, “Rethinking ‘History’,” 162. Ukpong has plenty of technique (as does the Scripture Project), but I think Green’s point is that the loyalty of these scholars is more to context and purpose than to a particular methodology.

⁶⁸ Green, “Rethinking ‘History’,” 172.

the church, and ecclesial worlds in front of the text are bound up with the purpose and function of Scripture. For the Scripture Project, the canon itself always has orientation back to the world behind the text and orientation forward to the world in front of the text. The text is able to have orientation simultaneously to the past, the present, and the future at least in significant part because it is God's story—the One who was and is and is to come. The Scripture Project also remembers the historical side of human authorship and holds in tension that the text “travels a distance” to get to contemporary readers, as discussed above.

If I have summarized accurately Ukpong's attention to the world behind the text and how it relates to the (African) world in front of the text, and the Scripture Project's focus on the text itself, then they interestingly take different paths to get to similar ends. Ukpong's privileging of socio-historical context applies to both the biblical world and his own African contexts. His commitment to African contexts manifests in investing in the parallel context of the world behind the text, with context serving as the bridge between the Bible and the present. The Scripture Project privileges the received text, and the canonized form itself links the historical with the contemporary. Both want to bring the text to bear on contemporary context, and perhaps there are things to learn from one another here. Inculturation hermeneutics may find that the text itself is poised to speak to African readers as it is, and theological interpretation may discover that increased attention to other dimensions of the text may help the contemporary church read the Bible as Scripture for its own day.⁶⁹ Both have their reasons for their preferences, however, and it may not be easy

⁶⁹ Ukpong [“The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30): Commendation or Critique of Exploitation? A Social-Historical and Theological Reading,” *Neotestamentica* 46.1 (2012), 190-207] may offer an indirect exhortation to the Scripture Project and theological interpretation efforts in general in his assessment of common interpretations of parables, such as the parable of the talents used to encourage readers to use their natural capabilities on behalf of the kingdom. He finds such interpretation “good and edifying” but laments “a narrow religious reading of the parable that prematurely invests the parable's narrative world with theological meaning without first investigating the social world that lies beneath.” Such a failure “does not recognize the social-cultural embeddedness of biblical texts...ultimately all parables have theological meaning, but they are in the first place stories about the practical life experiences of people in first-century C.E. Palestine” (190-91). While the Scripture Project is concerned to acknowledge the Bible as belonging to a different time and place in a real way, and wants to pay attention to the narrative details of biblical stories, Ukpong suggests theological interpretation may skip helpful readings by jumping too quickly to the theological import of the text. Parables in particular,

to make up the ground between. The experience of the ambivalence of the biblical text likely makes African inculturation readers wary of taking the text at anything like face value, and the Scripture Project's first commitment is to the text received in canonical form as Christian Scripture, as the group's name suggests.

Additional Textual Considerations

Canon within a canon? What portions of the text receive priority

In addition to having preferred dimensions of the text, Ukpong and the Scripture Project may reveal preferred selections of the biblical text. Individuals and communities tend to have favorite passages, books, or themes in the Bible that they turn to first and often, and which set the tone or trajectory for reading and understanding the rest of the Bible. Identifying what portions or concepts have priority helps reveal a reader's or reading community's sense of what is most important or what the Bible is about. The next chapter on conceptual framework will more thoroughly explore the shape of the canon for inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project; here as part of a chapter on text it is helpful to investigate what portions of the text receive attention in each.

In his discussion of inculturation reading, Ukpong emphasizes principles and values in the Bible over preference for particular books or passages. "The bible itself is life-oriented" he writes, "and ought to be read in this way."⁷⁰ In his later work, Ukpong summarizes, "In inculturation hermeneutics, emphasis is placed on ethical readings in the light of the basic human and biblical values of love and justice, peace and inclusiveness."⁷¹ These themes guide selection of texts. Though his second order work does not prescribe preferred portions, a good chunk of his first order interpretation work deals with Gospel passages, as he has written on the Lord's Prayer, considered mission in Luke, discovered good news in Matthew for those with HIV, and done much work on parables, among much more. Though Ukpong's work more frequently features the New Testament, he occasionally uses the Old Testament

argues Ukpong, require readers to pay attention to practical life experiences behind the text, and theological interpretation may not always heed this well enough.

⁷⁰ Ukpong, "Rereading," 13.

⁷¹ Ukpong, "Global Village," 19.

mostly for comparative work, including in his doctoral thesis, published as a 1987 book comparing *Ibibio* and Levitical sacrifice.⁷²

The Scripture project focuses on the narrative of the Bible, and while all literary genres contribute to the story of Scripture, narrative portions are easiest and seem to gain preference. The index of biblical citations in the back are well spread throughout Old and New Testament books, with the bulk of them from narrative portions. The Epistles have just a few citations, where the Gospels, Genesis, and the Major Prophets are more frequently cited. The selected sermons follow the liturgical calendar and draw from the lectionary texts appointed for the day.

Difficult texts

That the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics each have their preferred texts or themes does not mean either one shies away from difficult, challenging texts. *The Art of Reading Scripture* has a whole section on “reading difficult texts,” consisting of six essays. Just as identifying preferred texts offers insight into interpreters, so drawing out what portions of the text prove challenging and how interpreters handle those texts is also revealing. As a matter of principle, neither inculturation hermeneutics nor the Scripture Project is able to ignore difficult texts: if inculturation hermeneutics finds the Bible too important to do away with despite having experienced the text used as a weapon, inculturation readings must grapple with difficult texts and counter harmful interpretations. The Scripture Project is committed to the whole of the Bible in its canonized form, including difficult texts. Though the Revised Common Lectionary may give preachers a break by omitting some difficult passages, theological interpretation must be able to account for them.

Ukpong on difficult texts

Bible texts that deal with mission appear frequently in Ukpong’s work.⁷³ Indeed, the theme of mission has proven difficult for the African continent, as the

⁷² Justin Ukpong, *Sacrifice: African and Biblical. A Comparative Study of Ibibio and Levitical Sacrifices* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1987).

⁷³ In addition to publications referenced in the following paragraphs, Ukpong wrote more on mission that I was unable to access; information for these pieces is not in my bibliography, so I will offer it here. “Mission in the Acts of the Apostles: From the Perspective of the Evangelized,” *Africa Theological Journal* 17.1 (1988), 72-88; a longer version appears as “Mission in Acts of the Apostles: A Study from the

biblical mandate for Christian missions often resulted in the suppression of African cultures, the exploitation of African lands and resources, and a general view of Africa as the “dark continent.” Poorly interpreted Christian mission is a major impetus for the whole project of inculturation hermeneutics: inculturation legitimizes local interpretations and expressions of Christianity and the Christian Bible where foreign missionaries to Africa often suppressed indigenous sensibilities.⁷⁴ In addition to the general trajectory of his life’s work that explores, advocates for, and simply does inculturated African theology and biblical interpretation, Ukpong returns to texts directly about mission throughout his career, challenging narrow interpretation that often results in “frontier missions” with vocational missionaries that target areas of the globe where the Church has minimal or no presence, looking to replicate the (culturally Western) church with limited “salvation of souls theology.”⁷⁵ Biblical texts with themes of mission are difficult texts that Ukpong addresses repeatedly throughout his work.

Since the 1980s Ukpong has done biblical interpretation supporting every Christian as a missionary and a wider view of mission that addresses human rights, poverty, education, ecology, and dialogue with non-Christian religions. His critique of mission also begins in the ‘80s, when he writes that apartheid is a “thorn in the flesh” of Christian mission and exposes apartheid as “founded and entrenched on the pretext of Christian mission.” Good, biblical Christian mission should be working for the end of apartheid and should be planning to assist black communities in the transition out of apartheid, he says.⁷⁶ As Ukpong’s career progresses, he continues to demonstrate that the Jesus of the Bible is concerned with the renewal of the earth, including justice, peace, and liberation for the oppressed at all levels, whether economic,

Perspective of the Evangelized,” *Revue Africaine de Theologie* 13.26 (1989), 171-207; also published in Ukpong, et al, *Proclaiming the Kingdom: Essays in Contextual New Testament Studies* (Port Harcourt: CIWA, 1993), 125-48. “The Political Dimension of Jesus’ Ministry Implications for Evangelization,” pages 40-54 in Peter Thompson, ed. *Christian Witness in Contemporary Society* (London: Campbell Publishers, 1990). “The Problem of the Gentile Mission in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 59.7 (1995), 437-48.

⁷⁴ See “Inculturation and Evangelization: Biblical Foundations for Inculturation,” for one specific place Ukpong weaves together inculturation, Christian mission, and exegesis.

⁷⁵ Justin Ukpong, “Contemporary Theological Models of Mission: Analysis and Critique,” *African Ecclesial Review* 27/3 (1985), 162-71.

⁷⁶ Justin Ukpong, “The Future of Mission in its Function and Structure: A Reflection,” *International Review of Mission* 76 (1987): 90-95.

political, social, religious, and/or cultural oppression. This is opposed to portions of the Church that pursue mission as a “purely spiritual and eschatological” endeavor.⁷⁷ In a study of the New Testament word *metanoia* Ukpong demonstrates that the repentance Jesus calls his followers to involves a complete transformation of mind and life that must involve concern for ecological issues, for human liberation and thriving, and the cause of peace.⁷⁸ Based on readings of Luke and Third Isaiah, Ukpong makes the case that the poor are a central focus of Jesus’ mission and that in caring for the poor we also care for Jesus himself and prepare ourselves for eschatological judgment.⁷⁹

In the final decade of Ukpong’s career, one of his most critical pieces calls into question the vision of mission in the Gospel of Luke, connecting it to ways modern missions played out in Nigeria. Here Ukpong decries mission that does not “involve direct confrontation of oppressive colonial power” and challenges the idea that mission brings Christ to non-Christian communities. “Was the risen Christ not already present and active among the Gentiles and in Africa before the missionaries arrived,” he asks?⁸⁰ Ukpong concludes that the Gospel of Luke has “missiological inadequacies” that must be reckoned with in trying to avoid the mistakes of the past. This is an example of a comparative effort that gets behind the text at power structures and social relationships and assumptions in Luke’s community, drawing on modern experiences of mission in Nigeria to help evaluate the text.

Though themes of mission often occupy Ukpong’s attention, he certainly recognizes there may be difficult texts outside these themes. Concerning difficult portions of the Bible in general, Ukpong summarizes that exclusive and oppressive texts should be viewed as a challenge to the reader with respect to these values rather than as a basis for action. In other words, read through a lens of positive, life-giving

⁷⁷ Justin Ukpong, “Christian Mission and the Recreation of the Earth in Power and Faith: A Biblical-Christological Perspective,” *Mission Studies* 9/2 (1992), 134.

⁷⁸ Ukpong, “Christian Mission and the Recreation of the Earth,” 134.

⁷⁹ Justin Ukpong, “Option for the Poor: A Modern Challenge for the Church in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 36 (1994), 350-65.

⁸⁰ Justin Ukpong, “The Gospel According to Luke and the Mission of the Church,” in Daniel Patte, ed, *et al, A Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004). http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/religious_studies/SNTS/ukpong2004.htm

values, oppressive texts serve to judge any such oppressive tendencies in the reader, and in this way remain valuable.⁸¹

Some African readers find portions of the biblical text so troubling as to be irredeemable. Canaan Banana famously wants a rewriting of the Bible to get rid of oppressive texts. Inculturation hermeneutics offers a different way forward that takes both the biblical text and African experiences of oppression seriously, looking for ways even difficult texts can judge and affirm any culture that reads it, serving as Good News for all people.

The Art of Reading Scripture on difficult texts

The Art of Reading Scripture has an entire section devoted to difficult texts. In the first essay, which I find the most helpful of the section and will thus treat the most in depth, Ellen Davis sets out to explore the question, “are there any texts you would reject?” She confesses her own bias that if we fail to be edified by a text, it is our failure and not that of the text. She makes the point that there is some mutual suspicion between the American church (especially her Episcopalian branch) and (interpretation of) the Bible. Davis says that Christians in America may share experience or concern that the Bible has been read “to authorize appalling abuse, even murder of women, Jews, slaves, colonized peoples, homosexuals.”⁸² Thus, though Davis does not use this language, there is to some degree a shared history of evidence that the Bible can and has been used as both a tool and a weapon. Though African scholars and those belonging to the Scripture Project may largely emerge out of opposite sides of the abuse of Scripture, with Africans often being the abused and Western Christians often being the ones to abuse, this is a source of concern for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project and, Davis suggests, even American Christians more widely.

⁸¹ Cf. “Global Village,” 19. Ellen Davis writes something similar in her essay on difficult texts, treated in the following section. “The Scriptures are chock-full of embarrassing, offensive, and internally contradictory texts, texts we do not wish to live with, let alone live *by*. . . this is not accidental and maybe not ultimately regrettable, since it is the means by which we are being formed in the disposition I am calling critical traditioning” (*The Art*, 177). Both Ukpong and Davis see texts we may not want to live by as valuable in making us wrestle anew with the ways these texts challenge us.

⁸² *The Art*, 165.

Davis's course of action in addressing difficult texts that contain or condone abuse of certain groups of people is to explore how the biblical writers themselves deal with the difficult texts they inherit. "The biblical writers felt free to disagree with their predecessors about how God's will and word to Israel were to be interpreted," she finds, and she offers the example of the conquest of Canaan.⁸³ She finds views within Scripture that are in tension with one another. Some texts justify the conquest by suggesting the Canaanites deserved it for their worship of false gods or for other sinful practices. Other texts undermine such hard line views justifying the conquest, such as those that uphold the Gibeonites or Rahab as exemplary in practice. Where Ukpong's exploration of difficult texts, like mission in the Gospel of Luke, may use a comparative approach and pay attention to the world behind the text, Davis sticks primarily to the text itself in looking for clues about how we are to manage difficult texts that are part of our tradition.

Davis gives a second example of what she calls "critical traditioning" within the Bible, where a person or community accepts the biblical tradition as valuable but critically applies that tradition to be beneficial to their own community. She points to how Jesus reinterprets the levitical law in the Synoptic Gospels, sometimes through direct statements about what is written in the law and sometimes through less direct interactions with the tradition such as parables. Davis says this is an instructive example because Jesus addresses ethical matters involved in "the one great question" of levitical portions of the Torah: "What constitutes a holy people?" or, How are we to live "in such a way that God feels at home in our midst"?⁸⁴ Pressing contemporary issues of ecclesial importance including how to respond to homosexuality and same-sex unions, as well as the ordination of women, are part of figuring out what to do with this levitical question and the levitical legislation contained in the tradition we inherit.

In effect, Davis gives contemporary readers permission and tools to interpret difficult texts with critical traditioning that accepts "the pressure of the text on faith and practice" while seeking (re)interpretations that enable a "socially and politically heterogeneous community to retain a vital religious identity through varying historical circumstances."⁸⁵ She almost seems to see value in both trained reading and ordinary

⁸³ *The Art*, 167.

⁸⁴ *The Art*, 173.

⁸⁵ *The Art*, 177.

reading for processes of critical traditioning, where the goal is to appropriate the text in ways that are beneficial for how the community receives, experiences, and seeks to practice the text.⁸⁶

In other essays in the section on difficult texts, Moberly's partial answer to the difficulty of Genesis 22—Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac—is to say that approaching the text with "imaginative seriousness" need not manifest in strict historicism, but can recognize other things at work in the text and history of textual transmission.⁸⁷ That this text can be abused should not preclude its value, for all things of truth and value can be abused, he says. Anderson reminds biblical readers that those who claim forgiveness through Jesus Christ also admit culpability prior to our forgiven-ness; both guilt and forgiveness constitute biblical election. Thompson looks at the passage in John where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, and she says preachers are not sure what to do with the ethical and the soteriological all wrapped up together. This passage, according to Thompson's interpretation, requires followers of Jesus to serve others as he did in order to be bound up with him. Ukpong would approve, I think, of this reading of the potentially difficult text of footwashing for American readers.

In contemporary America where Christians often either want to gloss over difficult texts with a "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" mentality,⁸⁸ or just dismiss difficult texts as not historically, scientifically, and/or theologically reliable, *The Art of Reading Scripture* makes commendable efforts in trying to take the authority, contingency, and difficulty of biblical texts seriously all at the same time.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

As this chapter has noted, some people fear a multiplicity of interpretations and make efforts to maintain one meaning of the biblical text no matter who is doing the reading. The horizon of the text, however, does not cancel or consume the horizon

⁸⁶ The language she uses admits that the validity of an interpretation does not depend on proximity to the authorial source; she says critical traditioning helps "to moderate enthusiasm for historical critical method," while also arguing "against enshrining 'pre-critical' exegetical methods" (179).

⁸⁷ *The Art*, 188.

⁸⁸ This saying is a bumper sticker, literally, for fundamentalist or evangelical Christians who claim to prefer a simplistic reading of all biblical texts.

of the reader, and there are bound to be different interactions with the Bible that result in different readings; indeed, experiences with the biblical text and its history of influence vary widely. The reverse is also a danger: if the text itself is passive and can mean whatever readers want it to say, then reading is really no different from speaking our own mind or opinion. If there are no constraints in interpretation, no voice of the text or claim on the reader, apart from whatever the reading community takes (or makes) the text to mean, the church is “a *constant* threat to its own Scriptures,” says Francis Watson.⁸⁹ Gadamer reminds us, though, that pluralism is inherent in the very being of a work and need not arise solely due to the whims of interpreters.⁹⁰ Rather, “text and community each has its own form of agency, the one initiatory, the other responsive.”⁹¹ It is important that both text and interpretive community have agency and assert themselves on one another—this is the crux of dialogue, and in dialogue is hope of preserving integrity and agency of both text and reader. Watson calls cases of failed dialogue, where one is reduced to passivity, “pathological deformations of the true relationship between text and community.”⁹²

The horizons of inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project consist of different reception histories and experiences with the biblical text. The ways they each receive, view, and approach the Bible make for different horizons and interpretive possibilities. Thus, authentic dialogue between text and community will not look the same for these interpretive trajectories, and Gadamer’s model has room not only for interpretive difference but also interpretive conflict. Where previous chapters on *interpreter* and *context* revealed tension and critique between the dialogue partners, this chapter on text found fewer substantive clashes and identified significant common ground, even if they emphasize different dimensions of the text with the use of different tools. Within the broad *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Bible as shared sacred text, inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project are beholden

⁸⁹ Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12.2 (2010), 135.

⁹⁰ “We ask what this identity is that presents itself so differently in the changing course of ages and circumstances. It does not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but is there in them all. They all belong to it.” *T&M*, 120 as quoted in Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). Westphal uses different translations of Gadamer than I have been using, and the rendering here is helpful.

⁹¹ Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture,” 135.

⁹² Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture,” 136.

to it in a particular way, recognizing that Christian history has bestowed the Bible with sacred status, and that this bestowal of canonical status is a response generated by the text itself. They each desire to interpret the biblical text in redemptive, helpful ways for contemporary readers. This chapter has demonstrated that there is enough overlap between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project to make dialogue possible, and enough difference to make it interesting and fruitful. The next chapter will draw out the conceptual framework of each dialogue partner, consisting of the worldview each operates out of, including assumptions about the world and how we should live in it, assumptions about the biblical text, and a general understanding of all that is, from grand to mundane.

Chapter 6: Conceptual Framework

Introduction

The previous chapter summarized *text* in the biblical interpretation of inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, considering how each conceive of the Bible, including reception history and contemporary interpretation. Each interpretive trajectory has different experiences with the text, as well as different ideas about how to approach and use it, though they share a broad *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Bible affirming it as sacred text across Christian communities. This chapter takes up *conceptual framework*, the term in Ukpong's description of the task of interpretation that carries the most probative weight. Discussion of this term draws out the substance of comparison, getting at the primary postures and commitments of each dialogue partner.

That a conceptual framework is always in play as part of any interaction with a text is evident throughout Gadamer's work and assumed throughout this thesis. Ukpong's highlighting of this factor in the interpretive process is partly what makes Gadamer a good fit for the theoretical framework of this thesis. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and the notion of horizons get at Ukpong's sense of the importance of the conceptual framework within which interpreters operate. The reality of horizons surfaced in previous chapters, working through the key terms in Ukpong's description of the task of interpretation: "an *interpreter* (chapter three) in a certain *context* (chapter four) making meaning of a *text* (chapter five) using a specific *conceptual framework*; this chapter will specifically draw out how Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project acknowledge, claim, and construct their own conceptual frameworks for biblical interpretation.

Ukpong says, "together with its procedure, the exegetical conceptual framework is the most important component of the interpretation process."¹ He summarizes, "A conceptual frame of reference is a mental apparatus. It refers to the type of understanding of the universe that informs the reading, that is, the mind-set at work in the reading operation. It comprises a particular set of world-view, values,

¹ Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 7.

disvalues, and basic assumptions about reality.”² Often these things are taken for granted in biblical studies (indeed, in all of life) as the ways we see and experience the world are self-evident to us. Ukpong draws out the significance of the set of assumptions that make up a conceptual frame of reference. In short, conceptual framework is the crux of contextual reading, shaping how and why one reads, what one expects and receives from the text, and where and toward what one applies it. While this is the critical component that makes inculturation hermeneutics distinctive, a conceptual framework is the decisive feature of *all* readings, whether or not an interpreter knows it or admits it! Conceptual framework, as the horizon out of which a reader approaches a text and into which an interpreter receives the text, saturates the reading process throughout. Indeed, there would be no reading process without a conceptual framework in which to operate.

Inculturation hermeneutics as a paradigm shift

Though anyone who interacts with a text will do so out of the horizon they inhabit and the corresponding conceptual framework they have for receiving the text, scholars often operate within a general model that gives direction to their work. Ukpong offers examples of these larger scholarly frameworks, including “historical critical method, literary method, liberation hermeneutic;” such models give scholars an orientation to the text, a method of interaction with the text, and a frame for understanding their exegetical work.

Since text and interpretive communities are always changing, reading strategies that worked or have proven sufficient in the past will at some point need to adapt, including scholarly models.³ An exegetical framework likely has some ability to grow and stretch, but there may come a time when the whole approach must give way to something new.

As Ukpong describes it, inculturation hermeneutics arose in such a time.

Conceptual framework is an “orientation” that “conditions” a reader “as to the sort of

² Justin Ukpong, “Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings,” in Justin Ukpong *et al*, eds, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 15.

³ As Francis Watson says, “To engage in the dialogue initiated by the text is already to acknowledge that earlier interpretation is no longer adequate. Its limitations have become clear, and its interpretative results cannot simply be repeated.” “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12.2 (2010), 136.

questions he/she may put to the text” as well as what qualifies as a “satisfactory answer.”⁴ Ukpong is one of many people who write about Africans getting Christian answers to questions they had not asked, and failing to get answers to their own questions about the Bible. Vincent Donovan⁵ and John V. Taylor⁶ began to realize as foreign missionaries that this was happening, and Desmond Tutu writes about the “religious schizophrenia” of the African Christian: “The white man’s largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul; he was being given answers, and often splendid answers to questions he had not asked.”⁷ At this point of religious schizophrenia or epistemological crisis, inculturation hermeneutics emerges akin to a “paradigm shift in science,” Ukpong says. “The inculturation framework has arisen in the attempt to respond to questions and issues arising from the African Christian experience with the bible which current exegetical frameworks are unable to satisfactorily handle.”⁸

When Africans read the Bible through a foreign grid, “their own cultural input is bound to have a highly limited impact,” says Ukpong.⁹ Inculturation hermeneutics does not just apply the Bible to African contexts after reading “with a foreign frame of reference. . .rather, African conceptual frame of reference is used in appropriating the text,” explains Ukpong. Other reading tools, including historical ones, “are used critically and made to function within the African conceptual frame of reference. In

⁴ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 8. Gadamer makes the point that tradition, which is certainly related to conceptual framework, not only makes dialogue with a text, with an other, or with aspects of one’s own context possible, but is also a dialogue partner itself. “Tradition is a genuine partner in communication, with which we have fellowship as does the ‘I’ with a ‘Thou’,” he says, (Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans eds. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 321).

⁵ In *Christianity Rediscovered* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978], Donovan begins to see that his summary of the Christian message does not make much sense to the Masai people, and he must immerse himself and the gospel story in the culture, language, and world of the Masai. In a surprising role reversal, Donovan finds the Masai effectively evangelize him, teaching him anew what the Christian message means as he struggles to find ways to present the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that fit the questions and perspectives of the Masai.

⁶ Before Donovan, but similarly, Taylor [*The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963)] finds himself experiencing God and his Christian faith in new and different ways as he gains appreciation for African ways of being in the world.

⁷ As quoted in Simon Maimela, “Traditional African Anthropology and Christian Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 76 (1991), 9.

⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 7-8.

⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 4.

this way the African people and their contexts are made the *subject* of interpretation.”¹⁰ Thus Ukpong sees himself and inculturation hermeneutics broadly as doing something totally new and different, leaving behind insufficient frameworks (though sometimes retaining their tools) and breaking new ground.

Theological interpretation as a quiet revolution

The Scripture Project also encounters a need for a paradigm shift for different reasons but out of parallel experience of finding what has been done wanting. The introduction to *The Art of Reading Scripture* finds both popular and academic ways of thinking about and approaching the Bible insufficient. In secular culture, the Bible might be “a consumer product, one more therapeutic option for rootless selves engaged in an endless quest of self-invention and self-improvement,” in which case it will “likely not yield a very satisfactory reading.”¹¹ Even churches may not engage Scripture with much creative discipline and imagination, “accustomed as we are to user-friendly interfaces and instant gratification.”¹² The introduction to the book finds it worth only a passing mention that members of the Project pursue lines of theory and practice “in contrast to the Enlightenment’s ideal of detached objectivity.” Thus, the Project sets out “to recover the church’s rich heritage of biblical interpretation in a dramatically changed cultural environment.”¹³

The content of the essays in the volume gives more of a sense of specific areas of dissatisfaction, sometimes explicitly stating them. William Stacy Johnson mentions that at least in modernity, “the church has tended to transmute its Scriptures from interpretive framework – or canon – into an epistemological criterion for truth.” Such a posture attempts to make the Scriptures “carry more probative weight than they can possibly bear,” and asks the wrong questions of the Bible, getting answers the biblical authors could not have imagined.¹⁴ Daley writes, “Modern historical criticism—including the criticism of biblical texts—is methodologically atheistic.”¹⁵ McSpadden, a pastor, sees “a waning trust in Scripture as the authority for faith and

¹⁰ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 16.

¹¹ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xiv.

¹² *The Art*, xv.

¹³ *The Art*, xv.

¹⁴ *The Art*, 119.

¹⁵ *The Art*, 72.

life” among “those in the pulpit as well as in the pews.”¹⁶ Overall, however, there is little time spent on identifying the shortcomings of other conceptual frameworks. Rather than question or bemoan other frameworks and ways of reading, *The Art of Reading Scripture* seems to prefer to sketch a better way with merits of its own, thereby proposing “a quiet revolution.”¹⁷ Books have been written on how theological interpretation, the chosen posture of the Scripture Project, addresses the deficiencies of modern methods of biblical studies, and even books written on those books, so there is ample space elsewhere devoted to how theological interpretation displaces other conceptual frameworks.¹⁸

Cultural Frameworks

African cultural frameworks

Ukpong says conceptual framework “is ultimately the product of certain cultural factors”¹⁹ and outlines basic assumptions of inculturation hermeneutics, identifying common features among African cultural frameworks or worldviews, even as he acknowledges diversity of African contexts and communities.²⁰

¹⁶ *The Art*, 127.

¹⁷ *The Art*, xx.

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998] and Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998] and see Christopher Spinks on Fowl and Vanhoozer in *The Bible and Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* [New York: T&T Clark, 2007].

¹⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 8. The following numbered items come from the subsection of “Basic Cultural Assumptions of Inculturation Framework,” in “Rereading,” 8-9.

²⁰ To what extent these features apply to African peoples is up for debate. Others have drawn similar conclusions about general features of an African worldview [cf. the introduction to Wilbur O’Donovan’s *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1997) and “Essential Characteristics of African Indigenous Religion” in David T. Adamo’s article, “Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32.1 (2011) Art. #285, 10 [doi:10.4102/ve.v32i1.285](https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v32i1.285) while others hesitate to describe all Africans with the same sweeping features.

Tinyiko Maluleke, for some reason reticent to engage Ukpong’s work directly, is implicitly critical of Ukpong’s failure to nuance the diversity of African experience and worldview. It is striking and puzzling that in multiple survey pieces engaging a range of African scholars Maluleke never mentions Ukpong. Despite Ukpong’s frequent attention to issues of Christian mission, outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis, Maluleke’s survey article, “The Bible Among African Christians: A

- 1) “The unitive view of reality.” The African world is not dualistic but consists of one united realm that includes visible and invisible dimensions. Harold Turner calls this “a sacramental universe” with no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual.²¹
- 2) “The divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity, and the cosmos.” African cosmology sees a network of relationships in the universe, with humans in relationship with nature, one another, and God, and with “the entire universe...participating in the one life of God.”
- 3) “Community.” Individual people, inanimate objects, and even natural phenomena such as weather and harvesting, illness and death “find meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community and between the human community and nature.” Individual identity, accomplishments, and problems are all wrapped up in community. In contrast to Cartesian individualism, African persons exist in community with those past, present, and future: *cognate ergo sum* or ‘I am because we are.’ As Harold Turner puts it, in the relational, personalized African universe, “the appropriate question is not *what* causes things to happen but *who* causes things to happen,” and the who may be a living human, an ancestor who remains active in the life of the community as the ‘living dead,’ a spiritual power, or some combination.

Missiologial Perspective” [In Teresa Okure, ed, *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multicultural Global Context* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster, 2000)] never mentions him and he does not make the bibliography. Likewise, Maluleke’s survey of contemporary African theology in 2000 never mentions Ukpong, though it does briefly consider “the inculturation metaphor” under “old paradigms,” and makes the point that Africa, both in locale and idea are “daily imploding” and with Kwame Anthony Appiah challenges “all notions of a united, homogenous Africa [or] African identity.” “The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An Emerging Paradigm of Post-Cold War and Post-Apartheid Black and African Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000), 19-37.

²¹ Tony Balcomb pointed me with commendation to Harold Turner’s six-feature analysis of the primal worldview, from his 1977 essay, “The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study.” Turner’s features have affinity with Ukpong’s summary here. Kwame Bediako quotes Turner’s work extensively, with approval, finding it helpful for understanding African worldviews and how they relate to Christian tradition. See Bediako’s *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004], especially pages 87-89.

- 4) “Emphasis on the concrete rather than the abstract, on the practical rather than on the theoretical.”

Ukpong says all of these “lie at the basis of the African’s experience of the bible” and “inform the understanding and methodology of inculturation hermeneutic.”

Regardless to what degree one agrees with Ukpong about the specifics of these components, the point is that inculturation hermeneutics explicitly claims *African* framework and intentionally begins interpretation from a place that assumes and affirms African instincts, values, and experiences. All this constitutes “an epistemological break with a dualistic view of reality, a view that does not take seriously concrete historical human situations as a starting point for theology, a highly spiritualized and transcendent view of religion devoid of involvement in people’s daily lives, yearnings and aspirations, and an individualistic approach to life.”²²

Connecting with wider culture in *The Art of Reading Scripture*

The Art of Reading Scripture does not describe the surrounding culture or popular worldview of those they intend to engage or in which they operate with much specificity, identifying a generally rootless postmodern culture, interested in consumer products and the therapeutic in a pluralistic, secular setting. Perhaps it is difficult to say much more than that on a general level, given the diversity of the United Kingdom and the United States (where all contributors to the volume primarily live and work) along with both places having cultures that affirm and encourage individual ideas and expression. One gets the sense from the essays, though, that they tend to be more on an academic or intellectual level of conversation rather than a popular one, and much of the content would not be very accessible or interesting to people who inhabit a larger cultural conceptual framework. The essays do demonstrate awareness of intellectual trends and speak well to them, picking up themes surfacing frequently in the wider academy.²³

The church, as another intended conversation partner for this material, tends to be closer to popular culture than does the academy, due to the diversity of members and attendees, made up of various ages, socio-economic backgrounds, educational

²² Justin Ukpong, “Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology,” *Mission Studies* 16 (1999), 113.

²³ Including discussions of metanarratives, deconstruction, the Other, and moving beyond foundationalism and totality.

levels and ethnic/cultural identities. The essays written by pastors make efforts to connect with those in the pews and maybe even the streets, with McSpadden offering suggestions for effective preaching in a post-Christendom culture and Howell offering a concrete example in St. Francis of what it might look like to embody the Scripture creatively. Some features and assumptions about surrounding culture can be inferred from the essays, but there is nothing much more specific than a postmodern, post-Christendom ethos.

The final section of sermons gives occasional nods to the conceptual framework of the original congregational setting. Both preachers, Hays and Davis, occasionally invoke broader cultural frameworks or common experience to make a point. Preaching in New York City less than a year after 9/11, Davis acknowledges a widespread sense of vulnerability, and says all present know more, against their will, about vulnerability than they had the previous Good Friday.²⁴ Hays effectively grabs the attention of the congregation, beginning by juxtaposing a story of biblical heroes briefly with popular action heroes, pushing hearers beyond the superhero trope and bringing them back to real life by invoking names of recent well-known saints, finally bringing it closer to home with mention of names of the faithful from that very community inscribed on the walls of the building. On the day of the much-anticipated Duke/UNC basketball game, Hays opens a sermon on the Duke campus by acknowledging the occasion and makes points at different times that include something connected to the big game.²⁵ In a sermon based on Romans 12:1-12, Hays invokes a common American story, that of family struggle around the Thanksgiving table, to set the scene as one of conflict, but where coming together in unity for a bigger purpose prevails.

These preachers succeed in connecting with contingent elements of cultural conceptual frameworks, and the thrust of *The Art of Reading Scripture* suggests that just as important as connecting with components of broader culture is investing in

²⁴ Such an acknowledgement in the setting seems less robustly contextual and more like the bare minimum for authentic preaching. It is almost inconceivable that a Good Friday sermon in New York City a few months after 9/11 could fail to address it somehow.

²⁵ This may seem trivial to some, but this game captures the imagination of college basketball fans throughout the United States, and consumes students at the institutions for weeks. By the day of the game, some students had been sleeping in tents, lining up for good seats at the game, for months. A somewhat analogous big game in a South African setting may be a Springboks/Wallabies rugby match.

making Scripture itself and the liturgy/history of the church function as a framework of reception for hearers. Davis builds a sermon around the church season of Lent, making use of the Apostles' Creed and biblical art. This is appropriate for a congregation consisting of sisters in an Episcopal religious order; the Scripture Project envisions non-religious Christian communities steeped in and shaped by the Bible and the life of the church such that they amount to significant conceptual framework. This is not to deny the importance of living faithfully in a specific historical-cultural setting—after all, superheroes, game day, and secular holidays are significant. The Scripture Project would have faithful people with well-integrated conceptual framework that includes awareness of the cultural moment and formation in the continuing story of God's work in the world.²⁶

Methodological Frameworks for Reading the Bible²⁷

The Bible as part of conceptual framework for inculturation hermeneutics

In addition to broader features of African worldview, Ukpong includes a subheading of “Methodological Presuppositions” as part of his discussion of conceptual framework, indicating that “presuppositions about the nature of the bible and the goal of exegesis” are important parts of a conceptual framework.²⁸ In this subsection Ukpong summarizes much of the content of the previous chapter on text, describing the Bible as a plurivalent sacred classic and a document of faith, upholding “basic biblical affirmations and principles,” advocating for reading in context of the entire Bible, and reaffirming that “both the contexts of the text and of reader play an important role in the production of meaning.”²⁹ This section on methodological presuppositions explains that what interpreters see themselves as doing and what they

²⁶ Thesis Nine says, “Scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh rereadings of the text in light of the Holy Spirit's ongoing work in the world.” Johnson specifically refers to Scriptures as “interpretive framework” for the church. *The Art*, 119.

²⁷ Gadamer resists calling his philosophical hermeneutics method, preferring to say that he is describing what happens in the process of interpreting texts in *Truth and Method*. These methodological components of inculturation hermeneutics and *The Art of Reading Scripture* likewise set out to describe their own conceptual framework, and while portions of these frameworks may be transferable to other interpreters and reading contexts, they are not necessarily intended to be prescribed methods.

²⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 9.

²⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 10.

believe they are doing it with are crucial components of conceptual framework, amounting to assumptions about the Bible (sometimes called a doctrine of Scripture), and procedures, methods, and goals for reading.

African conceptual frameworks of course have authorities in addition to the Bible, just as any conceptual framework does. Musa Dube calls African traditions “scriptoratures,” echoing Ngugi’s use of the term orature to refer to the oral literature of Africa, and gives them their own canonical status. Dube sees inculturation hermeneutics as reading the Bible alongside “the authority and use of African scriptoratures.”³⁰ Ukpong readily uses anything that contributes to human thriving and empowerment—African, biblical, or otherwise—but he stops short of explicitly putting African traditions and authorities on par with or above the Bible, as Dube suggests. For Ukpong, Africa is the subject of biblical interpretation, and African frameworks and the Bible shape one another in the hermeneutical circle. Ukpong does not use language of canon or authoritative, he simply assumes the value of African sources while admitting that they and the Bible judge and shape one another.³¹

The Nine Theses as methodological conceptual framework

Though *The Art of Reading Scripture* rarely reflects on cultural framework consisting of felt needs or life issues, it spends much effort elucidating the part of conceptual framework that Ukpong calls methodological considerations. Much of the content of *The Art of Reading Scripture* relates to conceptual framework, and the bulk of it has to do with assumptions about the Bible, what to expect from it and how to approach it, as well as how and where it is best read. Every one of the Nine Theses on

³⁰ Musa Dube, “Circle Readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures,” in Johannes A. Smit and P. Pratap Kumar, eds, *Study of Religion in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of G.C. Oosthuizen*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 80.

³¹ “The gospel message serves as a critique of the culture, and/or the cultural perspective enlarges and enriches the understanding of the text” (“Rereading,” 6). It is important to clarify, however, that the spirit of the challenge the text may offer the context is toward invigoration more than condemnation; it is not to beat down but to build up. Negative, oppressive elements of the context will be challenged to give way to more life-giving realities. Gerald West sees a “predominant attitude of trust toward the Bible” in Ukpong’s admission of a “two-way engagement between text and context” (“The Bible in Africa,” in John Riches, ed, *The New Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 382). If a posture of suspicion means there is no room for the text to shape or challenge context, then inculturation hermeneutics certainly adopts a hermeneutic of trust, since a main goal of biblical interpretation in this model is positive community transformation.

the Interpretation of Scripture consists of methodological considerations contributing to conceptual framework. Up to this point, this thesis has reflected on the Nine Theses individually as appropriate for the point at hand, but it is fitting here to list them all in brief as they are “core affirmations” identified by the Scripture Project, coming out of and shaping their work together, as well as providing “substantial guidance for the church” about how to read the Bible, thus amounting to significant conceptual framework.³²

- 1) “Scripture truthfully tells the story of God’s action of creating, judging, and saving the world.” The Bible is primarily about God, and the God of Israel is the same God revealed in Jesus Christ, who raised him from the dead, and that same God “is still at work in the world today.”
- 2) “Scripture is rightly understood in the light of the church’s rule of faith as a coherent and dramatic narrative.” The unity of the biblical story consists of the story of the work of God, though the Bible contains many voices, genres, and subplots, and this story is “for the sake of the church’s faithful proclamation and action.”
- 3) “Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement of the entire narrative” with the New and Old Testaments requiring one another to be correctly understood.
- 4) “Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning...[but] multiple complex senses given by God.” The commentary on this Thesis explicitly says this “does not entail a rejection of historical investigation of biblical texts,” as history is important for “stimulating the church to undertake new imaginative readings of the texts.”
- 5) “The four canonical Gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.” Read in wider context of the whole Bible, the Gospels “convey the truth about the identity of Jesus more faithfully than speculative reconstructions produced by modernist historical methods. [They] are normative for the church’s proclamation and practice.”³³

³² *The Art*, xvi, xvii.

³³ There is no further discussion here of what the Thesis means by truth, but it does suggest a sense of truth bigger than ‘what actually happened’ historically. Essays get at a notion of truth beyond foundationalism, suggesting Scripture “witnesses to the transforming power that no truth claim itself can contain” (*The Art*, 112).

- 6) “Faithful interpretation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action – the church.” The goal of interpretation is “to participate in the reality of which the text speaks by bending the knee to worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ.” The church receives and proclaims the message of reconciliation, and Scripture should be lived out in “communities of prayer, service, and faithful witness.”
- 7) “The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform Scripture.” Not only officially recognized saints, but “the great cloud of witnesses...in diverse times and places, including many of the church’s loyal critics.” Saints demonstrate interpretive virtues including, “receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, humor, and imagination,” and “true authority is grounded in holiness.”
- 8) “Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church.” The explanation of the Thesis specifically mentions Jews and others from whom we can learn, including “critics who charge us with ideological captivity rather than fidelity to God.”
- 9) “In the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom of God, Scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh readings of the text in light of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world.” God’s story is still unfolding, and we have limited perspective of that story, but trust that God will lead us into truth, “that our speech and practice might yet be a faithful witness to the righteous and merciful God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ.”

In addition to these Theses, other content of the book offers more on methodological conceptual framework advocated by the Scripture Project and/or the individual authors. In the first essay of the volume, Ellen Davis addresses the task of teaching biblical interpretation and says it is “not primarily a matter of conveying historical information” but is “to impart the information and the conceptual framework, but even more, the imaginative skills for wondering fruitfully about the ultimate facts of life: love, sin, redemption, forgiveness.”³⁴ She seems to emphasize more the conceptual framework of biblical themes than a cultural framework of the

³⁴ *The Art*, 11.

contemporary reader. Davis's essay, as well as the wider volume, indicate the culture of the contemporary reader is biblically illiterate, and to understand the Bible means initiation into the biblical world and culture, and into the reception history of the church.³⁵ Rather than claiming contemporary culture as an intentional platform from which to read, the Scripture Project implies that cultural framework needs challenging and shaping in order to read Scripture better.

As the title of the collection of essays by members of the Scripture Project suggests, the Project found "the conviction grew among us that reading Scripture is an *art* – a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination."³⁶ Among the reasons the communion of saints and the Church Fathers are important resources is that, "we learn the practice of an art through apprenticeship to those who have become masters." The faithful who have gone before embody virtues and a posture of faith in instructive ways: "We need, perhaps most of all, to recover a 'hermeneutic of piety' for our exegesis, in a mode appropriate to our own life of Christian faith," writes Brian Daley at the end of an essay entitled, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?"³⁷

Between Text and Context: The Third Pole of Appropriation

Introducing a third pole in inculturation hermeneutics

From the beginning of his inculturation reflections, Ukpong sets out to explore and elucidate how Africans have appropriated the message of the Bible for themselves in their own contexts. The space and reading posture where text and context meet is a third pole in the interpretive process. Gerald West discerns an ideological pole latent in Ukpong's work. It is the interpreter, of course, that brings together text and context, and the idea of an ideological pole gets at aspects of conceptual framework that shape interpretations. The third pole is largely the conceptual framework, but not synonymous; the third pole is primarily located in the conceptual framework, though the conceptual framework is not limited to the ideo-

³⁵ The introduction to the volume says the Theses are to be part of "continued debate and reflection within the framework defined by our common convictions" (xvii). Presumably the ecumenical creeds encapsulate these common convictions, though the introduction does not elaborate.

³⁶ *The Art*, xv, emphasis in original.

³⁷ *The Art*, 88.

theological pole. A key word for this third pole is appropriation: how do readers bring the text to bear in a specific context? Jonathan Draper makes the point that appropriation of a sacred text is inherently emic, reading from within a community of faith. Though there are other potentially insightful ways of reading, appropriation of a sacred text embraces it from a perspective of faith.³⁸ Ukpong says that inculturation hermeneutics requires one to be well-acquainted with the cultural context and to be part of “the biblical community expressed in the text.”³⁹ Looking for meaningful readings for African Christian contexts, readers must be insiders to both descriptions, even if not indigenous.

Ukpong is committed to African contexts, as chapter four of this thesis showed, but the inculturation model can work in other contexts, and inculturation hermeneutics is open to conversation with and even learning from other ways of reading and different interpretations out of other contexts. More than a specific context, then, Ukpong’s unwavering commitment is to a particular construction of the third pole. While contexts, interpretations, and even the text will change, Ukpong is uncompromising on the following features: seeing the Bible as life-oriented and reading it as such; a critical, contextual approach that includes the concerns and perspectives of the ordinary reader; a practical component to interpretation that actively resists oppression and works for the common good and holistic empowerment. Ukpong sees enough promise for a third pole with these values to reshape and redeem biblical texts that they do not need to be thrown out or rewritten, as other Africans have suggested.

This third pole is where ordinary readers and trained readers ideologically come together with shared framework and purpose, using different tools. (See chapter three on interpreters for more about ordinary readers, trained readers, and the “reading with” process.) To the degree that trained and ordinary readers are united in a third ideo-theological pole, any ‘gap’ between them amounts to creative tension, as the tools, methods, and experiences of ordinary and trained readers will always be

³⁸ Jonathan Draper, “Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa,” *Grace and Truth* 19.2 (2002), 18.

³⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 10.

different. Creative tension is part of the point in bringing together ordinary and trained readers.⁴⁰

Introducing a third pole for the Scripture Project

The Scripture Project sets out to claim the emic space of the third pole, reading the Bible as sacred Scripture in and for a community of faith. The Scripture Project sees themselves as committed to both the text and the context of the church, viewing the two as inextricably bound together, as texts of faith call forth a community of faith and primarily speak to that community. In such a summary, the third pole of ideo-theology begins to show. That the Scripture Project claims space within an approach of theological interpretation makes overt a theological orientation to the text, the context, and the overall interpretive project. They see the Bible as “the true story of God’s gracious action to redeem the world,” and the truth of this story is neither totalitarian nor purely relativist, consisting of a “noncoercive claim to truth without imposing premature eschatological closure.”⁴¹ This truth claim is discerned in Scripture and embodied in the church, as the people of God witness to God’s gracious action and invite the world to join in God’s redemptive work.

The Scripture Project is very comfortable staking theological ground for the third pole, but more suspicious of claims to ideological orientations. Ellen Davis makes the case that tradition, thick with history and authority into life in the present, offers robust ground on which to encounter Scripture and ourselves anew, better than ideology. “Tradition, in contrast to an ideology, preserves in some form our mistakes

⁴⁰ Alissa Jones Nelson [*Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Book of Job with Edward Said* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012)] concludes that Ukpong fails to bridge the gap between academic and vernacular readers. She argues that Ukpong ends up relegating vernacular voices to a specific context, failing to offer impetus for cross-contextual conversation despite his “supposedly ‘holistic’” approach that seeks to be open to dialogue with other contexts. Finally, she finds that Ukpong’s academic interpreters employ “distinctly different approaches.” Further attention to Ukpong’s third pole as shared space for conversation and practice may help alleviate her concerns. Nelson acknowledges Ukpong’s vision of the “conversion of the elite,” but fails to recognize that such conversion amounts to shared ethical, epistemological, and ideological space. Granted, Ukpong does not draw this out, but common ground within an ideo-theological third pole would allow for and encourage meaningful cross-contextual interaction even among ordinary or vernacular readers. Different perspectives, approaches, resources, and contexts may find substantial shared space on the ideo-theological level of the third pole.

⁴¹ *The Art*, xx, 53.

and atrocities as well as our insights and moral victories” and “preserves side by side the disagreements that are still unresolved in the present.”⁴² Davis’s sense of ideology is rather monolithic and uncompromising, while for Ukpong it functions more loosely as a set of values and commitments contributing to a dynamic worldview. Those living and navigating life and Scripture from within a tradition have the possibility of repentance open to them, says Davis, perhaps resulting in a “radical reorientation of thinking,” and this “is not open to committed ideologues.”⁴³ Whereas traditions, for the sake of their own survival and integrity must embrace change and fresh biblical interpretation, ideological standpoints, as she sees it, are rather closed. The final paragraph of this subsection will take up further dialogue on ideology.

There have been negative and harmful ideological interpretations. Greg Jones admits there have been “ideologically oppressive” readings and upholds Martin Luther King, Jr’s premodern strategies of allegory and typology to counter them. Reading the Bible with others throughout the Christian tradition, including King, helps “offer challenges to our tendencies toward malformation and ideological paralysis.” For example, Martin Luther King, Jr’s “critique of American worship that is severed from justice has challenged Christians to see how clearly the prophetic critique of Israel’s injustice toward the poor also indicts systemic dimensions of sin inside and outside the church.”⁴⁴

Bauckham also admits the Christian story has been “compromised by oppressive distortions and collusion with the modern myth of progress” and says a convincing case for the Christian story “may depend on a retrieval of aspects of the biblical story that resist its ideological distortions.” Bauckham sees the cross as a central aspect of the story that challenges oppressive tendencies, since Jesus’ obedience consists of “identif[ying] himself irrevocably with the lowest of the low,” and only then “can he be entrusted with the power that God exercises characteristically on their behalf.” Stories of Daniel and Revelation, as well as other stories of Israel facing greater empires, emphasize “the transcendent power of God over all would-be divine rulers”—the rule of God will triumph over all evil, which

⁴² *The Art*, 169.

⁴³ *The Art*, 169.

⁴⁴ See Jones’ essay in *The Art*. The first quote here taken from 152, the longer ones from 155.

empowers non-violent resistance of oppression.⁴⁵ Communal interpretation, broadly conceived, drawing on the ideas of others throughout the Christian tradition, can also help resist ideological distortion of the text; here is a good reason for the Scripture Project to pay attention to a dialogue with inculturation hermeneutics.

The Scripture Project prefers to espouse a theological framework, drawing out implications of biblical stories and themes and reading from within the tradition of the church, rather than root themselves in extra-biblical ideology that is inevitably narrower and perhaps more susceptible to abusive distortion of the text. Challenge and correction from others in the Christian tradition, as well as themes within Scripture itself, help guard against ideological and even theological abuse of the text and of others. As a voice in this broader Christian tradition, Ukpong would likely push the Scripture Project on a desire to claim a theological orientation while distancing themselves from any ideological framework. *The Art of Reading Scripture* acknowledges pure or objective readings are impossible, but to claim to be ideologically free is to claim to occupy some level of pure or unbiased space. Such a claim potentially threatens violence to others under the guise of neutrality, and at the very least may fail to acknowledge the real concerns of others. Bauckham's sense that humility and the cross must be part of considering potentially distorted appropriation of the text is appropriate here. Perhaps the Scripture Project means to reject ideology as any staunch, unchanging set of assumptions or worldviews, like perceptions of hard, far-reaching systems of capitalism, communism, or Marxism. Ideology is not limited to broad political or economic systems; Ukpong more loosely means a set of commitments and orientations to the world, and no one escapes this sense of ideology. Inculturation hermeneutics would then push the Scripture Project to be more honest and self-reflective about the ideological dimensions of their third pole, including who stands to profit from them and whose perspective and concerns may be edged out by them.

Primary axes

Draper sees “what the interpreter considers to be the primary axis or thread of the whole” to be an important part of the third pole. Interpreters choose a reading perspective and posture, Draper says, and he finds support for his own preference for

⁴⁵ See Bauckham's essay in *The Art*, especially 47-53. Quotes here taken from 47, 52, and 51.

the “powerless, the outcast, the poor,” in the Sermon on the Mount and discerns a “fundamental axis of liberation, love and justice, which characterises God’s dealing with his people.”⁴⁶ Ukpong’s parallel axis consists of orientation toward ordinary African readers who may often be “the poor, the marginalized, non-biblical experts,” and “basic biblical values of love and respect for others, community building, justice, and inclusiveness.”⁴⁷ The Scripture Project’s primary axis is the church’s conviction that the Bible tells “the true story of God’s gracious action to redeem the world,” and the Spirit of God continues to lead people into truth, that their “speech and practice might yet be a faithful witness to the righteous and merciful God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸

These heavily theological statements of the Scripture Project use different language from Draper and Ukpong, and they make up a different third pole. There is concern for those who need grace and redemption (the whole world) and a hope for practical evidence of Christ-like grace and mercy, which may have some crossover with what Ukpong is looking for, but the poles are not the same. Johnson’s essay has a whole section on moving and reading “Toward the Other,” taking cues from Christian tradition and Emmanuel Levinas, and here there is some affinity with Ukpong’s priorities, but again amounts to a different third pole. Johnson describes the

⁴⁶ “Reading the Bible as Conversation,” 18. James Cochrane [*Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999)] similarly claims a “priority for those who suffer,” and his justification for this orientation uses concepts and rationale familiar to the Scripture Project. Cochrane appeals to the narrative nature of identity and, following Paul Ricoeur, the need for a *power to do* that constitutes a self and a *power in common* that brings the self and the other together. When the power to do and/or power in common is diminished for an individual (or community), this is suffering, and an ethical commitment to living well in community requires an *institutional* commitment to justice in respecting and preserving these powers for all, beyond interpersonal relationships. The Scripture Project accepts the narrative nature of ecclesial identity and implicitly accepts the narrative nature of the individual self as well, and should share vested interests in a *power to do* and a *power in common* for everyone seeking to live into the Scriptural story. An institutional commitment to preserving (or even struggling to regain) these powers for all should be a relatively easy step for the Scripture Project to make, as the church is already an ethical institution characterized by love of God and neighbor. Thus Cochrane (and Ricoeur) may help persuade members of the Scripture Project that they could and should join inculturation hermeneutics in an option for the poor or a priority for those who suffer. See Cochrane pages 111-114.

⁴⁷ Ukpong, “Global Village,” 11; Justin Ukpong, “New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities,” *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 151.

⁴⁸ *The Art*, xx, 5.

Other as 1) outside one's own categories, 2) poor, oppressed, weak, widow, orphan, stranger or neighbor, 3) that which is to come, a realm of justice and peace. The Other asserts itself upon anyone able to receive: "the 'Other' is not a projection of my own interiority but an exteriority that shatters the protective totality I have constructed around myself."⁴⁹ While those who are marginalized and poor are partly constitutive of how Draper and Ukpong engage in biblical interpretation, they are at least on the radar as a challenging Other with ethical and even temporal-political claims for Johnson.

The Scripture Project wants their reading strategies and framework to be informed by what they see in Scripture itself, but not in the sense of a simplistic correspondence between what the Bible is doing and what the Scripture Project is doing.⁵⁰ Likewise, Ukpong sees his third pole as informed by biblical principles. It is somewhat tricky to sort out any ideological trajectories present within the Bible itself and the ideo-theological third pole espoused by readers. Gerald West suggests "the shape is not inherent in scripture, it is ideo-theologically constructed." But a short time later in the same article West comments on "the shape of God's prophetic project in the biblical and theological tradition" while admitting the shape of this project is "open to ideo-theological interpretation."⁵¹ There seems to be some shape or certain trajectories within the Bible itself, but they are always perceived, received, and constructed from within a wider conceptual framework. Both Ukpong and the Scripture Project preserve a sense of agency within the text itself while simultaneously cognizant of the contingent conceptual framework they bring to the

⁴⁹ *The Art*, 123.

⁵⁰ It remains unclear how much the Scripture Project thinks their theological/narrative orientation to the Bible is inherent in Scripture and how much is their chosen third pole. Draper believes that acknowledging a third pole does not foreclose divine revelation, and the Scripture Project wants to claim both a contingent theological pole and revelation in and through Scripture.

⁵¹ Gerald West, "Locating 'Contextual Bible Study' within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70.1 (2014), 6, 7. See West's "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (Against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy" [*Scriptura* 86 (2004) 160-73] for a thorough engagement with the conversation about whether texts have ideologies. West is sympathetic to Mosala's point that some biblical texts resist liberative readings, but admits, with consideration of Stephen Fowl's insistence that texts do not have ideologies, that it is difficult to identify ideologies within texts. Ultimately West is unwilling to give up that texts "have a grain," which seems to be what he is getting at with these quotes as well. The text itself may have a grain, but the way it is read very much depends on the ideo-theological third pole of the interpreter.

task of interpretation; a thick sense of both of these factors will mean that the Bible and the third pole always shape one another, though approaches may make efforts to foreground either Scripture itself or ideological commitments.⁵²

Ukpong claims Africa as the subject of interpretation and Gerald West identifies the cultural and religious elements of African contexts to be “substantial” in the ideo-theological orientation of inculturation hermeneutics. Other models for contextual theology/biblical interpretation have similar methodology to inculturation but focus on different elements of context, like liberation hermeneutics would emphasize the economic and political. *The Art of Reading Scripture* focuses on the narrative, theological, and liturgical aspects of the Bible and of Christian history. The Bible and historical theology inform one another in the Scripture Project’s ideo-theological pole. Thesis Two claims the church’s rule of faith as a guide for reading, and Thesis Five suggests the Gospels as sources of doctrine and theological truth about Jesus; the book as a whole does not clearly state whether the Bible or the church’s theological tradition is primary in the hermeneutical task, though individual authors may favor one as a source for the other at times.⁵³ Both the Scripture Project and African inculturation hermeneutics have contexts where “the Bible is thoroughly woven into our social locations, so it is not that easy to separate out the ideological and the theological, the text and the context. They have mutually constituted each other, leaving their ideo-theological residue in us.”⁵⁴

This is an accurate statement at this point in Christian history, and the Scripture Project seems content to accept a third pole that has Bible, reception history (including the rule of faith), and contextual elements all mixed up. The Scripture Project would say, however, that ontologically the truth of the Bible comes first.

⁵² The discussion in this paragraph is limited to possible ideo-theological trajectories within the text that come with implications for interpretive postures, that is, whether the Bible itself suggests conceptual framework for reading the Bible; this is only a specific portion of a larger conversation about whether texts have ideological bent in and of themselves, aside from ways they are read.

⁵³ Stephen Fowl’s review of *The Art of Reading Scripture* [*Theological Studies* 66.4 (2005) 883-885] encourages readers to ask this question: “Do these interpreters treat theology as a form of exegesis or is the theological reflection based on exegesis arrived at on other grounds? It is a tribute to the sophistication of these essays that this question does not always admit a clear answer.”

⁵⁴ Gerald West, “Interpreting ‘the Exile’ in African Biblical Scholarship: An Ideo-Theological Dilemma in Postcolonial South Africa,” in Bob Becking and Dirk Human, eds, *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the OTWSA* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 265.

There would be no rule of faith or life of the church without the Bible to enliven it, even if effectively now in the process of interpretation they inform each other without a clear chronological order. Any true doctrine or church practice depends on the truth of the Bible; while these witness to the truth of the Bible, the truth of the Bible does not depend on these. The truth of the Bible would be true even if no one affirmed or practiced this truth, and when the Bible is unfaithfully proclaimed or practiced, it is false witness, separate from the truth of Scripture. Maybe this too helps explain the Scripture Project's reticence to acknowledge any ideology: it is for the Bible to affirm or shape any ideology before any ideology shapes reception. Even if this is ontologically true, it is methodologically impossible to sort out, as Gadamer demonstrates, and to hide behind ontology in order to mask or deny any ideology is dishonest.

Ukpong specifically privileges the contextual with a particular ideological lens, and recognizes the text is there somehow as well in the (mutually constituting) prominent role it has in African settings. Ukpong has always acknowledged the Bible as ambiguous, and agrees there is no innocent text, including sacred texts. At the same time, Ukpong continues to affirm the Bible as a document of faith and maintains a sense of divine inspiration in the text, its transmission, and interpretation. Throughout his work, Ukpong maintains a positive view of the Bible alongside a sense of its ambivalence, describing it as containing "good news" and "the liberating message of God."⁵⁵ Ukpong is a realist in acknowledging the range of ways the Bible has been read and used, knowing it can be used as a weapon or a tool, while maintaining faith and hope that something good remains. Inculturation hermeneutics is more interested in the process and outcomes of specifically African interpretations, and Ukpong rarely engages the truthfulness of the Bible, though he does affirm "the basic truths of the Christian faith."⁵⁶

If Ukpong challenges the Scripture Project for focusing on theological framework at the expense of honest appraisal of ideology, the Scripture Project levels an opposite critique of Ukpong: his focus on ideology and outcomes may rob the

⁵⁵ Ukpong, "Rereading," 3; Ukpong, "Global Village," 19.

⁵⁶ Justin Ukpong, "Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology," *Mission Studies* 16 (1999), 113. Among these he includes "truths about God, the Trinity, creation, and God's action in the universe; about Jesus Christ, salvation and redemption; about the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's action in the universe; about the purpose of human life and the afterlife; about evil and the reality of the devil."

sacred text of any uniquely Christian (theological) power. Pursuing goals of human thriving and anthropological empowerment do not require the help of biblical interpretation, at least in some world views.⁵⁷ In failing to make more of theological truths, inculturation hermeneutics is in danger of losing distinctiveness among other human ideas or systems. If inculturation hermeneutics seeks positive outcomes from reading the Bible, the starting point must be good theology. Bad theology, or even abdication of theological claims, will lead to impoverished interpretations, even according to the goals of inculturation hermeneutics. Scripture is powerful toward the ends inculturation hermeneutics seeks precisely because of its theological importance. As Draper says, appropriation of a sacred text is inherently emic, undertaken in a community of faith and claiming a theological orientation, and inculturation hermeneutics may not capitalize on this to the degree it could.

Both Ukpong and the Scripture Project have no trouble admitting that the Bible can be distorted for purposes of oppression and that biblical interpretation can be dangerous. Any such thing constitutes abuse (of the Bible and whomever is being oppressed), however, and does not mean the Bible is inherently untrue, bad news, or oppressive.

Necessity of an active third pole

Draper makes the point that the Bible is not just for doctrine, but for “lived faith” that “results in changed behaviour” and “in action in and through the community of faith in society.”⁵⁸ There must be a practical, active component to the

⁵⁷ Ukpong admits, “Of course we can engage in societal issues without the Bible” (NT Hermeneutics, 153). Though he never considers doing this himself, both because he aims to work among “professional readers of the Bible” and because “the Bible is too important in molding the lives of people...to give up on it,” Ukpong here recognizes that the prioritization of outcome could render any biblical or theological commitments incidental (NT Hermeneutics 153, 156). Though people of faith with theological and/or pastoral concerns would argue that spiritual health and good theology are necessary components of human thriving, not all worldviews would make sacred text central or even peripheral to goals of anthropological empowerment. Jonathan Draper [“African Contextual Hermeneutics: Readers, Reading Communities, and Their Options between Text and Context,” *Religion & Theology* 22 (2015)] makes a similar statement about the role of sacred texts in “the social construction of reality, which underpins and determines praxis,” arguing on a practical basis that “(positive) social transformation has to address the ‘sacred texts’ of a cultural community, written or oral, if it is to be successful” (16).

⁵⁸ Draper, “Bible as Conversation,” 18.

third pole. The third pole has qualities of a verb in addition to a noun as a component of interpretation and an adjective that describes the conceptual framework of the reader. This third pole makes up the task of interpretation and what it drives interpreters to do.

It is important for Ukpong that there be “interactive engagement;” inculturation hermeneutics is “participatory” in the world of the text and for social change in context.⁵⁹ Interpretation should transform a contemporary context and “forge history.”⁶⁰ Ukpong says if reading the context of the text (behind the text) and the text itself focus on “communicative function of language,” a contextual revolution is marked by a “performative function.”⁶¹ That African conceptual framework favors the concrete over the abstract means that the Bible needs to gain traction in practical ways and make a difference in the life of the community and the lives of individuals.

The Scripture Project too implies action from the beginning, likening Scripture to “a musical score that must be played or sung in order to be understood.”⁶² Thesis Six is about a reading posture that is drawn into God’s redemptive action through participation in the church. It is God who acts in and through Scripture, and active readers are drawn up into actions of proclamation, prayer, service, and faithful witness. St. Francis is an example of interpretation that is not merely mental or intellectual exercise, but “embodied...perhaps the only kind of reading that is finally appropriate to these texts, which are about, and intend to provoke, changed lives.”⁶³ Karl Barth often receives credit for helping restore a sense of the self-involving nature of theology and biblical interpretation that require active participation. Barth hovers around many aspects of theological interpretation, including this one.

Ukpong specifically upholds an active role for the professional Bible scholar as a public intellectual. As professional biblical scholars, Ukpong writes, “we need to make a critical use of the Bible to build and mobilize public opinion and unmask the

⁵⁹ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 6.

⁶⁰ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 7.

⁶¹ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 148. Ukpong does not mean public recitation or theater performance of the actual words of the Bible, like Performance Criticism (see www.biblicalperformancecriticism.com and/or David Rhoads’ two-part article titled, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Discipline,” online at the SBL site at www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/rhoads_performance.pdf) but performance more broadly conceived as life transformation.

⁶² *The Art*, 3.

⁶³ *The Art*, 100.

structures and mechanisms of the status quo of state and political arrangements that entrench practices and ways of existence that rest on oppression. We need to make our professional voices heard in the public and seek to influence political decision for the common good.”⁶⁴ Thus the impetus to action cannot be limited to the individual scholar’s private life, for “we are the agents of change in society through our professional practice.”⁶⁵ Here inculturation hermeneutics challenges members of the Scripture Project to see the extent of their responsibility. Especially in the postmodern, biblically illiterate world they know they inhabit, members of the Scripture Project **must** get out of the ecclesiastical comfort zones of Christian communities and into the streets. To limit biblical interpretation to catechetical ends within the church is too small a thing.

The Scripture Project does have a sense of responsibility to certain publics, primarily in helping equip the church for faithful living. The Scripture Project indicates desire to listen to those outside the church, but it is unclear how much they seek to engage or change any level of public outside the church. There is certainly invitation for anyone outside the church to join, becoming part of an alternative community. This is a rather Anabaptist posture, though few members of the Scripture Project are Anabaptist. Giving up on the project of trying to make the kingdom of humankind into the kingdom of God, the Scripture Project embraces the church as a specific locus of the kingdom of God and makes efforts to enact the kingdom well enough that others will want to join. This is witness—to live out the kingdom of God such that others see the invitation to the alternative community of the church and are drawn in.

The third pole as framework for pursuing and evaluating interpretations

Methodological presuppositions set the trajectory for interpretation, consisting of assumptions regarding what the Bible is, what it is for, and how it should be approached in order for it to yield the desired results. The next chapter on *procedure* will get more specifically at this aspect of the third pole. The goals of interpretation lie in the third pole, and thus the third pole determines how to read in order to pursue these goals.

⁶⁴ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 154.

⁶⁵ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 155.

Evaluation of whether and how a particular interpretation is good or bad or somewhere in between also originates in the third pole. “Based on their ideologies, some readings are better than others,” Ukpong explains, and it is the values of the third pole that make such judgments. “Better readings expose and critique power and privilege in society, support and encourage positive social change, and affirm difference and inclusion,” Ukpong summarizes according to his own ideo-theological commitments.⁶⁶ Not everyone would agree with this description of “better readings,” presumably, and the difference lies in the ideo-theological bent with which they read. Interpretations are judged chiefly against one’s primary axis, to use Draper’s language; how well an interpretation reflects and illumines one’s assumptions about the basic message and purpose of the Bible will determine how one evaluates an interpretation. For Ukpong, interpretations are evaluated according to their contributions (or lack of) to the “empowerment, in our communities, of people who have no power, no voice, in all aspects of life...and thereby make the voiceless and the marginalized more fully human.”⁶⁷

The Scripture Project, too, wants to nuance the evaluation of readings beyond categories of right and wrong; though they admit such categories can be useful and necessary, the introduction to *The Art of Reading Scripture* suggests that “perhaps ultimately a more adequate way of judging our readings is the way we judge works of art – according to the standards of beauty.”⁶⁸ These standards are imprecise and subjective, which is surely part of the point. Judging art is hard work and difficult to explain, especially to those unfamiliar with art history and aesthetics. Likewise, interpretation of Scripture requires immersion in a history, vocabulary, and lifestyle: a very emic endeavor. This parallel of art evaluation gets at the need for catechesis, training in the faith in order to read sacred text well. Intentionally or not, it also has elitist overtones: like high culture, biblical interpretation is only for those with adequate time, training, and proficiency. Likening biblical interpretation to art, suggesting a need to be somehow cultured, would prove worrying to Ukpong. “Colonialism is founded on an ideology derived from the classical idea of culture,” he explains, “the way of life of the elite was regarded as authentic and normative for all people everywhere...[culture] was synonymous with civilization, and those who did

⁶⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 149.

⁶⁷ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 159.

⁶⁸ *The Art*, xvi.

not live that way were regarded as uncultured...and those considered as uncultured should be brought under control and taught (given) culture.”⁶⁹ The Scripture Project means to focus on imparting a Christian culture to members of faith communities by means of catechesis, but this may too closely resemble imparting Western culture by means of colonialism, and at the very least retains the aim of making others more like oneself.

Inculturation hermeneutics resists all implications that the best readings come from the privileged. Even so, Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture* may approach more common ground with the way the introduction to the volume goes on to describe imagination, a key part of the artistic process, as “capacity to envision the existence of something that does not yet exist,” saying that Scripture “claim[s] us and make[s] us into new people” according to God’s relationship to us “through God’s power for love, for compassion, and so on.”⁷⁰ Ukpong says that inculturation hermeneutics aims to “actualize the creative power of the Bible in African societies,” and it is uniquely African perspectives and experiences that make inculturation hermeneutics able to offer “innovative imaginative insights.”⁷¹ Thus both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics affirm the need for creative readings: Ukpong believes all Africans, by virtue of being African, have resources to draw on for such insights, whereas the Scripture Project gestures toward the need for the imagination to be shaped by the biblical story and a relationship with God and God’s people prior to engaging in such reading.⁷²

⁶⁹ Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa,” in S. O. Abogunrin, ed, *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 33.

⁷⁰ *The Art*, xvi.

⁷¹ Ukpong, “Inculturation as Decolonization,” 35; Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 158.

⁷² Readers always approach the text from a particular ideo-theological orientation, and both Ukpong and the Scripture Project seek to draw out this orientation, shape it, and capitalize on it. How the dialogue between reader and text unfolds depends significantly on how much and in what directions the reader allows the text to ‘speak.’ Jonathan Draper [“African Contextual Hermeneutics,”] notes that “the reader inevitably stands in an at least initially hegemonic position vis-à-vis the text – she can open it or close it at will but not without consequences, since it is a text which, as a sacred text, makes existential claims on the reader which may be accepted or modified or rejected or ignored” (13). Draper argues the reader must “start with contextualization,” acknowledging their potentially hegemonic preunderstanding and then move to distantiation, “suspending disbelief” in an effort to hear the voice of the text and allow it to inform praxis (14).

Pursuing the Dialogue

Inculturation hermeneutics is open to dialogue with and learning from other contexts, interpretations, and reading strategies. As cited above, Bauckham understands dialogue in and among Christian communities to help guard against oppressive or ideologically distorted readings. In the early pages of the first essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Ellen Davis says that within faith communities, where there is often a tendency to think we know what the Bible says and means, an appropriate hermeneutic of suspicion is to “begin by suspecting our own interpretations.”⁷³ Both the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics may benefit from dialogue and comparison on conceptual framework, then.

Similarities

The conceptual frameworks of the Scripture Project’s theological interpretation and of inculturation hermeneutics emerge out of epistemological crises within their respective traditions and experiences with reception history. Each of them renegotiate frameworks that they find inadequate and forge something new, though the Bible and their respective reception histories remain inextricably bound up with their developing frameworks. Both see the Bible and the historical moment they inhabit as mutually shaping one another; each of them envision “shaping contemporary life with this story [of the Bible]” and recognize that “the text is being reshaped through our reading.”⁷⁴ Both agree that the third pole of appropriation, the space between text and context, must be active on a practical level. Biblical interpretation cannot be relegated to intellectual or spiritual realms, but should impact real, everyday life for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project. They each pursue interpretation that will be practical and significant in the lives of individuals and communities, though the ways they see this playing out are not the same. Finally, both recognize that there can be and have been harmful ideological interpretations.

⁷³ *The Art*, 16.

⁷⁴ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 137, 138.

Challenging one another

Perhaps it is the possibility of harmful ideological interpretations that the Scripture Project wants to avoid when some authors, notably Ellen Davis, make efforts to avoid ideology altogether, but inculturation hermeneutics calls their bluff, reminding the Scripture Project that “all readings are done from certain perspectives that comprise ideologies.”⁷⁵ Inculturation hermeneutics pushes the Scripture Project to be honest about their ideological commitments: the bias toward church history (see theses 2 and 7), despite the acknowledgement that there have been distortions, may put the burden of proof to challenge historical use of the Bible upon the victims of any misuse. Even with a shared commitment to active appropriation of the text, ideological preference for theological, ecclesiastical, and catechetical uses of Scripture may obscure purposes of liberation and human thriving on social, political, and economic levels. *The Art of Reading Scripture* occasionally connects with aspects or experiences of broader culture, but inculturation hermeneutics pushes members of the Scripture Project farther out from any ecclesiastical ghettos, beyond the boundaries of the visible church, to be public intellectuals, voices for the common good, taking sides on behalf of the marginalized.

Conversely, the Scripture Project cautions inculturation hermeneutics in their zeal for “influenc[ing] political decision” and challenging oppression not to allow a commitment to the public square to derail potentially powerful, specifically Christian, theological readings.⁷⁶ Though Ukpong claims “the goal of exegesis is to actualize the theological meaning of the text in a contemporary context,” Ukpong’s work tends to make use of historical and sociological tools to pursue this, and the Scripture Project may encourage inculturation hermeneutics to draw on more overtly theological approaches and to make broader use of narrative and even liturgical resources.⁷⁷

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

Inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project have distinct third poles of appropriation, emphasizing different ideo-theological priorities and methods. Inculturation hermeneutics forefronts context, with the crux of the ideo-theological

⁷⁵ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 149.

⁷⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 154.

⁷⁷ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 9.

pole consisting of commitments to virtues of love and inclusiveness and to outcomes of justice and human thriving. The Scripture Project prioritizes text, with methodological considerations for best reading practices and postures making up the bulk of the third pole. That Ukpong dubs his reading strategy “inculturation” brings into focus his orientation toward practical elements of human life, identity, and culture. That the group calls themselves the Scripture Project indicates their desire to handle accurately the word of truth. This chapter has drawn out both some affinities between these dialogue partners, as well as points of challenge to one another. The ways they push one another occur in areas where they are theoretically open to such dialogue: each can help the other do what they want to do better, on their own terms. Ukpong could potentially add more robustly theological rationale to support his goals of anthropological empowerment, and the Scripture Project could learn from Christian perspective and experience other than their own, thereby better reflecting and assisting the global church to which they claim allegiance. The next chapter will explore the last of Ukpong’s terms in the description of the task of interpretation: *procedure*. After chapters taking up other terms in that description, the next chapter will clarify **how** an *interpreter* in a certain *context* makes meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework*.

Chapter 7: Procedure

Introduction

The chapters of this thesis follow Ukpong's delineation of the elements that make up the process of interpretation: "an *interpreter* (chapter three) in a certain *context* (chapter four) making meaning of a *text* (chapter five) using a specific *conceptual framework* (chapter six) and its *procedure*" (current chapter).¹ The immediately preceding chapter on conceptual framework revealed substantive similarities and differences between Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics and the theological interpretation of the Scripture Project. Both models of interpretation forge something new upon finding existing frameworks, methods, and goals inadequate. It is significant that both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project see the Bible and contingent historical moments as mutually shaping one another: this concept of the hermeneutical circle means that interpretation must to some degree be contextual—that is, speaking to and responding to contemporary culture and audience with sensitivity to issues and experiences at hand. Both want biblical interpretation to be relevant and meaningful on a practical level in the everyday lives of individuals and communities, and both acknowledge the potentially harmful effects of distorted interpretation. Even with these similarities, significant departures occur between the two in the ideo-theological third pole of interpretation. The ways each approach the Bible, the assumptions they make about the endeavor, and the commitments and orientations they embody are different from one another. The primary axis or most important features of inculturation hermeneutics consists of commitment to biblical principles of love, justice, and empowerment; orientation toward African ordinary readers; and viewing the Bible as a life-giving text in very practical ways. The Scripture Project is more theoretical and theological, committed to Scripture as God's story of redemption that truthfully tells the story of all humans and our communities, simultaneously showing us how to live into that story as God's people. This chapter takes up Ukpong's final term, exploring how inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project each conceive of and pursue *procedure* in biblical interpretation.

¹ Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 7.

Ukpong explains procedure by laying out steps—the what and how of interpretation. In some ways it seems backward for procedure to be the final term in considering interpretation: often identifying a procedure to follow is the first step. One must know what they are doing in order to undertake it! The inclination to begin with procedure, however, obscures the reality that what readers assume and value about interpreters, context, and text will significantly shape the procedure they lay out. Conceptual framework is always present anyway, and it is healthy and worthwhile to draw it out before articulating a procedure. In Ukpong’s description of the task of interpretation, *procedure* is closely tied to *conceptual framework*: he says interpreters work out of “a specific conceptual framework and its procedure,” suggesting procedure emerges out of conceptual framework. As the previous chapter explored, conceptual framework includes socio-cultural worldview as well as assumptions about the Bible and the goals of exegesis. The all-inclusive horizon out of which an interpreter operates will indeed guide one toward a certain process of interpretation, whether or not one recognizes or interrogates the procedure they employ.²

Outline of Procedural Steps in Inculturation Hermeneutics

Ukpong says the “First step...is identifying the interpreter’s specific context that *dynamically* corresponds or approximates to the historical context of the text.”³ This step requires collaboration between trained readers and ordinary readers. Trained readers provide information about the background of the text, and ordinary readers help ensure that the contemporary issue chosen to parallel the biblical context is authentic and meaningful in the lives of everyday Africans. Already it is evident that inculturation hermeneutics “collapses exegesis and hermeneutics into one process whereby readers situated in and informed by their community context enter into a text, read it *dynamically* against its own context, and derive meaning for the present

² At this point, Ukpong is neutrally describing components of every interpretive undertaking, similar to how Gadamer sees *Truth and Method* as description of what happens in interpretation. Ukpong goes on to consider each term in inculturation hermeneutics, as this thesis is doing.

³ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 10, emphasis in original.

context.”⁴ That the first step begins with “the interpreter’s specific context” indicates that Africa will be the subject of interpretation, receiving priority even ahead of the text.

The second step robustly makes Africa the subject of interpretation, analyzing the interpreter’s context phenomenologically, socio-anthropologically (the worldview of the community), historically, socially, and religiously.⁵ Again, this step includes both ordinary and trained readers for accurate, responsible analysis of the African context. The importance of this step is why Ukpong insists the inculturation interpreter must be a cultural insider. Ukpong says the religious diversity of Africa, including African traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, and others, “means that our exegesis should bear the imprint of contemporary ecumenism.”⁶ Inculturation hermeneutics recognizes and embraces other diversity within Africa as well: “Thinking pluralistically means embracing the plurality with which Africa is endowed without at the same time denying our identities and diversities,” Ukpong explains, and this “entails de-absolutizing our readings, acting in interdependence with others, relativising our actions, acknowledging the presence and importance of others, and being sensitive to the perceptions of others in our reading practices. Inclusive thinking means breaking...the conventional barriers that society has placed between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”⁷

The third step consists of elucidating the historical context of the text. This is primarily a step for trained readers, but it must be done with an eye toward contemporary application. The themes, aspects, and features of the text that are

⁴ Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa,” in S. O. Abogunrin, ed, *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 45.

⁵ Several African readers first analyze African contexts before turning to biblical texts, though no other scholar outlines the process with the intentionality that Ukpong does. In the published version of J.N.K. Mugambi’s keynote address to the Consultation on African Hermeneutics and Theology in 1999 [“Foundations for an African Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics,” pages 9-30 in Mary Getui, et al, ed, *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton, 2001)], the first several pages are descriptions of Africa and Africans, with seemingly little to do with biblical hermeneutics. Musimbi Kanyoro [“Biblical Hermeneutics: Ancient Palestine and the Contemporary World,” *Review and Expositor* 94 (1997), 364] says cultural hermeneutics, understanding “the nuances of the culture of modern readers,” is a prerequisite to biblical hermeneutics.

⁶ Justin Ukpong, “New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities,” *Neotestamentica* 35 (2001), 155.

⁷ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 155.

important to inculturation hermeneutics, including principles of love and justice, are drawn out in this step, with attention to the methods and goals of inculturation. (See chapter five for a thorough discussion of *text* in inculturation hermeneutics.)

Step four, “analysis of the text in the light of the already analysed contemporary context,” brings together the previous steps, intentionally drawing the contexts, along with the text, more directly and intentionally into conversation with one another.

The fifth step is “gathering together the fruits of the discussion and a commitment to actualizing the message of the text in concrete life situation.”⁸ This step is the goal of the whole endeavor, the purpose of inculturation hermeneutics. Previous steps help ensure this step is done well. Here is the third pole of appropriation: at this point in the procedure an orientation that includes commitment and action in concrete life situations finally comes to fruition. Hans de Wit, in an article primarily on Latin American liberation theology but also very applicable here, helpfully draws on Gadamer to describe this central moment in the interpretive process: “Hermeneutically speaking, praxis is the moment of appropriation where reading becomes an *event*, when the text is read as a letter addressed to you—the moment defined by Gadamer as the core of the interpretation process.”⁹

Ukpong holds these steps loosely and explains that each of them will feature more or less prominently in different interpretive undertakings and they may even take place in a different order. It remains important, however, that the context receive attention first and “condition the evaluation of the discussion in the other steps.”¹⁰ Questions may arise, then: Why outline a procedure if it does not provide hard and fast guidance? And if the goals of interpretation for inculturation hermeneutics can be achieved without such specific attention to procedure? This procedure is important for at least the following reasons: 1) it overtly and methodologically makes Africa the subject of interpretation, 2) it demonstrates the necessity of both trained and ordinary readers throughout the inculturation process, 3) it outlines a transferable model that can be used elsewhere in other settings and contexts, thereby 4) making inculturation hermeneutics part of the global conversation in the field of biblical studies and

⁸ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 12.

⁹ Hans de Wit, “‘It Should Be Burned and Forgotten!’ Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another,” in Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach *Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 57.

¹⁰ Ukpong, “Rereading,” 13.

hermeneutics. In his essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Greg Jones identifies what he describes as “increasing preoccupation with questions of biblical method and biblical authority.”¹¹ African hermeneutics are in large part decidedly not preoccupied with these same questions,¹² and Ukpong’s outlining of a procedure can help bridge this gap, offering Western scholars some reflection on method without constraining African interpreters with too many specifics. Many African readers do something like the procedure Ukpong describes anyway, frequently without including intentional reflection on a method or procedure.

The Art of Reading Scripture on Procedure

Members of the Scripture Project gathered “to overcome the fragmentation of our theological disciplines” in reading the Bible together theologically.¹³ The Scripture Project is part of a wider trend among confessional academics, generally described as theological interpretation. While there is no strict procedure that qualifies as theological interpretation, there are loose principles and values that tend to apply. The dust jacket of Daniel Treier’s introduction to theological interpretation summarizes that this movement emphasizes “the contexts of canon, creed, and

¹¹ Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 145.

¹² Jeremy Punt identified “methodological preoccupations in areas of South African New Testament scholarship” in 1998; this is the subtitle of his article, “My Kingdom for a Method” [*Neotestamentica* 32.1 (1998), 135-160]. Punt’s article focuses on white South African scholars and surveys some of the questions and approaches gaining attention as well as neglected aspects of method, as Punt sees it. Black Africans tend to forefront principles, themes, and goals for biblical interpretation above method or procedure, as is evident in Nienanya Onwu’s 1984 survey of “The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa” [*The Journal of Religious Thought*, 41.2 (1984), 35-46]. Alan John Meenan writes that “African scholars are often eclectic in their approach and the ideo-theological orientation of a particular biblical interpreter tends to define the focal point of analysis, suggesting the third pole provides more direction than loyalty to particular method or procedure” [“Biblical Hermeneutics in an African Context,” *Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 1/2 (2014), 271]. Even Ukpong’s article that categorizes and describes trends in African biblical studies in largely methodological terms reveals that goals and orientations to the biblical text shape interpretation over adherence to particular method or procedure [“Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000), 3-18].

¹³ *The Art*, xv.

church.”¹⁴ In other words, theological interpretation treats the Bible as Christian Scripture, with historical, ecclesiological, and theological implications such an assumption entails.¹⁵

The Scripture Project, like inculturation hermeneutics, resists beginning with a procedure. Instead, they distill the work they have done together into Nine Theses on the interpretation of Scripture, rather than outline a method. The Nine Theses are not necessarily in order of importance or chronology, and are a result of the work the Project has done. The Theses did not shape the essays prior to their writing, but rather the essays, originally presented as working papers to the group, gesture toward the Theses the group articulates after discussing the papers. Part of the reason the group resists specific procedure is because throughout their time together, “the conviction grew among [them] that reading Scripture is an *art* – a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination.”¹⁶ While creative endeavors may have rules and parameters, there is not one correct procedure. This description of reading Scripture as an art gets at the subjectivity of the interpreter, suggesting engagement and imagination as important postures. Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project recognize the subjectivity of the interpreter early on, making Gadamer a good fit for the theoretical framework of the comparison between the two reading strategies that this thesis undertakes.

Thesis Six of the Scripture Project’s Nine Theses offers guidance for the subjectivity of the interpreter, affirming that theological interpretation is best done in the church. This Thesis has implications for discussions undertaken in earlier chapters: see chapter three on *interpreter* and chapter four on *context*. While Thesis Six is rather insular, members of the group recognize the need for conversation beyond local Christian communities. Daley writes, “Christian exegesis must become not only more theological but more theologically ecumenical if it is to nourish those who continue to read the Bible in faith,” upholding the need for a range of theological

¹⁴ Daniel Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁵ See R. W. L. Moberly’s “What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.2 (2009), 161-178 for “some working definitions of theological interpretation” with a survey of contributions to the field, contemporary and historical.

¹⁶ *The Art*, xv. Emphasis in original.

voices.¹⁷ Indeed, the Scripture Project’s theological interpretation is relational: “we learn the practice of an art through apprenticeship to those who have become masters,” says the introduction, suggesting that historical figures from church history as well as contemporary mentors and other relationships shape an interpreter’s framework and skills. Thesis Eight pushes readers into dialogue with “diverse others outside the church,” even while reading within a community of faith.

Thesis Three clarifies a basic theological assumption about the text, affirming that each Testament requires the other for right understanding. The commentary on the Thesis suggests the Bible must be read “back to front,” with Jesus as the climax and key to the whole thing, and must also be “front to back,” allowing the story of God’s self-revelation and redemption to unfold.¹⁸ Assumptions about the text feature heavily in the Nine Theses: Theses 1-5 each overtly attribute certain things to the biblical text, including that it “truthfully tells the story of God’s action,”¹⁹ that it is “a coherent dramatic narrative” best understood “in light of the church’s rule of faith,”²⁰ that the texts have “multiple complex senses given by God,” and are not limited to a single meaning,²¹ and that “the four canonical Gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.”²² The remaining Theses make indirect claims about the Bible in speaking primarily about interpreters and reading partners,²³ contexts,²⁴ and reading postures. Thus, procedure for theological interpretation is profoundly shaped by assumptions about the biblical text, what the text is for, and to whom the text is primarily directed.

Reading posture, broadly conceived to include character and orientation, is critical for the Scripture Project. Right understanding of Scripture must begin with virtues. But cultivation of these virtues does not happen in a vacuum and is already part of the hermeneutical circle. The church helps cultivate these virtues, and the church knows what these virtues are by reading Scripture and history well. Who one is and what one does matters greatly for understanding, as Gadamer has well-established, and the ideal interpreter for the Scripture Project is an active participant

¹⁷ *The Art*, 86.

¹⁸ *The Art*, 2.

¹⁹ Thesis One, *The Art*, 1.

²⁰ Thesis Two, *The Art*, 1.

²¹ Thesis Four, *The Art*, 2.

²² Thesis Five, *The Art*, 3.

²³ “The saints” (Thesis Seven) and “diverse others outside the church” (Thesis Eight).

²⁴ “The church” (Thesis Six) and “the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom of God” (Thesis Nine).

in the life of the church who learns and practices virtues including “receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, humor, and imagination,”²⁵ and who seeks “continually fresh rereadings” grounded in “the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world”²⁶ and emerging out of “dialogue with diverse others.”²⁷ If this seems a tall order, the Scripture Project would likely respond that it is, and individual interpreters are called always to be growing and refining their reading of Scripture, and reading together as the church helps make up for the shortcomings an individual may have as a reader at any given time.

The Scripture Project reveals a Gadamerian understanding of what happens in interpretation. Among the statements throughout the essays that clearly draw on Gadamer is this description in Daley’s essay:

Understanding a text is precisely the event of the interpenetration of horizons: the author’s and the reader’s, along with the entire set of cultural and community assumptions, intellectual models, and religious value systems through which each comes to participate in the world of intelligent discourse. It can never be a simple matter of the recovery of objective, “original” meaning through a scientific historical criticism that is free of the concerns and commitments of the later reader.²⁸

The Scripture Project’s notion of interpretation as an art is also in line with Gadamer on art. Gadamer distinguishes between performance arts, such as drama and music, and non-performance arts, including literature. But then Gadamer breaks down this distinction by acknowledging the “borderline position of literature,” saying that reading is a kind of performance that is understanding.²⁹ The text is not actualized until the reader grasps it. The content of the text is re-presented in the act of understanding, analogous to the representation of performance arts. The reader is the primary interpreter of the art of literature, whereas for performance arts the actor(s) or musician(s) is the primary or mediating interpreter.³⁰

²⁵ From the commentary on Thesis Seven, *The Art*, 4.

²⁶ Thesis Nine, *The Art*, 5.

²⁷ Thesis Eight, *The Art*, 4.

²⁸ *The Art*, 73.

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 142.

³⁰ Jensen utilizes this parallel in his essay, getting at the idea of interpretation as performance, even obedience. “Scripture constrains our lives and thinking the way a play or novel constrains the lives and thinking of the characters,” *The Art*, 32.

That the reader must re-present the truth of the text suggests that understanding must be active and not merely passive. At the very least, the reader must bring together her or his own horizon and that of the text, as the quote above illustrates. For the Scripture Project, reading the Bible must be at least as active as engaging with the meaning of the text and negotiating the claim it has on one's own life and self. That claim will often entail further action: a certain way of living one's life, or implications for Christian practice in a community of faith. For persons of faith, sacred scripture may go beyond other literature, with a divine quality or call present in the text. As George Lindbeck explains in a discussion of what he calls "hermeneutics of social embodiment," that "One theological warrant for giving priority to practice is confidence that the Holy Spirit guides the church into the truth."³¹

The Relative Importance of Procedure

Both Ukpong and the Scripture Project forefront their values, goals, and commitments over methodology, and want to preserve space to adapt as needed to the setting of interpretation.³² Both are more concerned with proper use and application of the text than fidelity to a specific method.³³ The ways each gesture toward procedure serve to undergird their respective third poles. In other words, procedure serves conceptual framework, even while emerging out of it. The previous chapter covered conceptual framework in detail, but it is helpful here to summarize the goals and

³¹ George Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," *Pro Ecclesia* 5.2 (1995), 146. In this article Lindbeck describes how premodern "performance interpretations could on occasion be radically different and yet all be acknowledged as authentic scriptural words of God accommodated to different contexts," and finds that such understanding and practice of Scripture "made possible an authentic pluralism joined to a tenacious unity" (145, 144). The final chapter of this thesis will return to Lindbeck's work in this area and see how it might be helpful for maintaining difference and even challenge between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, while preserving significant Christian unity.

³² As Anthony Thiselton says, "'Method' reflects theory abstracted from the contextual contingencies and broad life-flow of history." *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 11.

³³ See chapter five of this thesis for a discussion of how each understands proper use and application.

priorities of Ukpong and the Scripture Project, to remember what ideals procedure serves for each.

Summary of Ukpong’s goals of interpretation

Ukpong primarily wants biblical interpretation to contribute to “anthropological empowerment.”³⁴ He further describes this as “holistic empowerment of the personhood, lives and cultures of all sectors of African peoples for the realization of their full humanity.” People should be “subjects rather than objects of their situation,” and those “who have no power, no voice, in all aspects of life” need to be empowered and made “more fully human.” Precise indicators or measures of this empowerment remain unclear, though people will be able to “take responsibility and action for change in their lives and their societies.” Ukpong explicitly ties this goal of anthropological empowerment to procedure in saying, “the starting point... must be the empowerment of the ordinary people in reading practices, an empowerment that enables them and their different contexts to be the subject rather than the object of the interpretation of the Bible.”

The biblical message should “be experienced as good news in the concrete,” and interpreting the Bible means “to nourish as well as challenge life within the society.”³⁵ Ukpong envisions challenging “the status quo of state and political arrangements that entrench practices and ways of existence that rest on oppression,” and upholds the Bible and good interpretation as “life-oriented.”³⁶

Summary of the Scripture Project’s goals of interpretation

Michael Gorman observes, “One thing that seems to be generally agreed upon... is that theological interpretation is not primarily about exegetical *methods* but about exegetical *goals*,” affirming that a discussion of procedure is of secondary importance to goals.³⁷ The previous chapter on *conceptual framework* revealed that the ideo-theological orientation of the Scripture Project includes commitments to the

³⁴ All quotes in this paragraph come from “NT Hermeneutics,” 159.

³⁵ Justin Ukpong, “Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings,” in Justin Ukpong, et al, ed, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 19.

³⁶ Ukpong, “NT Hermeneutics,” 154; Ukpong, “Rereading,” 13.

³⁷ Michael Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2009), 145-146, emphasis in original.

text and the church, which they see as inextricably bound together. The Bible, as a text of faith, calls forth a community of faith and primarily speaks to that community of faith, the church. The Spirit of God continues to lead people of faith into truth, that their “speech and practice might yet be a faithful witness to the righteous and merciful God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ.” In plainer language, a goal of theological interpretation is increasing communion with God and one another, as people of faith.³⁸ Indeed, *The Art of Reading Scripture* does reflect these themes. Johnson writes that engaging the biblical text puts one in position “to recognize what God has done in the past as well as to discern what God is making possible for, and requiring of, us in the present.”³⁹ More generally, it is clear throughout the essays that good theological interpretation will result in changed lives. Jones says that a “rich familiarity with Scripture” will provide resources “for discovering afresh Scripture’s formative and transformative power.”⁴⁰

Do These Procedures Facilitate These Goals?

Ukpong’s summary of procedure makes logical sense: analyze context and text and bring them together for contemporary meaning. Ideo-theological orientation toward the poor and marginalized, with a commitment to empowerment, makes a persuasive case that interpretation could be life-giving on a practical level, contributing to justice. Does participation in inculturation readings actually produce change and empowerment in the lives of individuals and communities? Is there measurable contribution to justice when the people read the Bible as Ukpong outlines? Likewise, the content of the Nine Theses reflects the desire of the Scripture Project for the Bible to be meaningful and formative in lives of Christian discipleship. Whether their approach will be compelling and effective to bring people into increasingly faithful lives remains to be seen, though the Nine Theses have more

³⁸ Michael Gorman summarizes Stephen Fowl’s work on theological interpretation this way, referencing multiple page numbers in Fowl’s *Engaging Scripture* and finding Fowl demonstrates this two-fold goal of theological interpretation “throughout” *Engaging Scripture*. Gorman posted excerpts from the revised edition of *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, full citation in the preceding footnote, on a weblog at <http://www.michaeljgorman.net/2009/04/29/principles-of-theological-interpretation-pt-1/>

³⁹ *The Art*, 116.

⁴⁰ *The Art*, 147.

promise for practical transformation than focusing on historical or literary aspects for their own sake.

Inculturation readings and practical change?

In 2009, Hans de Wit observed that despite “an impressive quantity of examples of grass-roots reading of the Bible” collected in Latin America, “no real empirical research is being done on the question of exactly how readers make their way from interpretation to praxis and back again,” and the same continues to be largely true in Africa.⁴¹ De Wit has launched a project called *Through the Eyes of Another*, continuing the work of a 2004 publication of the same name, hoping to help remedy this dearth of empirical research.⁴² Focusing on contextual readings and the experiences and perspectives of ordinary readers, de Wit’s massive research project investigates phenomena similar to Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics, except that de Wit’s project more intentionally brings many reading groups from very different social and geographical locations into conversation with one another.⁴³ There is a vast amount of data in connection with the project, reported by numerous reading groups in partnership with one another. De Wit calls this work empirical hermeneutics and describes it like this: “Empirical hermeneutics thus includes an analysis of the appropriation processes and is directed at the text in its relationship to local explanation and interpretation, and in its effect on and use by contemporary readers.

⁴¹ De Wit, “It Should be Burned and Forgotten,” 58.

⁴² See the project website, www.bible4all.org.

⁴³ Ukpong is very open to such conversations and theoretically upholds the need for them in inculturation hermeneutics, saying that in the context of globalization, “First we are to do our exegesis not in mental isolation but in the consciousness of the global context in which we exist....Second, we must seek to make our own contribution to global biblical studies by maintaining our specific orientation and vision....Meeting this dual challenge translates into having our feet firmly in our contexts while at the same time being conscious of the other contexts with which we coexist” (“NT Hermeneutics,” 164). Ukpong and John Riches did a collaborative project similar to de Wit’s *Through the Eyes of Another* but on a much smaller scale, reading the Bible with small groups in Nigeria and Scotland and comparing the ways each approached the text. Ukpong’s write-up of the project indicates that the research was more about how and why people approach the text than it was about the results of reading. The project revealed “people’s attitudes, knowledge, inner feelings, fears and desires, particularly as these relate to their use of the bible,” but Ukpong reports no follow-up to measure how any of these had changed as a result of participating in the reading group, if at all. “Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings,” in *The Bible in Africa*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Boston: Brill, 2000), 585.

Empirical hermeneutics seeks to explore the area where the behavior potential of the text becomes operational.”⁴⁴ The most substantial work in empirical hermeneutics came together in a 2013 conference in Amsterdam and the subsequent volume, *Bible and Transformation*.⁴⁵

While empirical hermeneutics sets out to explore where behavior potential becomes operational, and de Wit expressed desire for research on how readers make their way from interpretation to praxis, this has proven difficult; “behavior potential” often remains just that—potential—with actual praxis difficult to trace and document.⁴⁶ Introducing *Bible and Transformation*, de Wit and Dyk admit the following about the collection of data the project worked with: “in the three thousand pages of empirical material, we discovered only one example of a group that took immediate action as a result of the reading process.”⁴⁷ Still, the volume contains numerous examples of transformation connected to the experience of intercultural Bible reading, including “shifts in [participants’] understanding and interpretation of the biblical text...changes in their view of themselves, and a modified view of their exchange partners.”⁴⁸ Intercultural Bible reading may also shift the relationship of

⁴⁴ Hans de Wit, *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture*, Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics series book 1, (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 2012) 15. http://www.bible4all.org/bestanden/documenten.ashx?document_id=108

⁴⁵ Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, eds, *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading* (Boston: SBL, 2015).

⁴⁶ For example, in summarizing the work contained in one of the essays in the *Bible and Transformation* volume, de Wit and Dyk write that “the researchers became aware of the inherent *possibilities* of that [intercultural Bible reading] space to address issues of sexual violence. Their essay reflects on *possible effects* that the intercultural Bible reading can have” (12, emphasis added).

⁴⁷ De Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*, 2.

⁴⁸ De Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*, 15. In the essay about interaction between Haitian and Dominican readers, I wondered if the impetus for transformation in the view of reading partners could simply be attributed to a collaborative activity of any form, more than to the specific task at hand. When I understood, however, that the passage they read together was from the book of Ruth, and consisted of a main character who had migrated struggling with the desire to return home and the potential reality that awaited her there, the increased understanding between Haitian migrants and Dominicans in the Dominican Republic was clearly related to the biblical content and interpretation the groups did together. It is difficult to isolate the impact of various components of the intercultural Bible reading experience; it is the process as a whole that *The Bible and Transformation* explores. Similarly, Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics consists of all the components, commitments, framework, and procedure discussed throughout this thesis, and cannot be reduced to any element(s) without the other(s).

readers with their social environments.⁴⁹ In his essay on “The Many Faces of Transformation,” de Wit concludes on one hand that “something indeed often happens when people read the Bible!” while admitting on the other hand that “the trajectory of this assumed or hoped for transformation is rarely, if ever, followed; what it consists of is never clarified; and how this transformation is brought about is not explained. In other words, we rarely receive a clear answer as to what elements in the interaction between Bible texts and readers changes [sic] this interaction into a script for transformative action.”⁵⁰ Anyone desiring documented instances of measurable change in a community in the form of statistics following intercultural or inculturation Bible reading groups will be disappointed, then.⁵¹

In the same vein, the Ujamaa Centre’s contextual Bible study on Tamar that combats violence against women, widely used in South Africa and beyond, does not document decreased rates of assault in communities where the Bible study has been done.⁵² The Ujamaa Centre does report, however, “substantial” effects of softer varieties, with the Bible study resulting in women empowered or beginning the process of healing from past abuse, and men thinking critically about social structures.⁵³ While there may not be much hard data or statistics available to demonstrate the outcomes of inculturation readings and contextual Bible studies, community transformation is happening in the hearts and minds of individuals and in interpersonal relationships. Empirical research thus far indicates that praxis and measurable change are not the only or best ways to understand whether inculturation

⁴⁹ *Bible and Transformation* reports increased awareness of and interest in various social conditions. The final essay in the volume “shows how processes of appropriation redirect and activate spiritual and nonviolent resistance” (15).

⁵⁰ De Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*, 60.

⁵¹ There is a strong focus on documentable outcomes across sectors of American life presently, including in the church and the academy, that often desires supporting hard data that proves a particular effort is worth the resources it requires. The shortcomings of this trend are apparent in this paragraph: transformation is not always demonstrable on the level of hard data, but that does not mean it is not doing real good in the lives of people and their communities.

⁵² A contextual Bible study on Tamar found significant traction such that a Tamar Campaign was launched in 2000 and has reached faith communities throughout South Africa. See Gerald West, et al, “Rape in the House of David: The Biblical Story of Tamar as a Resource for Transformation,” *Agenda* 61 (2004), 36-41.

⁵³ West, “Rape in the House of David,” 38. See too Gerald West, “Recovering the Biblical Story of Tamar: Training for Transformation, Doing Development,” pages 135-147 in Robert Odén, ed, *For Better, For Worse: The Role of Religion in the Development Cooperation* (Halmstad: Swedish Mission Council, 2016).

reading can have any real impact on readers and their communities. In fact, the research and experiences of scholars, as well as testimony from ordinary readers, indicate that forms of inculturation reading can and do change people, resulting in the liberation, empowerment, and life-giving results that Ukpong desires.

Theological interpretation and concrete Christian formation?

Does theological interpretation, reading in accordance with the commitments and procedure of the Nine Theses, really shape better persons and communities of faith? Does reading the Bible with the sensibilities of the Scripture Project shape Christians in worldview, vocabulary, faith, and practice (both practice more technically in terms of ritual Christian practices of worship and practice more generally like acts of justice, generosity, hospitality, forgiveness, and the like) as the Scripture Project hopes?

There are others who have wondered generally about the effects of reading the Bible in a community of faith. In his Ph.D thesis at Cardiff University, Andrew John Todd set out “to investigate the practice of Bible study groups, as a contribution to the practical theology of biblical interpretation.”⁵⁴ Todd found a dearth of research on what Bible study groups actually accomplish, or even what they do or consist of. Kevin Lawson gathered information from women who participated in a long-term Bible study group, and members of the group reported growing in relationship with one another and with God. They identified deepening prayer life and offering support for one another during challenging times of life.⁵⁵

Aaron Franzen is a sociologist who has researched the social and political effects of reading the Bible. The results of a 2007 Baylor Religion Survey indicated those who read the Bible more frequently were more open to social justice in areas of criminal justice, economic justice, and consumption of resources.⁵⁶ While these are

⁵⁴ Andrew John Todd, “The Talk, Dynamics, and Theological Practice of Bible-Study Groups: A Qualitative Empirical Investigation,” (PhD diss, Cardiff University), 7. <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/29139/1/Todd%20A%20J%20PhD%20Thesis.pdf>

⁵⁵ Kevin Lawson, “A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-Term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women’s Prayer and Bible Study Group” *Religious Education* 101.2 (2006), 180-203.

⁵⁶ Cf. Franzen, “Survey: Frequent Bible Reading Can Turn You Liberal,” *Christianity Today* Oct 12, 2011 and David Briggs, “Frequent Bible Reading Tie to Social Justice, Openness to Science” *Huffington Post* blog July 18, 2011

not outcomes emphasized in the Nine Theses, James Howell's essay on St. Francis upholds economic justice as a significant hermeneutical lens, and there are additional undercurrents of social justice throughout *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Franzen's research, then, may loosely support the Scripture Project's vision of Scripture reading shaping readers into more faithful members of the church. In a 2013 article, Franzen admitted that "research analyzing the social consequences of reading the Bible is very limited" and he draws on the same 2007 survey in order to identify the effects of regular reading by non-literalists.⁵⁷ His qualitative study suggests the practice of reading the Bible and belief in biblical literalism are not the same thing and result in different outcomes. Franzen explicitly mentions Gadamer and different preunderstandings when approaching the text. Again, it is difficult to draw straight lines connecting Franzen's work and the Scripture Project, but there is evidence that the conceptual framework from which people view the Bible impacts the outcomes of interacting with the text, as the Scripture Project assumes to be the case, favoring a theological approach.⁵⁸

There is evidence of some connection, then, between reading the Bible and worldview, including positions on issues of justice, and an association with Bible reading and growth in spiritual life or relationship with God.⁵⁹ Franzen's work

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-briggs/frequent-bible-reading-ti_b_897017.html

⁵⁷ Aaron Franzen, "Understanding a Cultural Identity: The Confluence of Education, Politics, and Religion within the American Concept of Biblical Literalism," *Sociology of Religion* 74.4 (2013), 521-543.

⁵⁸ "Theological accounts enormously underdetermine the ways in which people actually use and experience the Bible; so an anthropological account is needed, regardless of one's theological commitments," finds Brian Malley, as quoted in Hans de Wit, "The Many Faces of Transformation," 63. Though the Scripture Project fits the methodological description of theological interpretation, *The Art of Reading Scripture* is not so narrowly theological that it does not recognize other elements at work in the interpretation process. The Scripture Project understands that anthropological elements including history, culture, community, and worldview shape interpretation and appropriation, as previous chapters of this thesis have attempted to show.

⁵⁹ Another less academic study undertaken by Willow Creek surveyed 250,000 people and indicated "the most powerful 'catalyst' for moving people through the stages of spiritual growth... was reading and reflection on scripture." People often credited reading the Bible with spiritual growth above church activities or doctrine. Measures included increased satisfaction with spiritual growth, increase in belief in a personal God, decrease in dissatisfaction with church and leaving church.

<http://www.scriptureunion.org/SU%20resources/WillowCreekSurvey-RP.pdf>

suggests preunderstandings, including assumptions about the biblical text, do impact the outcomes of reading, and there is little research specific to how theological interpretation in the vein of the Scripture Project works. Where there has been specific opportunity to investigate notions and realities of “scriptural ethics” like the Scripture Project envisions, the work has often been limited to how the Bible and ethics *should* be connected, with little done on how they actually *are* connected in the lives of people of faith.⁶⁰

Procedure, Goals, and Outcomes

This chapter has argued that the third pole of interpretation, consisting of the orientation, commitments, and goals of reading, is more important than adherence to a particular procedure for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project. Each offers its respective ideas about procedure in service to the ends they pursue. There is some work that suggests in each case that procedure may contribute to the goals and purposes they set out to achieve, while clear connections to indisputable outcomes remain elusive.

Even in making the case that the end goals related to human thriving are most important in inculturation hermeneutics, it is essential to note that the ways Ukpong lays out the steps means that the procedure of inculturation reading already begins to realize these goals throughout. Goals are not simply achieved in the end results of interpretation and appropriation, but rather are instantiated from the beginning in making Africa the subject, valuing and empowering ordinary readers, and working together in a collaborative process. When the claim is made that goals are more important than procedure, the two are not all that separate. This realization renders the above investigation into the ability of inculturation hermeneutics to produce the

⁶⁰ Tommy Givens’ extended review of *The Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Joel Green, indicates that the contributors have a lot to say about how the Bible and ethical living ought to be connected, but rarely draw out how they are actually related in the lives of individual Christians and Christian communities. Givens says the volume seeks “to provide good soil for the growth of the laborious conversation between Scripture and ethics,” but indicates it largely remains theoretical and prescriptive. “Good Soil for Growth in Scriptural Ethics: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6.2 (2012), 307-320.

desired results incomplete, if the values and goals of inculturation hermeneutics are already enacted throughout the process.⁶¹ The goals of inculturation readings are not limited to the process; Ukpong envisions interpretations that transform communities in practical ways on social and political levels. The question of the above section, then, “Inculturation readings and practical change?”, remains a good question, as long as it is taken only as a partial reflection on how well inculturation hermeneutics works.⁶²

The goals and purposes of theological interpretation have to do with discipleship, growing people in relationship with God and with one another, and in the procedure of interpretation the Scripture Project maintains some space for everyday church members to read and interpret Scripture.⁶³ The Scripture Project also recognizes the subjectivity of all readers, and aims to lead readers toward encounter with the text and encounter with themselves in such a way that they are called into more faithful Christian lives and equipped increasingly to respond to that call. In order to facilitate these purposes, the subjectivity of readers needs significant framework to guide interpretation. Here is a potentially difficult space for the Scripture Project: there must be enough interpretive freedom and possibility for readers to encounter something new and meaningful to them, even to receive divine communication in a personal way. However, there are boundaries to interpretive possibility dictated by the Christian community throughout time and space (including the rule of faith and one’s own local church community), appropriate orientation and character of the reader, the need to hold the whole story of Scripture along with its parts, and other interpretive guidelines summarized above. It can be tricky to find a balance between offering enough structure to facilitate the purposes of theological interpretation and enough freedom that readers can realize these purposes themselves in the interpretation process.

⁶¹ Hans de Wit says this about reading methods that prioritize ordinary readers: it is the “*quality* of the interpretation process that must be cherished in its multifacetedness and not be reduced to a *desirable* effect of the hermeneutic act.” “It Must Be Burned and Forgotten,” 54, emphasis in original.

⁶² De Wit and Dyk caution about too singular a focus on outcomes: “if social transformation is the main objective of the interpretation process, it can easily lead to forms of utilitarian use of biblical texts and taking the interpretation process as hostage” (*Bible and Transformation*, 457-58).

⁶³ See chapter three of this thesis on *interpreter* for a more thorough discussion of ordinary readers in *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

Inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project have priorities and convictions to guard and uphold, as do all interpretive traditions. Too little interpretive framework or guidance on procedure may result in interpretive efforts that do not fit what the interpretive tradition is trying to do. Too much framework or guidance, however, can leave little possibility for readers to have their own hermeneutical experience, making the Bible little more than an artifact, a historical repository. Neither Ukpong nor the Scripture Project want to “take the interpretation process hostage” in this way.⁶⁴ Neither believes there is one correct interpretation to hand down to all readers. If a community already knows what the Bible means, there is not much need to read it. The purpose of gesturing toward procedure is to offer guidance in the interpretation process, and this requires trust that readers will take up the commitments and goals of the interpretive framework, even while finding and claiming new meaning for themselves.

Another important point to make in this section: outcomes are uniquely related to goals and procedure. Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project aim for transformation of individuals and communities, but what this transformation means and looks like are not the same. Hans de Wit finds that “transformation turns out to be a container concept, defined according to the religious orientation, the hermeneutic model, and the expectations of the effect of what is considered to be good Bible reading.”⁶⁵ Notions of transformation differ and “the definition of transformation follows the reading process,” de Wit says.⁶⁶ While this thesis has identified similarities between the two at times, inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project are different models with disparate goals and unique senses of good interpretation, appropriation, and outcomes.

Pursuing the Dialogue

Similarities between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project

Some of the same similarities between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project that previous chapters have drawn out have again surfaced in this one: both admit the subjectivity of readers; trained and ordinary readers work

⁶⁴ See footnote 61 above.

⁶⁵ Hans de Wit, “The Many Faces of Transformation,” *Bible and Transformation*, 62.

⁶⁶ Wit, “The Many Faces of Transformation,” 62.

together, to some degree, in each; attention to historical context of the text; and acknowledgement of other reading contexts and claims to value them. This chapter has particularly demonstrated that both prioritize the third pole of ideo-theological concerns over methodology, allowing procedural concerns to emerge out of the actual process of interpretation. Procedural comments in each case describe what is already being done, rather than serving a prescriptive function. Since this is the case, both models believe that what they do works, or serves their goals and purposes, because they already see them in progress and promise. Thus, despite limited research tying their procedures to sought-after outcomes, each sees their model resulting in more faithful embodiment of the Gospel, which is loosely a goal they share. Both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project require an active piece in procedure and appropriation, and both view the interpretation process as fundamentally relational, requiring collaboration of some kind.

Differences between inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project

While the interpreting community is the subject of interpretation for Ukpong, it is the space for appropriation for the Scripture Project. The community within which the reading is happening features first in chronology and importance in inculturation hermeneutics, and features after the text for the Scripture Project. It is no coincidence that Africa would be there with or without the Bible, whereas if there is no Word of God in Jesus Christ or in Scripture, then there is no church. Procedure for Ukpong primarily emerges out of the realities of Africa, whereas procedure for the Scripture Project takes its cues from the Bible as Christian Scripture.⁶⁷

Different starting points?

At first look it appears that the procedure of inculturation hermeneutics assumes *analogia entis* while the Scripture project assumes *analogia fidei*.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ As Louise Lawrence summarizes, “The majority *modus operandi* of the Western exegete is still dialoguing with printed texts, not people in their own environments,” and this distinction remains largely true between the Scripture Project and inculturation hermeneutics, despite the desires of the Scripture Project to draw church members into the interpretation process and to pay attention to surrounding culture. “Being ‘Hefted’: Reflections on Place, Stories, and Contextual Bible Study,” *The Expository Times* 118 (2007), 530-35.

⁶⁸ Traditional Christian doctrine has always affirmed creation and more specific revelation in Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ as sources of theological

Inculturation hermeneutics begins with the concrete and prioritizes context, whereas the Scripture Project begins with God's self-revelation in Scripture and Jesus Christ. A deeper look reveals, however, that it is more complicated from both ends than such an easy distinction. Ukpog does assume an analogy of being where divine communication for the contemporary moment is best discerned with thorough attention to the world around us—paying attention to what is. But inculturation hermeneutics does not necessarily assume that any facet of context is revelatory apart from God's self-disclosure. A focus on context works because God has chosen to reveal God's self in and through aspects of human culture and identity. Ukpog is Roman Catholic and African and likely has a sacramental view of the world that does not draw a sharp distinction between the natural world and divine revelation. Meanwhile, the Scripture Project certainly has affinity with Karl Barth and prefers to begin with the truth of God's self-revelation. We as humankind only have access to the divine story of redemption, however, in all our historical cultural contingencies. The analogy of faith must connect with the here-and-now of contemporary readers, or no revelation effectively takes place. Thus, while the Scripture Project and Ukpog do diverge in emphasis between text and context, they each realize the necessity of the other.

How do literary tools and analysis feature in procedure for both dialogue partners?⁶⁹

Neither inculturation hermeneutics nor the Scripture Project is much interested in “an endless discussion about the authority and historical significance of the Bible,” which can, as de Wit and Dyk explain, “get in the way of identifying with the story, while the story itself invites to identification and self-reflection and not to a discussion of its historical character.”⁷⁰ To identify with the story is a main reason why both Ukpog and the Scripture Project make use of literary tools. The Scripture Project always desires to keep the thrust of the story of Scripture as a whole in mind,

reflection. These terms *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* refer to preference and starting point and do not entail disregarding the other. As this paragraph demonstrates, there is rarely neat division between the two.

⁶⁹ Chapter two of this thesis promised, “The ends toward which Ukpog and the Scripture Project employ literary analysis may at times be different—this will be revisited in the later chapter on procedure.”

⁷⁰ Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*, 455.

allowing smaller narratives, characters, and moments to emerge as well.⁷¹ Ukpong, meanwhile, wants a particular biblical scene to come alive for readers, allowing for real, invested comparison of the biblical story and setting with the lives of the readers. *The Art of Reading Scripture* does not solely use literary tools to draw out a coherent narrative of Scripture or to explore a book or passage on its own. The sermons included in the volume sometimes employ literary analysis for purposes of preaching.⁷² Both Ukpong and *The Art of Reading Scripture* employ literary tools in order to draw parallels between biblical stories and the stories of readers, and to exhort readers to respond to the text in certain ways. Ukpong's goals in using literary analysis are practically oriented to encouraging readers to find something life-giving in the text for use in their own lives and contexts. The Scripture Project seeks to use literary analysis to interpret and appropriate the text according to the theological commitments of the group, which, while remaining largely theoretical, do include upholding the church as the primary arena for putting the text into action.

Chapter Conclusion and the Way Forward

This has been the final chapter in the body of this thesis, considering the last of Ukpong's terms in the description of the task of interpretation: *procedure*. While procedure is not a top priority for either inculturation hermeneutics or the Scripture Project, the ways individuals and groups approach the Bible will instantiate, reflect, and pursue the more important commitments and goals of interpretation. Having devoted a chapter to each of Ukpong's key words in his description of the task of

⁷¹ Baukham's essay, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," explains ways the scriptural texts have unity and coherence and ways they do not. He recognizes different genres, authors, time periods, and purposes throughout the Bible, while maintaining that the biblical texts to "a remarkable extent...assert...the unity of the story they tell" (40). This unity surfaces in connected history from creation through exile and reconstitution in Old Testament narratives; the genealogies of the Gospels that tie them to Old Testament characters and stories; the story of Jesus in the New Testament "as the continuation of the story of Israel and initiating the fulfillment of the prophetic promises to Israel" (41); repeated "major landmarks" of the story; and references to the larger story of Israel even in books that largely stand alone, including Ruth, Esther, and Jonah.

⁷² Exploration of the "squabbling" in Romans 12 about meat sacrificed to idols, for example, connects to conflicts hearers may experience in their own families or relational circles. See Hays, "Whether We Live or Die, We Are the Lord's," especially pages 317-18.

interpretation, the next chapter will draw together conclusions, offer continuing questions, consider ways forward, and evaluate the project as a whole.

Chapter 8: Conclusions, Evaluations, and Ways Forward

Introduction

Chapter One indicated that this thesis would attempt to do multiple things. This section of the final chapter returns to those things the thesis set out to do from the beginning, reflecting briefly on how each of them went.

This Thesis Set Out to...

Pursue Grant LeMarquand's idea

In Grant LeMarquand's 2006 article length evaluation of whether and in what ways African and North Atlantic biblical scholarship are "siblings or antagonists," he suggests Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics could be a promising model for a conversation between scholars of the two continents on "ways the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world."¹ Selecting theological interpretation as a North American trend to be in conversation with inculturation hermeneutics, more specifically using the work of the Scripture Project in the published volume *The Art of Reading Scripture*, this thesis has constructed a thorough dialogue between the two.² Much of LeMarquand's article centers around the "features" as he calls them of Ukpong's description of interpretation, and this thesis followed the same structure in exploring each of Ukpong's features or terms in turn: "an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making meaning of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*."³

It is unclear what LeMarquand had in mind or hoped for, but this thesis has demonstrated that indeed Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics can be a fruitful

¹ Grant LeMarquand, "Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from the North Atlantic and African Worlds," pages 62-85 in David Tuesday Adamo, ed, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006).

² Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

³ Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995), 5. Italics in original, as Ukpong too goes on to explore each in turn in this article.

conversation partner for North Atlantic scholars, more specifically those doing theological interpretation of Scripture. LeMarquand says he envisions the conversation taking up “ways the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world.” Though LeMarquand’s phrase gets no more specific than “the 21st century world,” LeMarquand’s vision is notably contextual, focusing on contemporary historical context. The premise of LeMarquand’s article recognizes significant contextual differences between African and North Atlantic Bible scholarship; LeMarquand’s “21st century world” is not monolithic, then, but recognizes potential shared ‘space’ between two geographic areas and two approaches to the Bible.

In the constructed dialogue of this thesis, multiple summary points emerged regarding how the Bible can and should be read in and for the 21st century world: 1) From a place of commitment to the context of interpretation and the reading community 2) As sacred Scripture with something to say to people of faith 3) By a range of people and not just formally educated readers, and not just Christian readers.

Construct a dialogue

In my own exposure to theological interpretation and African inculturation readings, I had a sense the two share some commonalities and have things to learn from one another. Through the work of this thesis, I have learned more about both models of interpretation and I feel I have greater understanding of and appreciation for each of them on their own terms and for each of them in light of dialogue with the other.

Most surprising to me was the way the dialogue on the text unfolded. At the early stages of putting together the idea for this project, I thought my work would primarily be about doctrines of Scripture. (Initially my sense was that Systematic Theology would be an appropriate designation for this project, and I would be working in the area of doctrine of Scripture. Nearing the conclusion of this project, it has been as much an exercise in hermeneutics as in theology, with very little done in the traditional areas of systematics, and it seems most appropriate to drop the “systematic” and categorize this thesis simply under theology.) Where I first thought the bulk of the tension and differentiation would surface in dialogue on the text, it turns out that the chapter on text (see chapter three) discovered much common ground, with differences most often amounting to degree of

emphasis rather than substantive disagreement. Of each area of focus, the dialogue on *text* was least contentious. Trying to remember why I anticipated the crux of the dialogue would come down to doctrines of Scripture, I think the explanation is simple: I thought biblical studies was primarily about the text. Ukpong has persuaded me that biblical interpretation must be at least as much about the reading community as it is about the Bible, or there is little reason to read it for most people.

Context was sure to be an area of dialogue where mutual challenge would surface. I anticipated that inculturation hermeneutics would push the Scripture Project to be more sensitive to and committed to context, despite sharing on the surface a desire to read and apply Scripture in concrete communities, and the dialogue did lead this way. Even with Ukpong claiming a posture of faith for initial reading communities, it became clear that Ukpong's ecclesial context is not conceptually the same as that of the Scripture Project. The Scripture Project sees the contemporary church as an extension, or more accurately an embodiment, of the biblical story, and critiqued Ukpong for too readily surrendering a uniquely Christian context for other facets of context, including cultural and socio-economic features. There will be further discussion below evaluating the dialogue on context.

I assumed the dialogue on *conceptual framework* would identify areas of significant departure, and Draper's and West's work on tripolar models of reading proved very helpful for analysis of the dialogue in this area. The chapter on conceptual framework examined the motivations, commitments, and goals of each dialogue partner. While the two share some general sensibilities and orientations, the chapter traces the origins of both models to an epistemological crisis in their respective historical moments, and emerging out of different histories and contexts (as chapter two explored), the two inhabit different worlds from their beginnings. There is space for learning and appreciation between the two, as each offers insights and perspectives the other may not have on its own. There is especially a lot for the Scripture Project, as the dialogue partner in the center, to consider when brought into conversation with inculturation hermeneutics, a model formed and used in the margins.

I found the dialogue on reading with ideology helpful and interesting. Ellen Davis of the Scripture Project is afraid of ideological readings and cautions against them, and

inculturation hermeneutics points out that ideology is always at play. The Scripture Project has taken significant steps away from the modernist illusion of objectivity, but inculturation hermeneutics helps reveal where vestiges remain.

Facilitate moments of hermeneutical experience

Since this is a constructed dialogue, it is difficult to say where hermeneutical experiences may take place for either partner in this thesis. The things that seem compelling to me, doing my best to interact empathetically on behalf of both interpretive traditions, may or may not amount to a hermeneutical experience for Ukpong or a member of the Scripture Project. While I cannot evaluate hermeneutical experiences for others, I can reflect on my own moments of growth or changed understanding, which leads to the next item this thesis set out to do.

Probe my own horizon

A primary motivation for undertaking this project was the influence both theological interpretation and inculturation hermeneutics have had on my own faith and understanding. While I did not think of this thesis as an exercise in autobiography, I understood there is more at stake for me than academic interest. Especially as I revisit the discourse on my own horizon and experiences in chapter one, I see that this thesis was an attempt to sort out the influences and experiences in my own personal life in addition to being an audacious effort to bring two interpretive traditions from different continents into dialogue about contemporary biblical studies. I concluded both dialogue partners are who they are due to epistemological crises, and perhaps the same is true of me.

Assessing My Own Horizon and Identity

I have already mentioned that inculturation hermeneutics has persuaded me that interpretation is as much about interpretive context and community as it is about the text. There was a time in my life when such a statement would have frightened me, remaining to some degree when I began work on this thesis. Admitting equal privilege to text and context is anathema if faithfulness to the Bible and faithfulness to Christ are reduced to

the same thing. To fail to give the text exclusive priority in such a framework would amount to following the world as much as following Jesus, and this would be idolatry! My views have shifted now such that to equate following Jesus with certain beliefs about and interpretations of the Bible seems similarly like idolatry: The Bible is a guide and a witness to faithful living and is not itself the object of our love, faith, or obedience. Ukpong's work and exposure to additional inculturation readings has persuaded me that making context the subject does not necessarily entail less faithfulness to Christ. In fact, if one is to live a faithful life, there is no alternative but to do so thoroughly embedded in context. Abstract or disembodied faith cannot be faithful; attention to context alongside text is not only admissible but necessary.

Not all ways of bringing together text and context are equally faithful, however, and I continue to have some questions here. Communal readings among diverse members, emphasized by both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project, certainly help ease concerns that interpretation can easily amount to proof texting or self-justification, though communities too, even with efforts toward diversity, can fall into such scenarios. More and more as my work continued, I wondered about the presence and role of the Holy Spirit for both inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project.⁴ The

⁴ Where Ukpong and especially the Scripture Project embrace a sense of the visible church as the parameter for ecclesial interpretation, Musa Dube suggests a pneumatological criterion in "Readings of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations of Matt 15:21-28," *Semeia* 73 (1996), 111-129, shaking off other ecclesial parameters or checks and balances in favor of a very subjective appeal to *moya*. When I first encountered this article when I lived in Uganda, I found it highly suspicious, and it struck me as an example of what Ephraim Radner describes as a "more desperate than assured" appeal to the Spirit's guidance in a context of "confusions over Scripture...linked with confusions over what the Christian church is or where it is to be found" ["The Absence of the Comforter: Scripture and the Divided Church," pages 355-94 in Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Green-McCreight, eds, *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).] While I appreciated at the time the egalitarian presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the new directions the Spirit may lead, there was insufficient framework of tradition in Dube's analysis of the workings of *moya* for me to find it compelling. Frankly, it did not seem Christian to me, and I still imagine she would not much care. I may be less critical of Dube's sense of *moya* now, while remaining suspicious. I do believe God works outside the visible church and outside the Bible, but for me, standing somehow in the Christian tradition is important if *moya* is likened somehow to the third person of the Trinity. Even though I find Ukpong's

third member of the Trinity rarely surfaces in Ukpong's work or in *The Art of Reading Scripture*. More robust pneumatology would strengthen both models in my assessment.

Noticing the absence of the Holy Spirit also reflects my views on revelation. Chapter five made the point that Ukpong and the Scripture Project believe the Bible and the person of Jesus Christ to be loci of divine communication. The church as the Body of Christ in the world in this age is also in some sense embodied revelation or witness, especially for the Scripture Project. I do believe, upon completion of this thesis, that the people of God, enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are also important places of revelation. The Body of Christ needs the different parts, communities that live in different spaces and inhabit the world in different ways, in order to continue to discern and practice the word of God for us today. Here is much of the payoff of work like this thesis: the more we know about God's work in the world among other people, the more we know about God's self, our own selves, and about diverse others with whom we share one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit.

Returning to the dialogue about ideology in reading, I am persuaded both that ideology is unavoidable and that ideology should be a cautious commitment when approaching the biblical text. Davis resists ideology in large part because she wants to preserve the possibility and even pursuit of conversion. I agree that reading should maintain an openness to conversion: conversion of self, conversion of community and context, as well as conversion concerning the Bible itself, including revising assumptions about the text, what it is for, and how it should be used. As explored in chapter six, acknowledging ideology does not mean embracing a staunch, uncompromising position, but rather requires self-reflection about who receives preference and who may be ignored or suppressed based on reading commitments and goals.

Drawing out my own conceptual framework

In the brief comments above in the section on my own horizon and identity, I see the influence of different components of my history. The convictions that God works through the Bible and that the Holy Spirit communicates directly and indirectly with

pneumatology wanting, along with that of the Scripture Project, I do not find Dube's account of "readings of *semoya*" any more compelling.

individuals and communities remain from my evangelical upbringing. I continue to appreciate my evangelical heritage and believe overall it gave me a solid foundation in the faith, one that I value, even if in evolving ways, to this day. My expressions of faith and the ways I pursue growth, both personally and communally, have shifted, and many evangelicals would likely find me best described by a term other than evangelical.

If very broadly inculturation hermeneutics has persuaded me regarding the elevation of context, this general affirmation comes with several implications. If contexts are the fodder and the avenue for the truths of the Bible to come alive and play out, there must be value in contexts prior to Christian content. Thus, inculturation hermeneutics has given me philosophical and theological reason to value religious traditions and communities outside the purview of Christianity. I believe faith communities have things to learn from one another and there are ways to work together. Inculturation hermeneutics has also convinced me that caring for the vulnerable, in disposition and action, is a Christian responsibility. A non-negotiable criterion for faithful biblical interpretation is that it empowers the marginalized and brings all people ever more into the fullness of life. At this point I encounter divergence with many evangelicals, especially in the current political climate in the United States, if faithful interpretation of the Bible may mean things like health care for all, protection and rights for those who identify as LGBTQ, and/or welcoming and assisting refugees and immigrants.

Although I lived on the African continent for five years, I am not a cultural insider. Andrew Mbuvi, in a recent survey of African biblical studies, asks a series of questions about what qualifies as African biblical studies and who can contribute to it. He suggests that “it is the African content that determines whether a writing is engaging in African biblical interpretation.”⁵ Ukpong maintains that an interpreter must be to a significant degree an insider in the culture that is the subject of interpretation, including having knowledge, experience, and insights of the culture and also the capacity to view it critically. I do have exposure and experience in the life and culture of a Ugandan university town, and can draw on this in reading and appreciating work in African biblical studies, as Mbuvi outlines it, but my work is decidedly not African biblical

⁵ Andrew Mbuvi, “African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15.2 (2017), 155.

studies. Ukpong states that inculturation methodology can be translated to any socio-historical setting. I am well-acquainted with Ukpong's method and the commitments inculturation readings seek to embody and pursue, and I could undertake inculturation efforts with the Bible in my own community. As a pastor/scholar, particularly at this time in a rural, remote community on the edge of the Navajo Nation, my current context could greatly benefit from efforts to bring together Native American and other ordinary readers and bring the Bible to bear on issues of concern in our town and on the reservation, including historical trauma, domestic violence, addictions, and suicide.⁶

Mainline theological interpretation is most clearly an enduring community for me and component of my interpretive framework as a United Methodist pastor. A posture of faith that looks to read the Bible for the building up of the saints and as witness to the world will always hold value for me, I expect. At the same time, theological interpretation in my mind is more broadly conceived and necessarily includes greater diversity of voices than *The Art of Reading Scripture* recognizes and includes.

⁶ See, for example, Diane McEachern, *et al*, "Domestic Violence Among the Navajo," *Journal of Poverty* 2.4 (2008), 31-46, which touches on historical trauma and poverty as well as domestic violence. The article reports domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women ages 15-44 on the Navajo Nation. Research conducted by the University of Arizona between 2009 and 2013 indicates comparable rates of binge drinking and heavy drinking among Native Americans and whites, suggesting the stereotype of extraordinary alcohol use among Native Americans is false. Still, drugs and alcohol remain a significant problem on the Navajo Nation, as the UA study and many other sources note. See "Stereotypes about Native Americans and Alcohol Debunked by UA Study," <http://opa.ahsc.arizona.edu/newsroom/news/2016/stereotypes-about-native-americans-and-alcohol-debunked-ua-study>. The most recent report on suicide by the Navajo Epidemiology Center indicates an overall suicide rate of 17.48 per 100,000 for Navajos overall, and 31.41 per 100,000 for Navajo males. While this is marked improvement from the 2010 spike in the suicide rate among the Navajo of 32.1 per 100,000, it is still significantly above the national average. "Navajo Epidemiology Center Update" Vol. 1, (May 2016), 5, at <http://www.nec.navajonnsn.gov/Portals/0/Announcements/Navajo%20Epidemiology%20Center%20Update%20May%202016.pdf>.

Reviewing the Dialogue

Inculturation hermeneutics and the Scripture Project share some similarities and assumptions in approach. Both expect the Bible to be living divine communication, certainly notable among scholars, since academic study of the Bible does not assume faith and is often suspicious of it. Each of them desires interpretation to be useful on a practical level in their own reading communities. Both desire to be faithful to text and context, and as such they both require an active component in interpretation. The Bible is not to be read passively or only for spiritual edification or personal enjoyment, but requires active participation in self-reflection and in relation with God and others. Both Ukpong and the Scripture Project want to include readers beyond themselves, including less academic ones.

In later chapters, I began to summarize the main trajectories of the dialogue partners with this very general description: inculturation hermeneutics focuses more on the context, making Africa the subject of interpretation, whereas the Scripture Project focuses more on the text, apparent even in the name of the group and its work. For inculturation hermeneutics, the context of Africa is the “given” portion of the equation in bringing together text and context. In making Africa, and African peoples and cultures in all their complexity, the subject of interpretation, inculturation hermeneutics places the burden of proof on the text. Africa remains, whether or not the Bible has anything compelling to say to it. As long as God speaks to Africa in and through the text, and as long as there is life-giving potential in appropriation of the text, then the Bible will not go away. Conversely, theological interpretation affirms that God’s story continues to unfold, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, and Scripture testifies to that story and continues to shape communities of faith in line with God’s work in the world. Reading communities can do what they will with the text, including misunderstand or abuse it, but the truth of God’s story remains.⁷

⁷ Jensen puts it most starkly, clearly claiming the Bible as the “given” in any scenario or context: “Scripture’s story is not a part of some larger narrative; it is itself the larger narrative of which all other true narratives are a part” (*The Art*, 34).

What Now? Ways Forward

This has been a heuristic exercise, capturing a moment of dialogue between inculturation hermeneutics and theological interpretation. Things are always developing, moving, and changing. I did my work in the years following 2011, but the dialogue constructed reflects a moment closer to the year 2000. The Scripture Project was gathering at that time, sharing papers and reflecting on the theological interpretation of the Bible. Ukpong continued to write about inculturation hermeneutics and experiment with inculturation readings at that time, building on the 1995 piece that has been foundational to this thesis, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes.” The Scripture Project has concluded and Justin Ukpong is no longer living, but theological interpretation and inculturation hermeneutics continue. How are these interpretive traditions continuing to develop? What new contributions are surfacing?

Theological interpretation continues to flourish, generally as a trend in the academy and in the work of individual members of the Scripture Project. In recent years Richard Hays has pursued further work on how the Old and New Testaments relate to and illumine one another.⁸ Ellen Davis has continued exegetical work, often with a practical focus for the sake of preaching or Christian living.⁹ R. W. L. Moberly’s recent work has included back-and-forth dialogue with others, including an exchange with David Congdon on the clarity and usefulness of Bultmann with regards to the Bible, the church, and the social nature of knowledge. Moberly finds Bultmann to have a limited sense of the “epistemological significance of ecclesiology,” while Congdon insists that for Bultmann, the community is bound up in the kerygma, and thus there is always

⁸ Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel*, (Waco: Baylor UP, 2014); *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, (Waco: Baylor UP, 2016).

⁹ Cf. Ellen Davis, *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014); “Abraham’s Radical Trust,” *Christian Century* 133.22 (2016): 29-31; and “Identity and Eating: A Christian Reading of Leviticus,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30.1 (2017): 3-14.

“indirectly present” ecclesiology.¹⁰ Moberly has also engaged Susannah Ticciati on theological interpretation of particular passages concerning issues of creation, election, and difference.¹¹ This sampling indicates commitments to church, both Testaments, and practical implications persist, and that Moberly, at least, brings his theological interpretation into conversation with other scholars.

While African Bible scholars rarely use the term inculturation hermeneutics in their own work, many of them are doing a version of what Ukpong proposes. Andrew Mbuvi’s very recent survey of African biblical studies finds that many of the descriptions and characteristics that this thesis attributes to inculturation hermeneutics apply to African biblical studies more generally.¹² Even if the term inculturation is not widely used, the priorities, concerns, methods, and goals of inculturation hermeneutics remain thoroughly a part of much work in African biblical studies. Both trends continue, then, and it would be possible for scholars operating in the two interpretive communities to come together for intentional dialogue and/or collaboration. A preliminary question, before proposing forms and directions such a continuing dialogue could take, is whether such a dialogue would be worthwhile to the conversation partners. Arguments and evidence presented throughout previous chapters remain applicable here. Theological interpretation has some pressure in the North American academy to diversify, and strong

¹⁰ See R. W. L. Moberly, “Bible and Church, Bultmann and Augustine: A Response to David Congdon,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9.1 (2015), 39, and David Congdon, “Kerygma and Community: A Response to R. W. L. Moberly’s Revisiting of Bultmann,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8.1 (2014), 1. The initial piece Congdon was responding to was Moberly’s “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church: Bultmann and Augustine Revisited,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6 (2012), 1-22.

¹¹ See R. W. L. Moberly, “Theological Thinking and the Reading of Scripture: An *Auseinandersetzung* with Susannah Ticciati,” and Susannah Ticciati, “Response to Walter Moberly’s ‘Theological Thinking and the Reading of Scripture,’” both in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10.1 (2016).

¹² Including prioritization of the present reality of the reader over historical or ancient realities, incorporation of all spheres of life, inclusion of ordinary readers, privileging of hermeneutical concerns rather than just exegetical interests, attention to themes and purposes of fullness of life, and preference for communal readings. Mbuvi (“African Biblical Studies”) finds Ukpong’s summary of characteristics of African worldviews worth repeating in full (see section on African cultural frameworks, beginning on page 195 in chapter seven of this thesis, where they are also repeated in full).

ecclesiology requires more comprehensive voices in the global church. Theological interpretation in North America has reason to engage in dialogue with African biblical studies, then.

How about from the other side? African scholars have always had to be aware of and reckon with, to some degree, biblical studies in the West—this would be nothing new for their own work. If African contexts receive priority, why should they spend time in intentional conversation with scholars in the center? Individual scholars or projects would have to evaluate the purposes and benefits of dialogue with theological interpretation in North America, but there are potential reasons to do so. If the world really does need Africa, as Kwame Bediako has argued and this thesis has claimed, this idea could be compelling rationale; even if conversation with other Africans for the sake of African contexts remains the priority, there may be incentive to contribute to a larger conversation. Additionally, Nche, *et al* make the point that African culture and contexts are always changing, thus what it means to inculturate is always changing.¹³ It is harder and harder in an increasingly globalized world to consider one context or culture in isolation from others. More and more all people share global dependence and influence beyond levels of economics or world politics, such that even the worldviews and reading strategies of ordinary readers reflect certain realities of globalization.

Suggestions for Future Interaction

At times in this thesis, I gestured toward hope that this dialogue might produce increased awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation between the two dialogue partners, particularly by the Scripture Project toward inculturation hermeneutics. Here I pick up this hope intentionally, offering practical ideas about how such positive interaction may continue and grow.

¹³ George C. Nche, Lawrence N. Okwuosa, and Theresa C. Nwaoga, “Revisiting the Concept of Inculturation in a Modern Africa: A Reflection on Salient Issues,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.1 (2016) <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3015>

Corporate worship

It could be instructive and formative, I believe, for diverse readers of the Bible to worship together. Inculturation methods already know the value of corporate worship and often include elements of prayer and singing in reading groups. Theological interpretation upholds the worshipping church as the best place for interpretation. A logical step, then, would be for these interpretive communities to worship together as part of continuing dialogue on the Bible. When diverse people participate in worship together, they will see themselves differently as well as see and hear new ways of worshipping. Some questions for dialogue based on worshipping together could include the following: How does the Bible function in corporate worship? Who reads and/or speaks about it? Though less related to hermeneutics, other acts of worship reveal and shape how people read and understand the Bible: What do prayers include and not include? What do people thank God for? How and for what do people worship God? Conversation centered around worshipping together requires a practical level of engagement; builds unity even if not uniformity; engages a range of emotions, atmospheres, and experiences, at times including joy and shared fun, gratitude, lament, repentance, and intercession; and, I hope, builds friendship. A gathering of the Society of Biblical Literature cannot manufacture much of these things. Perhaps scholars of even nominal faith should consider planning some kind of worship service in partnership with diverse readers of the Bible in order to bring about new possibilities for dialogue and friendship. For ordinary readers and church members interested in ministry and mission around the world, a potentially mutually beneficial model for mission trips could largely consist of planning and implementing worship together with diverse others.¹⁴ Such a model requires and facilitates relationships of equality rather than imperialism and/or dependency, and acknowledges that both visitors and locals have things to share and things to learn. Corporate worship would set the tone and parameters for further ministry projects done together.

¹⁴ Even without travel, groups from different places could be intentional about sharing elements of worship, perhaps exchanging prayers and finding other creative ways to incorporate one another's contributions in worship, almost like Hans de Wit's "Through the Eyes of Another" online project, but including more general shared worship in addition to shared Scripture readings.

Conversational commentary

Christopher Hays suggests a “polyphonic or dialogic commentary” consisting of a conversation between scholars of different specializations and perspectives.¹⁵ Hays is primarily thinking of bringing together biblical studies and theology, but his comments could also apply to scholars coming together from different geographic locations and hermeneutical persuasions. “I suspect that not only are there disagreements in the details, but that *those disagreements are potentially fruitful*,” he says, and any gaps between the dialogue partners “create room for creativity.”¹⁶ If a few scholars really wanted to engage each other on interpretation and appropriation of a specific passage, they could write and publish a conversation style commentary, or even a shorter length essay, and readers would have in front of them an opportunity for a smaller-scale exercise like this thesis, eavesdropping on and analyzing a conversation between diverse approaches, settings, and perspectives. Full length essay responses between scholars can be helpful, but a back-and-forth conversational commentary would be new ground, and certainly potentially fruitful.

Critical collaboration

There is a push beyond conversation to critical collaboration, which could be a goal or outcome of further interaction between theological interpretation and inculturation hermeneutics.¹⁷ I am persuaded there is sufficient common ground for

¹⁵ Christopher Hays, “Bard Called the Tune: Whither Theological Exegesis in the Post-Childs Era?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4.1 (2010), 151. This is a review article looking at Brevard Childs’ *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* and Mark Gignilliant’s *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel: Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Isaiah*. Hays concludes he “would much rather read a record of Stanley Hauerwas and David Petersen arguing about Isaiah than read Childs’s univocal theological commentary on the prophet,” and pursues the idea of a conversational commentary from there.

¹⁶ Hays, “Bard Called the Tune,” 151. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued in 1988 that a hermeneutics of conversation is insufficient and challenged Harvard students in a convocation address to move toward critical collaboration. “Commitment and Critical Inquiry,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82.1 (1989), 1-11. James Cochrane applies Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument to African collaborative readings in *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), see page 103 ff.

critical collaboration between the two interpretive models. To suggest what that collaboration could or should look like is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Thesis Conclusion

I found it a helpful and enlightening enterprise to draw Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics into conversation with the Scripture Project. It is my hope that there will be ever-increasing awareness and dialogue among readers of the Bible across distance and difference. I hope this thesis contributes to a vision of increased understanding of and appreciation for others, including experiences of learning and collaboration by all. The goal of dialogues like this one, as I see it, is not a fusion of horizons where all parties reach agreement and share the same perspective. Rather, preservation of difference in unity of spirit is how the Bible ends, with people from every tongue and tribe and nation sharing in worship before the throne of God, and in that same hope I conclude this thesis.

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