

## The Role of Historical-Critical Methodology in African Old Testament Studies<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*Based on the observation that the historical-critical methodology used in mainstream biblical studies reflects 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century western epistemology and hermeneutics, the article addresses the role of this methodology in African Old Testament studies as it has developed since 1960. African Old Testament studies – in relation to historical-critical methodology – is then approached in three steps: first its context, with a focus on institutional and methodological perspectives; then its content, with a focus on its preference for comparative perspectives; and finally a critical perspective, with a focus on the potential of historical-critical methodology – at least when consciously used – to express critical concerns vis-à-vis the challenge that faces Old Testament interpretative communities not only in contemporary Africa, but at all times and places, namely to be more than just a mirror of current religious, cultural and political power structures.*

### A INTRODUCTION

This year – 2010 – many African nations celebrate fifty years of independence. Some got their political freedom in the late 1950s; others had to wait a few years, or even decades. Nevertheless, 1960 represents the peak of the massive wave of political independence that swept over the African continent in the third quarter of the twentieth century. The same year, 1960 – or at least the same decade, the 1960s – can also be said to represent the birth of Old Testament studies as an academic discipline in Africa, with the first hermeneutical and organizational expressions towards an Africanized discipline.<sup>2</sup> The coexistence of the two – fifty years of political freedom and fifty years of academic Old Testament studies – deserves some attention, as one would assume a kind

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<sup>1</sup> The essay is a revised version of a guest lecture presented as a Visiting Professor within the Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, on September 23, 2010. My sincere thanks go to Professor Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), the chair of the Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, for inviting me to spend some time at Unisa.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 61-86; Knut Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publisher, 2008), 83-115.

of interaction or even parallel development between them, institutionally as well as hermeneutically: whereas African politicians, on the one hand, have searched to express their political strategies in relation to a traditional, western political hegemony, African academic Old Testament interpreters, on the other, have searched to express their interpretative strategies in relation to a traditional, western interpretative hegemony.

Only a small segment of this interaction or parallel development can be dealt with in this presentation, and I will concentrate on the following question: What role does historical-critical methodology play in African Old Testament studies, as we have learned it to know in the recent 50 years? I would like to argue that the question deserves some attention, simply due to the fact that historical-critical methodology was developed in – and as such obviously reflects – another interpretative context than that of contemporary Africa, namely that of the previous two or three centuries Europe.<sup>3</sup> As part of the western, academic tradition of universalizing its own experiences and concerns, historical-critical methodology has been considered *the* scholarly approach to the texts of the Old Testament. Still, its contextual biases cannot be ignored. Historical-critical methodology as we know it from Old Testament studies cannot escape the impression of being a typically western approach, an exponent of a western epistemology and hermeneutics of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. As such it is a methodology that reflects the gradual liberation of western academia – including western theology and western biblical studies – from church authority, and its subsequent embracement of historical perspectives as a new and major means of orientation. These western experiences and concerns of the previous two or three centuries are certainly not the same as those of postcolonial Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and the question of what role historical-critical methodology plays in African Old Testament studies therefore deserves attention.

With this question in mind, I will approach African Old Testament studies in three steps: first (B) its context, with a focus on institutional and methodological perspectives; then (C) its content, with a focus on its preference for comparative perspectives; and finally (D) a critical perspective, with a focus on the potential of historical-critical methodology – at least when consciously

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<sup>3</sup> I use the expression "historical-critical methodology" as a general (and therefore somewhat vague) designation of the critical approaches to the Bible developed in western universities throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as for example source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. The classical study of the development of these approaches is Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener verlag, 1988, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.); an interesting case study in relation to its reception in church contexts is Joseph G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999).

used – to express critical concerns vis-à-vis the challenge that faces Old Testament interpretative communities not only in contemporary Africa, but at all times and places, namely to be more than just a mirror of current religious, cultural and political power structures.

## B CONTEXT

My first step into the question of the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies is to address its context, which I will do from institutional and methodological perspectives.

First, the *institutional* context of African Old Testament studies as an academic discipline is made up of two sets of academic institutions, state universities on the one hand, with their departments of religious studies and, at least in a few cases, theology, and church-related institutions on the other, stretching from bible schools without any academic pretensions, via seminaries and graduate schools, to church related universities, with their departments of theology or biblical studies. The increasing number of accredited universities with openings for academic Old Testament studies – run by state, church or other organizations – can be ascertained quite precisely, whereas the number of seminaries and theological colleges where one can talk about academic Old Testament studies in a qualified way is more difficult to ascertain, due to lacking criteria of accreditation and evaluation. In 1960, Tropical Africa, here defined as Africa between the Maghreb and Limpopo, had only six universities, whereas they today are counted in the hundreds (the Association of African Universities has per July 2011 not less than 264 members [<http://www.aau.org/>], in addition come a number of universities that are not members in the AAU). The university boom of the first decades after liberation was characterized by optimism and enthusiasm, and the mission of the universities – which in most cases were established and run by the state – was seen as that of participating in the building of national identity and the creation of societal development.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the twentieth century African universities came to face severe difficulties, especially with regard to funding. In consequence with this, we currently face a second, this time privatized university boom, initiated by churches and NGOs as well as by more commercially based organizations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jacob F. A. Ajayi; Lameck K. H. Goma and G. Ampah Johnson, *The African Experience with Higher Education* (Accra: The Association of African Universities, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bev Thaver, "Private higher education in Africa: Six country case studies," in *African Higher Education: An International Reference Handbook* (eds. Damtew Teferra & Philip G. Altbach; Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 53-60.

What we today acknowledge as African Old Testament studies is to some extent part of these university booms. It *is* part of it, in the sense that the birth and growth of an Old Testament studies in Africa throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century can hardly be understood independently of more general lines in the development of higher education in Africa. In a situation where the mission of higher education – in general – was seen as that of participating in the building of national identity and the creation of societal development, the disciplines of religious studies and theology emphasized their African context, which in turn led to an Old Testament studies focusing on African experiences and concerns as interpretative resources.

However, at the same time, Old Testament studies is only *a part* of the more general lines in the development of higher education in Africa, as the geographical distribution and institutional organizing of Old Testament studies – and theology and religious studies for that matter – in African universities is more uneven than what is the case with most other academic disciplines. One example is found in the traditional state universities, where those in Anglophone Africa tend to follow the British tradition of setting up departments for religious studies – and in some cases theology, too – in the faculties of humanities, whereas those in Francophone Africa tend to follow the French tradition of excluding these academic disciplines from the universities.<sup>6</sup> Another example is found in the current mushrooming of private universities, where the many church-related ones on the one hand and the even more that are commercially funded and focused on the other not surprisingly have rather different priorities when it comes to an academic discipline as Old Testament studies.

Second, the *methodological* context of African Old Testament studies as an academic discipline can be characterized by two sets of impulses. One is that the birth and growth of an academic Old Testament studies in Africa, from the 1960s on, happened to coincide in time with quite radical changes in western Old Testament studies. An illustrative example is that the Wellhausenian paradigm, which had provided a chronological framework not only for Pentateuchal studies but for the discipline as a whole, gradually was dismantled towards the end of the previous century. Another example is that Old Testament studies throughout the recent three or four decades has opened its doors not only for new historical and literary perspectives, but for methodology and

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jan Platvoet, "The institutional environment of the study of religions in Africa south of the Sahara," in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religions* (ed. Michael Pye, Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1987), 107-126.

material from the social sciences,<sup>7</sup> as well as for various ideologically conscious perspectives.<sup>8</sup> These changes in western Old Testament studies have been interpreted in different ways. Personally I would tend to argue that they should not be over-dramatized. It is more a question of methodological nuances and additional tools in the toolbox, than a question of a final farewell to historical-critical methodology as such. Nevertheless, from the perspective of African Old Testament studies some of these changes are of interest, not least the introduction of methodology and material from the social sciences, an innovation that creates space for some particular concerns of interpreting the Old Testament in Africa.<sup>9</sup>

And then we are in the midst of the second set of impulses characterizing African Old Testament studies as an academic discipline. As noticed above, the newly independent nations and their institutions of higher educations demanded *inter alia* an Old Testament studies focusing on African experiences and concerns as interpretative resources. The development of what has been called a "comparative paradigm,"<sup>10</sup> that is an interpretative paradigm letting the two entities "Africa" and the "Old Testament" encounter and being explicitly compared, can be seen from the 1960s and till today. Grant LeMarquand's and my own bibliographical surveys of African biblical studies demonstrate how a wide spectrum of Old Testament texts and motifs may be compared with corresponding African experiences and concerns.<sup>11</sup> They also demonstrate that the enterprise of comparing the two may serve various interpretative strategies. In some of the older material, the mere establishing of certain religio- or socio-cultural parallels between Africa and the Old Testament is a major interpretative strategy. However, in most cases the use of comparative analysis reflects two parallel sets of perspectives; either comparisons with a contemporary focus on Africa, using the Old Testament as a tool to interpret traditional or modern

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example John W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); Thomas W. Overholt, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> See for example Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margin* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See for example the contributions in Musa W. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading* (2001); Samuel O. Abogunrin (ed.), *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Eric Anum, "Comparative readings of the Bible in Africa: Some concerns," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (eds. Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 457-473.

<sup>11</sup> Grant LeMarquand, "A bibliography of the Bible in Africa," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (eds. Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 833-800; Knut Holter, *Tropical Africa and the Old Testament: A Select and Annotated Bibliography* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 1996) and Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa*.

African experiences and concerns, or comparisons with a more historical focus on the Old Testament, using African experiences as tools to interpret the texts exegetically.

The comparative paradigm is in many ways the major characteristics of African Old Testament studies, whether one approaches the guild from chronological, geographical, hermeneutical or thematic perspectives. However, this focus on comparisons between "Africa and the "Old Testament" does not exclude more textually oriented approaches, in which, as we will now see, a major role is played by historical-critical methodology.

## C CONTENT

My second step into the question of the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies is to address its content. I will first present a few interpretative perspectives, and then attempt to draw some general lines in the material.

So, what is then the role of historical-critical methodology in the rapidly increasing material of African Old Testament interpretation? On the one hand, there are some African Old Testament scholars who – at least in principle – would like to reject historical-critical methodology as a dogmatically intolerable way of responding to the revealed Word of God. Coming from certain theological contexts that more or less adhere to fundamentalism and claims of Scriptural inerrancy – or at least the claim that the biblical texts are "inerrant in the original manuscripts," as Byang H. Kato so nicely formulated it<sup>12</sup> – they attempt to develop textual approaches that are free from the presuppositions of traditional historical-critical interpretation. An illustrative example here is Yoilah K. Yilpet (Nigeria), who in a doctoral dissertation from Trinity International University (USA) on the concept of "righteousness" in Isaiah, rejects historical-critical methodology as "inadequate to analyze the prophecy of Isaiah."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, there are also some African Old Testament scholars who would tend to embrace historical-critical methodology, seeing it as a means that can save African Christianity from various forms of fundamentalism. An illustrative example here is Kris Owan (Nigeria), who a couple of decades ago claimed that scriptural fundamentalism is "one of the plagues now overwhelming the church,"<sup>14</sup> arguing that what the church therefore needs now is a critical and scientific reading of the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 182.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Yoilah K. Yilpet, "A rhetorical/intra-textual study," (1997) 47.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kris Owan, "The Fundamentalist's Interpretation of the Bible: A Challenge to biblical exegesis in West Africa," *West African Journal of Ecclesial Studies* 5 (1993): 1.

However, the vast majority of African Old Testament scholars – from the 1960s till today – are found somewhere in between these two extremes of rejection or embracement of historical-critical methodology. An illustrative discourse on the topic is found in an essay published a decade ago, where Justin S. Ukpogong (Nigeria) discusses whether African Old Testament studies can escape the historical-critical approach.<sup>15</sup> Ukpogong notices that most African biblical scholars are trained in historical-critical methodology. This includes not only those who are trained in western contexts, but also those trained in Africa, as African biblical studies is a child of the western tradition of the discipline, Ukpogong argues. But then, he continues, African biblical studies has at the same time managed to develop its own interpretative strategies, different from those of the western tradition in the sense that they explicitly address topics emerging from the context – *in casu* African context – of the interpreter. And, whereas western interpreters tend to see historical-critical methodology as an end in itself, African interpreters see it more as a tool that enables the interpreter to interact with questions arising from the current historical and sociological context. Nevertheless, Ukpogong argues, these African and contextually based interpretative strategies, too, need interaction with historical-critical methodology, for three reasons. First, because of the post-enlightenment context all of us have in common, we simply cannot return to an uncritical use of the Bible in academia. Second, because lack of historical-critical perspectives in biblical interpretation in the past led to abuse, such as for example in South Africa's experience with apartheid. And third, given the African focus on contextual interpretation, it is necessary with a corresponding analysis of the original context of the text, to secure that the original and contemporary contexts are comparable.

The question is now to what extent Ukpogong's brief map of the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament interpretation corresponds with the terrain itself. I find that it corresponds quite well. In my analysis of the doctoral dissertations of the first generation of African Old Testament scholars (1967-2000), I argue that we can roughly divide the terrain – or dissertation material – into two groups, comparative and exegetical studies.<sup>16</sup> In the first group, comparative studies, the major approach is a comparative methodology that facilitates a parallel interpretation of certain Old Testament texts or motifs and supposed African parallels, letting the two illuminate one another in various ways. These studies, of course, are not only comparative, they are

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<sup>15</sup> Justin S. Ukpogong, "Can African Old Testament scholarship escape the historical-critical approach," *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* 7 (1999), 2-5.

<sup>16</sup> Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa*, 87-111. It can of course be argued that it is methodologically problematic to use dissertations written by African doctoral students in western contexts to illustrate the case. Still, the thematic profile of the dissertation material demonstrates the capacity of these students to develop approaches that are in dialogue with their African backgrounds.

indeed also exegetical, in the sense that they analyze certain Old Testament texts or motifs; however, their major methodological characteristic is that they approach the Old Testament texts from African comparative perspectives. In some cases, "Africa" is used to interpret "the Old Testament," such as in Robert Wafawanaka's (Zimbabwe) analysis of poverty in ancient Israel, based on a sociological analysis of poverty in traditional Africa,<sup>17</sup> or in Lechion Peter Kimilike's (Tanzania) analysis of poverty in the Book of Proverbs, based on a folkloristic analysis of poverty in African traditional poverty wisdom.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, the interpretative point of the comparison is a better understanding of the Old Testament texts. In other cases, however, "the Old Testament" is used to interpret "Africa," such as in Justin S. Ukpong's (Nigeria) comparison between Ibibio and Levitical concepts of sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> Here the interpretative point of the comparison is not a better understanding of the Old Testament texts, it is rather an attempt at inculturating the Roman Catholic concepts of the Eucharist amongst the Ibibio Christians.

In the second group, exegetical studies, the major approach is a methodology that facilitates historical and literary interpretations of various Old Testament texts or topics. These studies, too, may include some use of African comparative material; however, their major methodological characteristic is that they approach the Old Testament texts from more strictly exegetical perspectives. One example is Denis Mianbé Bétoudji's (Chad) analysis of the relationship between the Melchizedek's El Elyon and Abram's Yahweh in Gen 14.<sup>20</sup> This is a traditional exegetical work within the historical-critical tradition. Nevertheless, in the frames of the work it is noticed that the encounter between El Elyon and Yahweh may provide models for understanding the relationship between various concepts of God in contemporary Africa. Another example is Joel A. A. Ajayi's (Nigeria) analysis of "old-age wisdom" in ancient Israel.<sup>21</sup> Again a work within the historical-critical tradition, still, drawing on insights from the Yoruba tradition.

Both groups, that of comparative studies as well as that of exegetical studies, make use of historical-critical methodology in their approach to the Old Testament texts. There are cases where explicit references to historical-

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wafawanaka, "Perspectives on the problem of poverty in traditional Africa and in ancient Israel." (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Lechion Peter Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: An African Transformational Hermeneutic of Proverbs on Poverty* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, *Sacrifice – African and Biblical: A Comparative Study of Ibibio and Levitical Sacrifice* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Denis Mianbé Bétoudji, *El, le Dieu supreme et le Dieu des patriarches (Genesis 14:18-20)* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Joel A. A. Ajayi, *A Biblical Theology of Gerassapience* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).



critical methodology are marginalized, and there are also cases where more recent literary and reader-oriented theory is reflected. Still, traditional historical-critical methodology is used throughout the material. In other words, if my material of doctoral dissertations written by the first generation of African Old Testament scholars (1967-2000) – together with more recent contributions, such as those by Kimilike (2008) and Ajayi (2010) – is representative for Old Testament studies in Africa, there is no doubt that historical-critical methodology is taken for granted as *the* scholarly approach to the Old Testament.

## D CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

My third and final step into the question of the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies is to voice a critical perspective. In the nearly two decades I have been engaged in research into interpretative strategies of African academia vis-à-vis the Old Testament, I have deliberately approached the material from analytical but rather descriptive perspectives. I have not wanted to go into what John S. Mbiti once called the role of western theological engineers, that is to give advice on "how African theology should be done, where it should be done, who should do it, what it should say, *ad infinitum*."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, a few times I have been challenged to express more normative approaches too, and the present topic – the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies – is such an occasion. When I towards the end of this presentation feel tempted to offer a more critical perspective, I still hope to do so without becoming one of Mbiti's theological engineers.

I have above briefly noticed that some African Old Testament scholars reject historical-critical methodology as an inadequate approach *vis-à-vis* the Word of God, whereas others tend to embrace it as a means of saving African Christianity from various forms of fundamentalism. In my view, a dogmatically based view that criticism – *in casu* historical-critical methodology – is an inadequate way of responding to the revealed Word of God, hardly makes sense in the critical context of academia. Not only would it ignore the historical character of the Old Testament texts themselves, but it would also prevent the African guild of Old Testament studies from dialoguing with the accumulated insights of more than two hundred years of historical-critical Old Testament studies in western contexts. However, nor do I share the enthusiastic embracement of historical-critical methodology as a means with which African Old Testament studies can participate in the – in my view legitimate – fight against fundamentalism. Such an embracement ignores the obvious problems of using a methodology that is born into – and out of – a western epistemological and hermeneutical context unaltered in other contexts. Therefore, together with

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<sup>22</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 61.

Ukpong and a vast majority of African Old Testament scholars I would tend to defend a use of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies, but then, I would emphasize, a critical use of it.

My basic premise for defending the use of historical-critical methodology is a fear that any version of Old Testament studies – whether they are localized in Africa or in the West – that totally reject such a methodology, for dogmatic or other reasons, easily will face the danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. In spite of all its problems, and then not only its western contextuality, but also its far too optimistic views with regard to the scholar's possibilities of reconstructing "original contexts," I find that historical-critical methodology addresses topics that are of vital importance to all Old Testament interpretation, also in its African versions. A major concern of early historical-critical studies – as we will see if we bother to go all the way back to Johann Philipp Gabler and his famous *Antrittsrede* from 1787, which to some extent can be said to represent the birth of historical-critical biblical studies<sup>23</sup> – was to develop an academic biblical interpretation that was liberated from church authority. The liberation of biblical studies and theology from church authority – and eventually, at least in some cases from political authority too – throughout nineteenth century European universities, was of course part of a more general secularization and emancipation of academia. This was a fight that included all faculties in the universities, but that for obvious reasons was experienced particularly tough in the theological faculties. Nevertheless, in retrospect we are able to see that the emancipation of biblical studies and theology actually served a central theological point, namely the potential of these disciplines to be critical voices into church and society, and their manifold uses and abuses of the Bible.

Two hundred years later this is still a valid point. It is a valid point in the West, where the church and her theologies due to political correctness vis-à-vis the general public, and power relations vis-à-vis the state, so often has betrayed her calling to be on the side of the poor and oppressed ones, and where the state so often has used the Bible – as part of the Christian tradition – for power purposes. But it is also a valid point in Africa, I would tend to argue, as African churches and their theologies – as well as African states and their ideologies – may face some of the same temptations and challenges. There is no innocent interpretation of the Bible, not even in a bible-embracing continent as Africa. Celebrated *liberation* hermeneutical models may become state ideology, when one political regime is exchanged with another. Radical *inculturation* hermeneutical models may end up as cementing traditional – and oppressing – cultural and political structures and practices. And much needed *reconstruction*

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<sup>23</sup> Magne Sæbø, "Johann Philipp Gablers Bedeutung für die Biblische Theologie: Zum 200-jährigen Jubiläum seiner Antrittsrede vom 30. März 1787," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Theologie* 99 (1987): 1-16.

hermeneutical models may eventually serve to legitimize one particular segment of the political spectrum, a segment that soon proves to be lacking its supposed socio-ethical qualities. Church and society are therefore in deep need, I would say, of an academic Old Testament studies that is able to express critical concerns vis-à-vis all those Old Testament interpretations that just mirror current religious, cultural and political power structures.

Now, historical-critical methodology is obviously not *the* answer to these challenges. Historical-critical methodology is not a universally neutral tool, as more or less all of its practitioners tended to argue in the past, and as some of them actually still do.<sup>24</sup> The problems of historical-critical methodology are not found in badly performed practices only, but originate deep into the epistemological and hermeneutical presuppositions of the methodology itself, presuppositions that – as pointed out above – are formed by its western context of origin, and that are not necessarily shared with other contexts.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, I would argue that the focus of historical-critical methodology on the otherness of the Old Testament texts, a focus on the fact that the texts originally had other addressees than us, this focus expresses a concern that I would not be willing to give up. It is a concern that – if consciously and critically used – may save both African and western Old Testament studies from at least some of all those dangerous interpretations I just referred to as simply mirroring current religious, cultural and political power structures.

In conclusion, what *is* then the role of historical-critical methodology in African Old Testament studies? As I see it, it is a set of experiences with Old Testament texts, experiences that originally grew out of other interpretative contexts than those of Africa, but that nevertheless, when used consciously, may serve an African Old Testament interpretation that responds to contemporary African experiences and concerns. Making *critical* use of this methodology, as a tool for creating interaction between ancient texts and contemporary contexts, the African guild of Old Testament studies demonstrates not only its interaction with the global guild of Old Testament studies, but also its commitment to its own interpretative context.

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<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Defining the center, trivializing the margins," *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (eds. H. Räisänen et al., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 29-48.

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