

The Prophetic Vocation of the African Scholar: A Celebration of Wholeness

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True intellectual heroes in Greco-Roman tradition were those who believed their teaching so much that they were willing to die for it; philosophers who died for their beliefs were considered noble and brave. Paul stands in the Old Testament prophetic tradition of speaking God's message no matter what the cost, but he also presents his message in a manner that resonates with the best in his hearers' culture (Keener 1993: 384).

Introduction

The above words by Craig S. Keener capture a number of points that this paper wishes to affirm, indeed to celebrate, with regard to African scholarship. Celebrations are in the air as South Africa, the last country on the continent to attain freedom from systematic political oppression of the indigene, revels a decade of political freedom for *all* of its citizens. But on the continent and in a country such as ours, such celebrating demands a review of the commitments, successes and failures thus far realized. It is towards this task that I find the opening quote a useful starter.

First, the quote declares that intellectual pursuits and faith are not rivals that must be kept apart from each other at all cost. Keener finds in

Paul a life that is deeply spiritual and deeply intellectual at the same time—this he reckons is worth accenting in our modern schizophrenic world. Secondly, the quote states that noble and brave scholarship is not something a scholar does on certain days of the week. On the contrary, desirable scholarship is one that permeates the scholar's life to the extent that the scholar will gladly bear witness to it through her own life (martyrdom) if required.

The third assertion of Keener's words is that the best of the Old Testament prophetic tradition is paralleled in the best of the Greco-Roman tradition. The two are so matched that Keener does not feel it a transition to move from the intellectual philosophical to the religious prophetic. The sight of a connection between intellectual pursuit and prophetic vocation is as refreshing as the intimation that the two coexist symbiotically in a true, brave and noble life. Fourthly, and flowing neatly from the last point, the quote affirms the need to focus on one's cultural context as the primary subject and objective of one's life pursuits. The present paper endeavours to show that the virtues just outlined obtain among or at least inform the intentions of *African* scholars. In other words, where Africa is privileged as the starting point and goal of a scholar's enterprise, then the scholar tends to operate like Keener's prophet-philosopher.

Far from suggesting that I have observed or read everything that has ever come out of Africa, I shall proceed to substantiate the foregoing propositions by restricting myself to the arena of African Christian scholarship. Indeed our starting point has to be a recognition of the vastness and diversity that Africa is, as well as the potential benefits and pitfalls that such diversity bears for the African scholar. We realize, in chorus with a leading African hermeneut, Justin Ukpong, that this multiplicity is not demoralizing. On the contrary it undergirds simultaneously the free-spiritedness as well as the commonality of worldview and assumptions among African peoples. In Ukpong's own words,

[i]n spite of the evident multiplicity of African cultures, the following may be identified as aspects that are common to all African world-views and that belong to the root paradigm of African cultures First is the unitive view of reality whereby reality is seen not in dualistic but in unitive terms [Even] The human being is

not seen as composed of body and soul, but as one person with visible and invisible dimensions Another basic feature of African world-views is the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos The third important feature of African world-views is that of the sense of community—the fact that the life of the individual human person and also even of inanimate objects in the cosmos finds meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community, and between the human community and nature The last feature of African world-views we shall mention is emphasis on the concrete rather than on the abstract, on the practical rather than on the theoretical (Ukpong 1995: 3-14).

From different angles, therefore, both Keener and Ukpong bring us to four aspects that I believe must be characteristic of African scholarship in general and African Christian scholarship in particular. Let me elaborate the congruency as I see it.

Scholarship the African Way

In Africa therefore, both individual (physical, spiritual, psychological for example) and communal (societal relations, religious belief, natural phenomena, amongst others) integrity are the obverse of scholarly integrity. In fact, these categorizations are illegitimate even if necessary. It could suffice to say that for the African, each aspect of life is interconnected with all the others. The African scholar cannot justifiably be removed from the phenomena ordinarily referred to as community/culture, the divine, the contemplation, or the natural.

These are some of Africa's key existential and exegetical premises. I am not implying that these traits are the exclusive domain of Africa, or that they are everywhere in Africa equally realized. All I can claim is that for better or worse, and to uneven degrees, they are positively part of the African scholar's constitution and African scholarship's significant starting points. Conversely, I am also not saying that they are the sole points of departure for the African scholar. For better or for worst, modern African scholars have been trained in or outside Africa from the premises supplied

by the assumptions and worldview of the Enlightenment. But frustration with the applicability or value of such premises in Africa has always attended the African scholarly endeavour. From the early days of modern African scholarship, scholars trained in or by the West, in say the New Testament, like John Mbiti or Teresa Okure, came to find back in Africa that they had to simultaneously be systematic theologians, philosophers, missiologists, community leaders, and much else besides. This interconnected embodiment of varied aspects of scholarship, the community's manifold aspirations as well as continuity within the scholar between lived life, intellectual pursuits and spiritual convictions characterizes the African scholarly project.

These thoughts I began to articulate in an earlier article¹. In a nutshell, my argument there was that the philosophy of African (biblical) scholarship (both exegetical and hermeneutical) comprises at least three aspects that co-exist in meaningful partnerships. These, for lack of better jargon, I there called: the 'scholastic', the 'contextual', and the 'ideological'. My intentions were descriptive (i.e. expression of my limited understanding of the situation) rather than innovative (i.e. forging of more novel ways of going about the task). In other words I found these categories useful in capturing what I intended to communicate, but I was thereby not casting them in stone². Perhaps a synopsis of what they were intended to encapsulate will help drive home this point.

By *scholastic* I intended a commitment to the full range of skills that have developed the world over in the various pertinent academic disciplines. African Christian scholarship cannot be about short cuts although it cannot adopt wholesale the ex-colonizers' philosophies and paradigms that evidently still dominate the academe. For instance, the African biblical

¹ See Tshehla (2003: 24-30). In this earlier article I also offer a definition and thus some justification of my tendency to see the African scholar as a hermeneut, i.e. one always seeking to explicate, serve and critique her context for its own good.

² 'Perhaps the attempt to find an Africa hermeneutic should rely less on the development of the already abundant number of exegetical-hermeneutical methods and attempt to devise a framework or perimeters appropriate to Africa and the biblical documents' (Punt 1997: 140).

scholar should possess the facility to engage the original biblical languages (as much as she engages subsequent scholarly and popular ecclesiastical biblical traditions) just as well as she should engage the outworking of the Bible as her community appropriates it in its own local idiom and ways. Kwame Bediako's phraseology is succinct,

[t]he Bible, for example, the Old Testament, is not a difficult book in Africa. If the Bible is 'not perceived as an ancient book, but as a context which people inhabit and in which they participate, especially through the Scriptures in the vernacular', then it follows that African Biblical Studies will seek fresh categories of interpretation that derive from linking the original languages with mother-tongue apprehensions in the mother-tongue Scriptures. It follows from this that Hebrew and Greek cannot be options, nor is it enough to study the Bible only in English or in French, or in Portuguese, the major lingua francae in contemporary Africa (Bediako 2001: 32)³.

By *contextual* I meant a commitment to work intentionally and systematically together with both African wisdom and heritage, however artistically articulated, and African expressions of Christianity accessible in one's region. There is no evading one's location—authentic theologising is that which is consciously carried out from, and primarily for, a specific locale. Justin Ukpong, sums up this demanding commitment in the following terms,

[i]nterpreting a text is a complex process. It involves an *interpreter* in a certain *context* making *meaning* of a *text* using a specific *conceptual framework* and its *procedure*.... Making a particular socio-cultural context the subject of interpretation means that the conceptual framework, its methodology and the personal input of the

³ See a comprehensive review of the challenges facing African Christian scholarship by Andrew Walls in the same volume in an article entitled 'Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-first Century'.

interpreter are consciously informed by the worldview of, and the life experience within that culture (Ukpong 1995: 5; e.a.).

Thirdly, by *ideological* I was urging an overt commitment from the African scholar to the privileging of African perspectives, interests and ailments in her intentional and systematic work with all the role-players on the continent and elsewhere (Gottwald 1996: 136-149). One of South Africa's important (Black) theologians, Takatso Mofokeng (1992:3), once elucidated this commitment thus,

[w]e have to be guided by Jesus Christ's choice and commitment in our swift and appropriate response. He chose the side of the poor, the weak, the humiliated and the marginalized. As such the choice has already been made for us and we have to live and work it out.... We shall consequently learn to leave out the texts that hurt and humiliate [the victims of our societies], simply because the oppressed say that they are being hurt and humiliated by them, and not because we believe it or not or because what they say has any scientific backing.

So we see that African scholarship cannot be indifferent to the dominant ideologies of our time, as much as it is hardly at ease with the academy's copious specializations. To be an interpreter of scripture therefore, for instance, means working within, with and for one's community (see West 1991 and 1999 amongst others). But it also means working with every other academic discipline, theological and otherwise. My predilection for Biblical Studies cannot be hidden:

Experience in South Africa and Brazil in the interface constituted by 'reading with', in which the subjectivities of both socially engaged biblical scholars and poor and marginalized readers are vigilantly foregrounded and power relations are acknowledged and equalized, demonstrates the need for both 'community consciousness' and 'critical consciousness'. The experiences, questions, needs and interests as well as the readings and resources of the community, are the starting point of contextual Bible study, and socially engaged

biblical scholars must allow themselves to be partially constituted by this reality (West 1999:63).

It follows then that the African hermeneut is a scholar immersed in the social and intellectual realities of her immediate and wider contexts⁴. These matters should be self-evident but yet they still need to be affirmed because the wider 'global'⁵ context of our day simply is at a different place⁶. Let me briefly illustrate this issue.

The 'Global' Scholarship Context

The nexus of inward, upward, horizontal and downward relationships or partnerships of the scholar that we celebrate and practically take for granted in Africa is not everywhere self-evident. As one of Africa's sons observes,

⁴ 'We have emphasized that the church must be allowed to indigenise itself, and to 'celebrate, sing and dance' the gospel in its own cultural medium. At the same time, we wish to be alert to the dangers of this process Thus we should seek with equal care to avoid theological imperialism or theological provincialism. A church's theology should be developed by the community of faith out of the Scripture in interaction with other theologies of the past and present, and with the local culture and its needs'. (*The Willowbank Report* 1978: 26-28). Accessible also in Stott (1996).

⁵ I use the term 'global' when referring to the attitudes and praxes of the apparently technologically advanced Bush's and Blair's of this world—religion has its own number of such lust-struck practitioners. See Tshehla (forthcoming).

⁶ Writing in the late 1980s Cornel West (1988:112) describes this place as, 'The most salient feature of the global context in which we find ourselves is the extent to which most of the world remains under American, Soviet, and European hegemony. At the beginning of this century, this hegemony took the form of the Europeanization of the world—with a handful of states located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural mountains controlling over 87 percent of the land on the globe by 1918. By the middle of this century, this hegemony had been transferred into the Americanization and Sovietization of the world'. [We now know at the beginning of the twenty-first century that North America now monopolizes the globe.]

[t]hat kind of concern [for theological formation] is rare in the western theological academy, which has become a guild of scholars talking to each other with little relevance to, or concern for, the life and mission of the western church struggling to survive in a spiritually hostile, secularised and morally relativistic environment (Bediako 2000: 29).

Indeed progressive pockets of the western academy appear to long for this African-type praxis of the communal integrity of life in general and scholarship in particular. Staying with the Biblical Studies guild, we encounter this manner of longing in Stephen Fowl's *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Fowl 1998) written for and with the USA and British context(s) in mind (Fowl 1998:9). In this laudable attempt at reclaiming integrity in scholarship, Fowl laments a situation that is a poignant reverse of the African reality just celebrated above. Independently confirming Bediako's observation, he bemoans 'The current situation which sees biblical scholars and theologians working in isolation from each other and from the concerns of Christian communities' (Fowl 1998:10)⁷. One of the main critiques in this regard, is that scholars of 'Biblical Theology' see themselves as detached from the theological enterprise. He illuminates,

[t]he discipline of biblical theology, in its most common form, is systematically unable to generate serious theological interpretation of scripture. This is due to biblical theology's persistent concern with its own disciplinary integrity. This concern leads biblical theologians to bracket out constructive theological convictions (Fowl 1998:1).

As we indicated in the opening paragraphs of this paper, African scholarship hardly boasts such self-serving mono-disciplinary obsessions. In fact one could go so far, without gloating, as to infer that Fowl has learnt the holistic

⁷ He says, 'my point is that to the extent that contemporary Christians (theologians, professional biblical scholars, and lay people) have lost the skills and habits ... they now need to learn those habits and skills anew for their own time' (Fowl 1998: 9, sic.).

path from what he calls 'developing countries'⁸. In order to remedy this unfortunate ethos of western scholarship, Fowl advocates what he calls, a model for the 'theological interpretation of scripture'. This model emanates from the assumption that if one understands the Bible as 'scripture'⁹—and not just as part of a literary corpus—then the Bible is normative and authoritative for the biblical scholar just as it is for the average Christian and for her faith and practice. In contradistinction to a mere scholarly enterprise, biblical theology and cognates then become means through which the biblical scholar *practices* theology. Fowl further explains:

For the professional biblical scholar, the Bible is simply one (among many) texts upon which scholars might bring their interpretive interests and practices to bear. Christians stand in a different relationship to the Bible. The Bible, for Christians, is—their scripture... scripture is authoritative (Fowl 1998:3).

While not all western professional biblical scholars are Christian, the fruit of the labour of all professional biblical scholars retains value for the Christian¹⁰. Fowl is admittedly a member of this guild of professional biblical

⁸ 'In developing countries' Fowl (1998:16) concedes in a footnote, 'a whole different range of pressures ... shape[] the interests of academics'. Compare Norman Gottwald's (1985:27) introductory acknowledgement of the value of insights and experiences from the 'Third World' and how they lead to new interpretations of biblical texts on the phenomenon of prophets and prophecy.

⁹ This is the case in Africa, and I surmise that those who try hard to deal with the Bible as though it were not scripture for Africans do so in order to appease non-African agendas. See the acknowledgment expressed more fully and critically in Punt (1997) or Tinyiko Maluleke (2000:87-112).

¹⁰ 'Throughout the book I make ready and constructive use of professional biblical scholarship, while at the same time distancing the interests and purposes of theological interpretation from those of professional scholars. ... I lay out the argument for making *ad hoc* use of professional scholarship. That is, the views, results, and works of professional biblical scholars can be usefully employed in Christian interpretation of scripture on an *ad hoc* basis' (Fowl 1998: 12).

scholars (Fowl 1998:13), however, he clarifies that hope for the regeneration of the integrity of biblical scholarship as wholesome scholarship lies with those professional scholars who keep up 'participation in particular Christian communities'¹¹, accept the Bible as scripture, and maintain a Christian character branded among other things by 'truth-telling, as well as habits of gracious and edifying speech' (Fowl 1998:12).

Unlike Fowl, far fewer global scholars are candid about either the reasons for, or the regional scope of their studies. In making the preceding assertions, Fowl has thus partly raised the issues that African scholars have been grappling with for some time now. However, it appears to be crucial that these issues are asserted more intentionally by Africans so as to ensure that the instructive reality of African scholarship earns more than a footnote in well-meaning works such as Fowl's book. So the responsibility of the African hermeneut towards global scholarship remains urgent, as does the need to articulate that responsibility in the clearest terms possible for the respective benefits of all Africans and the rest of the globe. My focus on Africa is thus intended to celebrate as well as register Africa's strides amidst much difficulty¹².

Some More of the African scholar's Commitments

More needs to be affirmed about African scholarship than we have articulated thus far. In other words, in addition to the commitments to: scholarly rigour, the scholar's own immediate and wider context, a non-

¹¹ 'If Christians are successfully to engage scripture in all of the ways they seek to, then that will generally happen in the context of their participation in particular Christian communities' (Fowl 1998: 6f).

¹² 'It hardly needs stating that this theological significance of the 'non-West', particularly of Africa, in the new configuration of the Christian world, is not for self-congratulation, but rather for African Christians to take up their responsibility in faithful witness to the Gospel in the new century. That this modern African responsibility comes in the wake of twenty centuries of Christian tradition, renders it more, not less, demanding' (Bediako 2000: 5-11).

fragmented approach to life, and a pro-the-disenfranchised ideology, the African scholar enshrines a few other attributes.

An African scholar who does not actively participate in a religious community is (and should remain) a sore exception rather than the rule. For instance, supernatural forces are a reality in Africa and the scholar needs to take due cognisance of this reality, that is if she hopes to have any meaning in the community. To rationalize them, or to attempt to explain or wish them away, would be a waste of time and serve simply to distance scholars from their faith and wider communities. On the contrary, the responsibility of finding fresh and contextually adroit ways of tackling such challenges rests with both the scholar and the religious community to which she belongs.

Lay Africans are active participants in the academy just as scholars are active participants in religious communities¹³. In the words of Moiseracle Dibeela of Botswana, the African hermeneutic is 'a hermeneutic that does not only take seriously the form and world of the text, but the culture and experience of the reader ... and how they impact on each other' (Dibeela 2000: 384). The 'reader' in question is unambiguously both the scholar and the 'ordinary member in the pews'—it is the collective African hermeneut. The African biblical scholar is simultaneously a student and a sample, i.e. the subject, of African Christianity—no wonder Dibeela's paper is typically autobiographical. This is in keeping with our earlier observation that all aspects of life, including the contemplative, find mutual expression in every African. The result of this is that the insights, for instance, of an illiterate 'reader' of scripture are consequential to the scholar, and vice versa. The African hermeneut is thus never an individual locked up in some ivory tower 'working in isolation from others and from the concerns of Christian communities', to borrow Fowl's words. She is constituted by the life of the Christian community in which she participates¹⁴.

The last point we must amplify is that the African hermeneut engages in scholarship primarily in pursuit after the meaning and betterment of her life first and foremost. The service aspect of her scholarship is vital, and its relevance to real life-settings of her community and perhaps even of the wider world affords her the much-needed motivation. However, it is

¹³ *Inter alia*, see West (2002:66-82 or 2000:29-33).

¹⁴ See the first three chapters of West (1999).

primarily critically that she connects with the age-old African tradition that saw scholarship as aimed primarily at the scholar's own quest for a better or higher form of being. Again I restrict myself to examples from Christian Africa.

Whether it was Antony or Pachomius in the Egyptian desert, or Pantaenus, Clement or Origen in the catechetical school of Alexandria, the model of theological formation was the quest for holiness and moral transformation within the student, who would then also become a model for others seeking their own liberation. In other words, one embarked on theological training not to receive information to pass on, not to acquire status through diplomas and degrees, not even to acquire skills for ministry, but to be changed inwardly. Only when one had learnt the secret of the holy life, was one recognized as being able to be of help to, and a teacher of, others (Bediako 2001: 32).

This is a far cry from obsession with self and personal interests. It is also not merely inward-looking scholarship with no interest in or relevance towards the social arena of lived experience. Rather it is a recognition that much of the political and social, and even religious, misunderstanding and conflict going on in the world results from misguided lives and skewed personal priorities than from ritual or confession. Therefore,

[o]ur feeling after a renewal of theological formation and Christian discipleship is a contemporary manifestation of what accompanied the earlier shifts, namely, new ventures of faith, new initiatives of intellectual and spiritual formation and new practical obedience to the call of the Living God in engagement with the world.... In stressing theological formation, our concern is not the production of a caste of theological professionals set apart from the day-to-day life of ordinary Christian people. Rather, it is a way of underlining and recapturing the central place of theological reflection and insight in their deep and broad dimensions for the nurture of Christian lives and minds, and for the equipping of the people of God and the transformation of society. This has always characterized movements

of new life in Christian history, when ordinary people become theologians (Bediako 2001: 29).

It is precisely because the African scholar is confident and vulnerable enough to let her fellows into her life pursuit that they too allow her to speak into their lives with authority¹⁵. She thus becomes a prophet in her own hometown—however precarious that status is as history is replete with prophets turned martyrs.

A Prophet in her Hometown

Throughout the centuries the biblical prophets have served as the models with which other types of religious specialists have been compared. It is therefore somewhat surprising that anthropologists seldom use the word 'prophet' in their writings. There are two possible explanations for this state of affairs. First, when the title 'prophet' is given to contemporary figures, a comparison with the biblical prophets is virtually inevitable. Anthropologists usually seek to avoid this sort of comparison because of the danger of distorting our understanding of the contemporary figures by forcing them into the classical biblical mould. Second, the English word 'prophet' is

¹⁵ In the article already cited, Bediako (2001:30) attempts to articulate *a model for a new African theological and Christian formation for mission* that seeks 'to provide a framework for understanding and interpreting what is actually happening within African Christianity; but it [seeks] also to suggest components for a theological formation that takes seriously these African realities and produces an integration of heart and mind, learning and discipleship, that liberates us as African Christians to share in God's mission and transformation in the world. The model is composed of *four* overlapping circles with *three* superimposing concentric circles. The four overlapping circles are *Discerning the Signs of the Times, History and Tradition, Context, and A Mind for Mission and Transformation*. The three concentric circles from the inside outwards are *The Living God, The Bible, and Faith and Spirituality*.

ambiguous, even when it is seen against its biblical background (Wilson 1980: 22).

For what follows, I forthrightly accept culpability to perpetuation of the practice of summoning biblical prophets into my modern context. It is simply inevitable for one of my background and writing for a context such as mine to speak of prophets without making connections with scriptural traditions. It is very striking how the qualities we have been discussing as the prerogative of the African hermeneut are also qualities displayed by the prophet. Fully cognizant of the dangers of generalisations, granting the variety of contexts and periods to which the biblical prophets belonged, can we legitimately speak of the Old Testament prophetic tradition? What about the mission of the prophets, can we understand it uniformly? Whereas Robert Wilson is anxious about 'the danger of distorting our understanding of the contemporary figures by forcing them into the classical biblical mould', David Pleins warns of the same pitfall in the following terms:

To import a modern agenda about what it means to be prophetic into a starkly different ancient context serves to muddy the waters concerning how to make use of the Bible in cotemporary discussions of social ethics¹⁶.

So we are introduced to the need to learn from the biblical and modern

¹⁶ See Pleins (2001:6). I venture into this rushed précis fully aware of the vast array of issues that require the special attention I am not able to give here. For instance, David Pleins (2001:12) feels that 'The very notion of a unified 'prophetic tradition' is a terribly problematic concept, and our sensitivity to differences of social visions between and among the prophetic texts will open up significant avenues of biblical social thought. Nevertheless, generally speaking, we may agree with Norman Gottwald (1985:386) that by Amos' time, prophecy 'was achieving formalization and broad public recognition as a kind of 'regularized criticism' of the established order. One of the developing institutional habits was to draw extensively on a wide range of pre-existing speech forms... in order to deliver arresting messages that cut to the core of popular and official presuppositions about the religious foundations of national life'.

prophets, albeit at the same time it is indispensable that we respect these prophets' unique and varied terms of reference. While taking to heart all the stated precautions, we approach the matter without the simplistic analyses that see prophets merely as either religious specialists or militant social visionaries. The study of propheticism is itself a prophetic exercise. Is it any wonder then that scholars lament the muddying of waters or the ambiguity of the concepts 'prophet'? Only active participation in the phenomenon leads to such meekness.

Whenever one does what she was put on the planet to do, she inescapably earns the title 'prophet'. Whether it is Steve Biko or Musa Sono, and whether we like them or not, their lives continue to instruct ours to immeasurable extents. In other words, when the African scholar engages in the intellectual pursuit because it is the means whereby she is strategically placed to impact her society, rather than as a means to fame, status or riches, then we are looking at a prophet. If we grant this, then we need not seek to force or mould every prophet into our own image. If we indeed accede to this understanding, we shall let prophets be the people of conviction and vision that they are, people who will not let us rest on our laurels, and people who proclaim justice and divine judgment on behalf of the downtrodden¹⁷.

The critique levelled by the prophets against members of their society is twofold, according to Gutierrez. In the first place, the prophets raised the concern that just relationships be established in society, especially that the disenfranchised members of society find protection from oppression. Secondly, the prophets levelled their criticism against the forms of religious expression that held sway in their society, namely, 'purely external worship'. But prophetic religious criticism is not treated by Gutierrez as separable from the prophetic concern for just social relationships; rather, concern for a just society flows from a concern for appropriate religious values (Pleins 2001: 168).

¹⁷ 'This is what prophecy is: judgment about the present in the light of the future-judgment arrived at through the authority of God (Wolf 1983:64). Gutierrez, 'The prophetic eschatology is oriented to a future that is bound up with a concern for present historical realities' (in Pleins 2001: 165).

Similarly,

[a]ccording to [Walter] Rauschenbach, 'When the prophets conceived Jehovah as the special vindicator of these voiceless classes, it was another way of saying that it is the chief duty in religious morality to stand for the rights of the helpless.' This advocacy for the poor functioned to extend religiously rooted ethical commitments into the public domain (Pleins 2001: 216).

Out of the collective nature of her hermeneutics, the African scholar is thus poised to make a positive contribution to the plight of African thought through her scholarship. The Old Testament prophets 'generally were lay persons They arose from the people of God, where they most often had been bred, nurtured, trained, and at times even supported in their work (Seilhamer 1977: 4). The prophet's authority lay in her membership in the community that recognized her to be a prophet, i.e. the spokesperson of the divine¹⁸. But the force of her proclamation resided in the integrity of her life, the degree to which she was able to resist the lures of her society that predictably were controlled by the rich and powerful against whom she was most likely to have to prophesy. In other words, insofar as she both partook of the life of the community and remained un-coerced by the schemes of the powerful of her community, she remained a voice of sanity and justice¹⁹. But

¹⁸ Old Testament prophets shared, among other things, the 'absolute assurance that God had called them personally into his service Hence, in a very real sense, right from the beginning the prophets understood themselves to be God's handpicked spokesmen and his personal messengers'. Secondly God was understood to have authored the material they uttered. 'Only when such divine messages were received did the true prophet speak, act, or write. In fact, there were periods of silence for all the prophets ...' (Seilhamer 1977: 2-3).

¹⁹ 'A broader application of social scientific methods to prophecy suggests that the prophets were intimately a part of their society even as their stances towards its current directions were highly oppositional' (Gottwald 1985: 307).

she also must beware the persuasive (manipulative) schemes of the hoi polloi²⁰.

In every sense of the African scholar's vocation, her community and justice are as paramount as her need to overcome personal handicaps. From this perspective it is a privilege and blessing for the academy to have students who do not let go of their roots once they start being exposed to theories and worldviews that are dissimilar to their own. Instead of jumping ship, they leave behind on the academy the imprint of their sending community while assimilating what profitable material they can for use back in their hometowns. African scholarship is about keeping in very fine prophetic balance the praxis of the individual scholar, the academy and the community. To drift towards only one side of the equation at the expense of the other is detrimental to the faith as to the legitimacy of the output of the African scholar. It is a demanding occupation to be an African scholar therefore, an occupation that extends beyond mastery of tools of appropriate discourse to the skill of maintaining all these aspects in optimal balance.

I should know, coming from a Pentecostal background where theologians are not given much regard because many Pentecostals who become theologians fail to sustain the lifestyle they led prior to their entering the Pentecostal ministry. They then often move in directions that are apparently for the worst rather than the most challenging (most prophetic), being with the community and by serving the community. But there are encouraging examples of Christian scholars who on their return to their sending communities did not make shipwreck of their communal and intellectual commitments.

²⁰ 'For [Antonin] Causse, the prophets drew on the ancient desert and tribal traditions to critique both the aristocracy and the peasants.... Causse sees in the prophetic critique a deeper grounding for the community, namely, in the notion that the society's relation to YHWH is to be based neither on ethnic ties nor ritual practices, but on a just way of life. Thus Causse maintained that the prophetic contribution to Israelite religious thought lay in its elevation of an ethical critique that operated independently from the interests of both the ruling elite and the peasantry' (Pleins 2001: 14).

Concluding Remarks

It is sobering to discover from the Old Testament that 'testing the spirits' is not merely necessary; it is also extremely difficult (Wolf 1983:65).

So the African hermeneut is constantly facing the danger of inadvertently carrying either the colonising tendencies of western ideologies into her own context or a debilitating awareness of their impotence in coping with African realities. However, it is through an understanding of prophecy explained above and a critical engagement with the 'assignment' and the tools or media of the missionary enterprise, that scholarship can retain a liberating sense in Africa.

Awareness of history, a sense of responsibility, and a sober attitude are necessary lest the mistakes of our modern missionary forebears be repeated. The African hermeneut further has the moral duty to represent the plight of those in her community who are less fortunate. She also cannot pretend to be unaware of the exacting standards of thought, self-expression and discipleship to which the output of fellow-believers in her community ought to be pushed if it is to be taken seriously by others. She would be doomed if she ignored the yearnings and cries of her context. And, she is called to the sacred task of passing on the baton—the skills and knowledge she has gained, however imperfect, must be shared in humility and good conscience. As a prophet she 'cannot but speak of what she has seen and heard'²¹ in the religious community, in society and in the academy; nor can she skirt reminding the 'rulers of the people and elders' of their own responsibilities—whatever the cost to her own life²². This is indeed a serious and exacting profession, one easily beset by mistakes that are better seen only in retrospect, but it remains the task we are humble enough to embrace as we embark on the African century.

²¹ Cf. Acts 4:19-20.

²² Peter never shirked the duty of reminding the leaders of Israel (God's chosen people to whom he too belonged) of their part in the rejection of the Messiah (cf. Acts 2:22-24 and 4:9-12).

Any acceptable social analysis employed by Christian thinkers should take seriously the biblical injunction to look at the world both through the eyes of its victims and through the Christocentric perspective which requires Christians to see the world through the lenses of the cross (West 1988:113).

Although dominant stories have forced their way into the history books, it remains the African scholar's duty to uncover other parts of the mosaic—many of them preserved in indigenous tongues—in the interest of wholesome and modest scholarship. This surely presumes the close cooperation affirmed above between the lay theologians and professional scholars. But it also presupposes a non-schizoid scholar who is deeply grounded in both her scholarship and in her context. This is the hope that the African scholar bears for 'global' scholarship and why I wish to dedicate this article to Prof G.C. Oosthuizen. As scholar, he stood out not only because of his prophetic critique of apartheid, but especially with regard to the remarkable contributions he has made to the study of indigenous religious cultures.

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