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Prophecy in an African Context
Methodological Considerations

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Abstract

Efforts to view prophecy from an African perspective fall into the category of approaches to the Bible that seek to make the Bible meaningful to the world or horizon of the reader. Basically, these are efforts that seek to contextualize the Bible. Concerns to contextualize the Bible so that it speaks to the context of the reader, and in our case, the African context, are not new. There has been a long standing debate reviewing the movement in biblical interpretation dubbed 'the New Hermeneutic' whose major concerns were to apply the biblical text to the context of the reader and in a way that incorporated the culture of the reader. Our thesis in this chapter is that while the concerns are novel and indeed genuine, scholars who venture in these endeavours have not always been forthcoming in terms of how they propose to contextualize the Bible in ways that restrain biblical interpretation from falling back to, and into, the methodological pitfalls of the past, especially the pitfalls of the various shades and forms of eisegesis whose major heuristic crime was the failure to do enough justice to the text. In this chapter we revisit the history of the interpretation of the Bible in general, and prophecy in Ancient Israel in particular, in a bid to make our own proposal on the method and, or, hermeneutics that are appropriate to interpret the prophetic books in an African context but still doing justice to the message that was intended by the authors of the texts to the audiences of their time. We propose a fresh look at hermeneutics as a generic term that distinguishes it from exegesis and incorporates principles of cultural relativism and social scientific criticism. We very briefly apply the social scientific conceptual metaphor of social capital as a demonstration of the application of our hermeneutics to understand the prophet Isaiah and selected contemporary prophets in Zimbabwe.

The Task at Hand

If our task were to be academic, if our endeavours were to be regarded as research at all, then it is inevitable to first and foremost think about issues of methodology. We need to reflect on the 'how' and 'why' we are going to perceive and conceptualize the phenomenon of prophecy in an African context. Quite often writers plunge straight into discussions of various figures in Africa they regard as prophetic figures; moving back and forth the various biblical stories they deem comparable to case studies of these African figures without providing a methodological rationale and operative logic for their comparative studies. More often than not, findings from such studies raise more questions than answers and are easily dismissible as what Haralambos and Holborn (1991:698) refer to as guesswork or common sense that has been mystified.

To this end, this chapter deals specifically with two questions: first, how do we go about investigating the phenomenon of prophecy in an African context drawing parallels from a similar phenomenon in ancient Israel? Second, on what operative logic is/are our method(s) anchored? That is, what are the principles and philosophies that underlie our perception and conceptualization of prophecy in an African context? Therefore, the focus of this chapter is on methodology. While it does refer to some examples of phenomena regarded as African prophecy, its primary concern is 'how' and 'why' it is that we come to perceive and conceptualize that which we call prophecy in an African context, especially as we compare two phenomena that are miles apart in terms of time and culture. This is a stage that this chapter regards as foundational to build-up studies looking at specific case studies of African prophets and different manifestations of African prophecy.

The task of interpreting prophecy in an African context has two dimensions to it emanating from two strictly related assumptions. The first assumption is that the prophecy we are talking about is prophecy in ancient Israel (hereinafter referred to only as Israel) or what is commonly referred to as Old Testament prophecy which we intend to understand from the context of the African cultural background. The implication of this assumption to our task is multi-varied. Does it imply that the phenomenon of prophecy was unique to Israel and therefore, Old Testament prophecy can be seen as the sole provider of the canons with which we can understand prophecy in our contemporary context? Besides, by looking up to Old Testament prophecy as the provider of inter-

pretive canons for contemporary prophecy, are we implying that the Bible is normative and indeed does speak for posterity? Are we also implying continuity between prophecy in the Old Testament and prophecy in the New Testament? Therefore, the first dimension of our task may bring forth a number of articles probing each of the implications mentioned above and many more that we are silent about.

For instance, some scholars have argued that there was prophecy outside Israel that even predates Israelite prophecy. This is not a new argument and neither is it a bizarre one for those of us who are familiar with theories on the origins of prophecy in Israel. An implication of this argument that has not been probed is that prophecy, then, is not unique to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In fact, it has often been argued that various concepts of prophecy are found throughout the world's religions and cults. This is what has given birth to articles comparing elements of Old Testament prophecy with what may be regarded as prophecy in say, African traditional religions.

What needs to be probed in this regard is, are we not imposing a category that never existed in those religions that we are alleging to have possessed this category of religious phenomena which Israelites referred to as prophecy? Phenomenologically, when say, for example, Chaminuka predicted the arrival in Zimbabwe of some people 'without knees', or when Nehanda predicted that 'her bones were going to rise' and fight in a newly rejuvenated Chimurenga, did these two sacred practitioners regard their predictions as prophecy? Similarly, did the recipients of such predictions regard the two sacred practitioners as prophets? From a phenomenological perspective, how valid are such statements of eidetic intuition? Similar questions can be asked about similar phenomena and religious figures in all those other religions throughout the world that we are alleging to have possessed the category of prophecy.

Thus, the task to investigate prophecy in an African context may proceed in two directions that produce research in two categories. First, there may be research that is based on prophecy in the Old Testament and hence, research that compares prophecy in the Old Testament with what may be deemed African prophecy. Second, there may be research that looks at prophecy that is independent of prophecy in the Old Testament, based on the assumption that prophecy was in existence throughout the various cultures of the world and it even predates prophecy in the Old Testament. Each one of the two directions has its own

methodological principles and philosophies to consider as we draw meaning from phenomena studied.

This chapter is placed in the first category of research. This is not to say the second category is not significant, but our choice is based purely on considerations of time and space. Our task here assumes that the prophecy we are dealing with is prophecy in the Old Testament, which we need to understand within the context of our African cultural background. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, it is inevitable to consider how prophecy in the Old Testament has been interpreted, especially the principles and philosophies informing those interpretations, in a bid to arrive at means to conceptualize prophecy within our African cultural background. Methodology to discern prophecy in the Old Testament has historically revolved around exegesis and, or, hermeneutics. Therefore, it is inevitable too that the first and larger part of the chapter is a historical examination of the principles and philosophies underlying the stated methods aimed at arriving at our own methodology deemed appropriate for the task of understanding prophecy from an African cultural perspective. The case studies of typical African prophets and manifestations of African prophecy are minimal as they are serving only to vindicate and exemplify our methodology.

The Current State of the Debate on Methods

Biblical interpretation to date is raven with controversy regarding the way forward in so far as interpreting not only prophecy but the Bible as a whole in a way that reflects critically on contemporary issues. That is, how are we to interpret the Bible in such a way that it speaks to the contemporary reader? Scholarship is divided to two extremes. One extreme position is that biblical interpretation should begin with and must respect the horizon[1] of the author and his/her intended audience. This position advocates a diachronic[2] reading of the Bible as the approach

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[1]   We interpret the term 'horizon' to mean 'the world-view' of either the author or the interpreter of the Bible in a way that encompasses even the creative milieu of the author. For a much more expanded and detailed discussion of this term see Thiselton: 1980, xix.

[2]   We take the term to encompass all those methods that take cognizance of the fact that language and especially culture occur and, or, change over a period of time and therefore an analysis of such phenomena must necessarily either imply or ask historical

that does justice to the text. The second extreme position is that the world of the writer of the biblical text and his/her intended audience must simply disappear into oblivion. What is crucial is the horizon of the reader and what the reader makes of the Bible today. This latter position thus advocates synchronic[3] approaches to the Bible as the meaningful and more relevant approach to the contemporary reader.

Such a concern is not new in the history of the interpretation of the Bible. There have been similar attempts in the history of the interpretation of the New Testament (even though it spilled into the Old Testament) in the form of an interpretative method, or in our view a 'movement', dubbed 'The New Hermeneutic' (see Braaten, 1966; Ramm, 1970; Shealy, 1979 and 1997 and recently, Marshall, 2013). While a number of books and articles have been written on this subject, Marshall's definition of this interpretative method gives us sufficient ground to discuss it without losing many of our readers. Marshall (2013) defines The New Hermeneutic as an approach that focuses (or rather, focused) on how current audiences interact with the biblical text. Scholars generally agree in principle that E. Fuchs and G. Ebeling are the initiators of this method, even though the foundation for the method was laid as far back as the 1920's with R. Bultmann who himself was building up from K. Barth's insights (see Carson, 1980 and 1996). Marshall echoes what many New Testament scholars point out; that the method is based on two strictly related philosophical presuppositions: first, that the text is timeless and claims that this timelessness necessarily means that it holds new meaning for each new reader and second, timelessness also means that the text transcends original historical context, authorial intent, or other dimensions across which a text is evaluated (Marshall, 2013). What this means is that in our present endeavour one can compare Old Testament prophetic figures with contemporary African cultic figures, drawing similarities between the two without raising any methodological eyebrows.

However, despite the fact that he was for the new hermeneutic, R. Bultmann (cited in Ogden, 1984:3) raised an argument that dismissed the continued validity of the Old Testament to provide canons to under-

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questions (see Hirsch 1967:1 and also http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary /diachronic).

3   If an approach, phenomenon or activity is described as "synchronic" it means it is not affected by past and future, and that it simply focuses on a specific point in time.

stand contemporary religious phenomena. Bultmann was of the view that nothing that contradicts science and reason should be acceptable, even if it were clearly taught in the Bible. In particular, according to him, the Old Testament is a human document and Christians may entirely ignore it or, if they use it at all, its value would only be as a document that paves the way for Christianity (cited in Surburg, 1974:14). Such a negative attitude towards the Old Testament and supernatural dimensions of the Bible as a whole can be understood from the point of view of the philosophy that informed Bultmann and the situation he was trying to address. As an army chaplain, Bultmann was trying to come up with a biblical interpretation that was relevant to soldiers who were seeing their colleagues perishing at the battle front and were always haunted by the idea that one day it would be their turn. Bultmann thus adopted the philosophy of existentialism that guided him throughout his interpretation of the Bible. His interpretation of the Bible was born out of, and was intended to answer an existential concern (Baker, 1964:7). While Bultmann's argument left a yawning gap in biblical interpretation regarding the continued validity of the Old Testament, he contributed one crucial philosophical principle to biblical interpretation that is relevant to our task of understanding prophecy in an African context: any methodology to discern Old Testament prophecy must address the existential concerns of the reader if it is to be relevant. To what extent does the Old Testament, and in our case, the Old Testament prophecy speak to the contemporary reader? Is the Old Testament prophecy normative? Therefore, is the endeavour to see the Old Testament prophecy speak to our own African context a worthwhile endeavour?

Bultmann's argument on the validity of the Old Testament is not as worrisome as what his hermeneutic implied on methodology. Bultmann's hermeneutic placed inevitable emphasis on theology (faith) and not on method. To put Bultmann's argument in perspective, it is the message of the prophets in the Old Testament that is relevant to the reader, rather than the methods to prove that the prophets themselves and events surrounding them were historical. We can still develop faith in God from the stories and use that faith to understand our own religious experiences today without establishing the historicity of those Old Testament stories about the prophets.

Of course, emphasis on theology and not on method was not unique to Bultmann. Rather it was typical of that era in biblical studies because

even in Old Testament studies up to the early 70's the categories and methodologies that now dominate the Old Testament studies were not yet on the horizon (Brueggmann, 2002: xii). Then, the major shape of the Old Testament was largely crafted by G. von Rad and E.G. Wright who emphasised the dichotomies between 'history' and 'nature' and 'time' and 'space' in Old Testament studies that saw the inevitable focus on the theology of the Old Testament. Here scholars isolated specific themes that were guided by the major theme of 'God's mighty deeds in history'(Brueggmann, 2002: xi). Interpretation of the message and, or, theology of the prophets was thus guided by this overarching theme.

However, focus on theology was the kind of direction the 'New Hermeneutic' took because of the concerns of the architects of the movement. The spirit to allow the Bible as a whole to speak to the contemporary reader of the Bible was the key driver of the endeavour. Emphasis on theology (faith) would give the New Hermeneutic such elasticity and mileage.

Bultmann's students, popularly known as the Post-Bultmannians, added their voice when they argued that language itself is existential in character (Fuchs, 1964:115; Ebeling, 1963:331) in which case they took up their teacher's axiom that biblical interpretation must answer to an existential concern. Although the context of their discourse was the 'Quest for the Historical Jesus', the Post-Bultmannians contributed a methodological principle that was to have a lasting effect in the history of biblical interpretation. Fuchs and Ebeling in agreement with their other fellow Post-Bultmannians, E. Kaesemann and G. Bornkamm to mention a few, realized that although the historical Jesus was difficult to find in the New Testament, that Jesus needed to be found; it is important to know what can be known about him because the Jesus of faith, the Christ of the kerygma necessarily continues from this historical Jesus. Otherwise if there is no such continuity then Christianity is a non-historical timeless myth. There is simply just too much historically relevant data about this Jesus in the Gospel traditions for scholars to ignore (Meier, 1993:1318). Thus, the Post-Bultmannians managed to establish that there is indeed a kennel of history in which the Christian faith must have confidence and it is that kennel of history that makes the contemporary religious milieu of the reader relevant. Faith alone without that kennel of history is without the necessary foundation.

Again to put the argument into perspective, it is not possible to focus on theology without method and thus, the Post-Bultmannians broadened the breath and improved on the elasticity of the biblical interpretation of their teacher. There is a syntagmatic relationship between sound theology and method and from our argument above there is need for a method that asks historical questions; that proceeds from the world of the authors of the biblical texts and their audience.

However, the proponents of the New Hermeneutic, Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamar, Funk and many who belong to this school, were of the conviction that their New Hermeneutic was not to be limited to theology only but was to be also the foundation for the reconstruction of philosophy and the basis for a new programme of epistemology (Surburg, 1974:16). For them, apart from Scripture, contemporary culture also became a source of religious authority. Thus, it is a valid observation that the proponents of the New Hermeneutic transcended the mere quest to allow applications of biblical texts to be more life-related (Surburg, 1974:17); their claim went a bit further to assert that the biblical message itself needed reformulating (Surburg, 1974:17) in the light of contemporary culture.

The reconstruction of our hermeneutics builds up on major critiques of the New Hermeneutic that we discuss, but only briefly. A number of critics are not comfortable with the basic existential import of the New Hermeneutic that faith is just but a relationship between persons; by its emphasis on existentialism most of the traditional dogmatic teachings are eliminated and by its interpretation that faith is merely a relationship between persons and need not have a doctrinal content the whole foundation of Christian doctrine is undermined (Surburg, 1974:18). Hence, the major fear, especially among the evangelicals, is that such an import undermines the authority of the Bible and strips it of its normativity. The message of the Bible becomes unnecessarily relative and this is the major fear of those who are opposed to the endeavour to interpret the message of the Old Testament prophets for the African context.

Notwithstanding such theological reservations, our focus is more on the implications of the New Hermeneutic on the method of biblical interpretation than on Christian Theology. After all, sound and appropriate methods of biblical interpretation result in sound doctrine and acceptable Christian Theology. Therefore, we do not focus on what the New Hermeneutic did and is still doing for and about Christian Theology, but

on the net effect it had and has on method. Did The New Hermeneutic collapse all earlier efforts on method for instance, the thrifty gains of the Historical Critical Method[4], to build something completely new or this was and is still a fuss about nothing that did and does not make any methodological headway? Is what we are trying to do: to understand prophecy in our own African context methodologically unattainable?

A number of critics indeed have raised serious concerns against the New Hermeneutic for what they think is its impact on method and what they think is likely to happen to biblical interpretation as a whole should the 'arbitrary' application of the Bible be allowed. Major critics along these lines arose from evangelicals. These evangelical critics range from extreme critics like Ramm (1970) and some of his ardent disciples like Shearly whose scathing attack on the New Hermeneutic features in his *Redrawing The Line Between Hermeneutics And Application* (1997) to moderate critics like Larkin Jr (1988) who not only reviewed the major findings of previous methods of interpreting the Bible but also discussed in satisfactory detail Cultural Relativism in his *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics.*

The primary criticism that these critics raise against the New Hermeneutic theorists is that in terms of method the theorists departed from the grammatico-historical principles (that according to the critics, presumably instilled objectivity in biblical interpretation) and embraced the kind of subjectivism typical of all such approaches to the Bible as the New Hermeneutic (Ramm, 1970:vii). Shearly (1997:83) expanded the argument and according to Shearly, the New Hermeneutic theorists incorporated the dimension of application into the hermeneutical process thereby confusing definitions of hermeneutics, exegesis, meaning and interpretation. We are not sure whether we understand fully what Shearly exactly meant by this but the gist of his critique is that in the process of trying to come up with an approach to the Bible that allows the Bible to speak to the reader, terms were either not properly defined or they were not defined altogether resulting in inevitable confusion in their use. Such confusion led to a number of unfortunate developments, according to Shearly. First, it encouraged a man-centred interpretation; second, it allowed cultural interpretation to alter meaning and third, it encouraged a reader-response type of interpretation among other syn-

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[4]   We are using the term here as a generic term encompassing all the methods that either ask or imply historical questions (see Bishau, 2010:77).

chronistic approaches to the Bible (Shearly 1997:83). Whatever else Shearly says later in his article are elaborations and exemplifications of this basic argument that we summarise here and so we work on this summary as we develop our argumentation.

What the critics of the New Hermeneutic persuade us to do in our reconstruction of hermeneutics that allow us to apply Old Testament prophecy to our African context is to first, note the crucial importance of defining the terms used to describe the various approaches to the Bible and second, arrive at ways in which our interpretation of prophecy takes cognizance of the African culture but still retaining the desired objectivity of the traditional grammatico-historical methods of interpreting the Bible. Indeed, our survey of some literature on methodology vindicates Shearly's point: the terms exegesis and hermeneutics appear confused in terms of what they denote about interpretation and application.

Towards Appropriate Hermeneutics to Interpret Prophecy in an African Context Exegesis

By exegesis we mean a systematic interpretation of the text that employs such methods that generally constitute the Historical Critical Method (Hayes and Holladay, 1987:23). The Historical Critical Method is taken as a composite method embracing all those methods which either ask or imply historical questions. These, according to Kaiser and Kummel (1967:69), include Textual Criticism, Literary and, or, Source Criticism, Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism, to mention a few.

We use this term this way but taking cognisance of R. N. Soulen's word of caution and reservations concerning whether or not the Historical Critical Method can be as generic as we imply here. Soulen would view our use of the term Historical Critical Method not only as loose but also somewhat erroneous. For him the term is often used erroneously as synonymous with the whole body of methodologies related to the discipline of Biblical Criticism (Soulen, 1981:88). We define the Historical Critical Method as we do following scholars like J.J. Keegan (cited in E.D. Hirsch, 1967:3) who see it as essentially a diachronic method that comprises such distinct methodologies we stated above. The strength of using the term as a generic term is that we are able to use the methods as a composite without necessarily specifying them individually unless it is strictly necessary to do so. We are also aware of the fact that each of

these methods has its own assumptions, strengths and weaknesses. We argue that the assumptions, strengths and weaknesses of exegesis are an aggregate of the assumptions, strengths and weakness of the individual methods that comprise the exegetical method and therefore, embrace those aggregate assumptions and strengths of exegesis. Elsewhere we deal with these in detail (see Bishau, 2010). It is sufficient only to state one of them briefly below.

One crucial strength of exegesis comes from the assumption that when we exegete texts, we exegete written words and not oral ones, which implies that, as Hayes and Holladay (1987:23) correctly point out, the writer is not present as the reader reads the text. This makes the Bible specialized content whose forms of expression were produced in the world of the writer (first party) and were intended for the writers' audience (second party) (Hayes and Holladay, 1987:8). Both these parties lived much earlier than us, the interpreters of the Bible (third party). Thus, not only are the biblical texts composed in a different language and forms of expression different from ours, but also, they were composed in a different culture and historical context. Therefore, a cultural gap exists between the writer and his audience on one hand, and us, the interpreters of the Bible on the other hand. Similarly, a historical gap exists between the production of the biblical texts and the interpretation of these texts. What is crucial to the task of interpreting prophecy in an African context is that exegesis helps the reader to go back to the world of the writer and his audience.

However, exegesis has its weaknesses. One major one arises from the fact that as interpreters of the Bible, we are third parties. Hence, both a cultural and historical gap exists between the writers of the texts and their intended audiences on the one hand, and us, the interpreters of the Bible on the other hand. For us to be able to interpret prophecy in an African context, there is need to find means to bridge both the historical and cultural gaps. This is where we revisit the definition of hermeneutics once more.

Hermeneutics

The terms exegesis and hermeneutics have sometimes been used interchangeably as if they refer to one and the same thing. Therefore, the critics of the New Hermeneutic are correct when they argue that there

has been confusion regarding exactly what each of the two terms designates. For example, hermeneutics has been defined as a theory of interpretation of biblical texts; the formulation of rules or principles or methods of studying the text and these methods include Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism and Textual Criticism (Achtmeier, 1985:384). This definition is not at all different from the definition of exegesis which we gave above. In other definitions, exegesis has been defined as the concrete explanation of sacred scripture using the principles of hermeneutics, while hermeneutics has been defined as a form of theological science that treats the principles of biblical interpretation (Meagher, 1978). Thus, it is apparent that these definitions are not only vague but also confused, especially when the definitions are extended to show the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics.

Yet, for a successful application of biblical prophecy to our African context that relationship must be delineated clearly. Again we do that in a greater detail elsewhere (Bishau, 2010). We maintain the definition of exegesis as defined above and proceed to define hermeneutics following A. C. Thiselton's insights regarding the interpretation of texts. Thiselton views the interpretation of texts in terms of "horizons". By "horizon" Thiselton refers to the limits of thought dictated by a given perspective or viewpoint (Thiselton, 1980:xix). In the interpretation of texts this scholar envisages two horizons, namely: the horizon of the text, in particular, that of the writer and his intended audience, and, the horizon of the reader or interpreter of the text. Thus, according to Thiselton, exegesis helps us to establish as accurately as is possible, the horizon of the writer and his intended audience. However, the nature of our task, which is interpreting prophecy in an African context, dictates that we move from that horizon of the author to the horizon of the interpreter and this is where hermeneutics comes in.

We define hermeneutics as a method of interpreting the Bible whose task is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and the text in such a way that the interpreter's own horizon is reshaped and enlarged (Thiselton, 1980:xix). So, hermeneutics seeks to bridge both the cultural and historical gaps between the author and his intended audience on one hand, and the interpreter on the other hand. The method certainly has a synchronic dimension but it is different from the synchronic literal approaches we dismissed earlier in that hermeneutics proceeds from the results of exegesis, which is diachronic.

It aims to apply the message of the author, already determined diachronically, in such a way that it speaks to the situation of the interpreter of the text today. Therefore, in essence, hermeneutics helps us to avoid the methodological problem of jumping categories by applying various paradigms of historical and cultural relativity.

There have been similar attempts before. One that immediately comes to mind is James Limburg's method of interpreting the prophetic message for the contemporary context in his *The Prophets and the Powerless*, 1977. Limburg (1977:17) expresses a similar concern regarding what the prophetic word may mean today. He suggests that after determining what the text meant (through exegesis), the next thing would be to then determine what it means in the contemporary context. To do this the interpreter must ask two crucial questions: first, what does the text say about the relationship between God and humanity and second, what does the text say about the human being and one's relationships with fellow human beings? The interpreter then formulates brief answers to these questions in a manner that bridges the gap between what the text meant and what it means. However, in his application of this hermeneutic on Isaiah 1:10-17, Limburg observes the limitation of such hermeneutic in that it does not apply to every text in a mechanical way. We argue that meaning is not always attached to God's relationships with individuals, neither is it always specific to human interrelationships.

This is where Larkin Jr.'s hermeneutic comes in. Larkin (1988:104) asks broader questions than Limburg in what he calls biblical imperatives that guide his hermeneutics. Larkin's hermeneutic is guided by four critical questions. First, what teaching or practice does the text advocate? Second, what meaning is expressed by the action in the text? Third but strictly related to the second question, what is the rationale behind the action whose meaning is expressed in the text? Fourth, what is the cultural context in which the action takes place and is to be comprehended? It is from these biblical imperatives that according to Larkin we can arrive at the text's contemporary relevance.

There have been varied ways of dealing with the question of the context. While Limburg raises valid points, it is as if human relationships occur in a socio-economic and political vacuum, as he says nothing about the context or the creative milieu of the prophetic word. This is why we are happier with Larkin than Limburg. Larkin says something about the social context of the prophetic word, but does not satisfy us

regarding how the context is to be regarded in the hermeneutics. J.R. Jaeggli (1997) talks about contextual analysis involving a process of 'de-contextualization' that is to be perceived in terms of various levels of context: the immediate context within a paragraph, the relation of paragraphs within a genre, development of genres in a section of a prophetic book, and the macroscopic contribution of sections in the overall message of a book. By keeping a macroscopic perspective, the interpreter can maintain his/her bearings as s/he navigates through the many hermeneutical details one must consider.

We do not indulge in such complex explanations of the hermeneutic endeavour. We embrace both Limburg and Jaeggli's contributions but add that there is need to define the relationships, teachings, practices, standards and meanings advocated by the text in terms of concepts. Our thesis is that concepts transcend time and culture. For example, the concept of eating is the same across time and cultures. What differs is what is eaten and how it is eaten, but the concept of eating remains the same conceptually in terms of purpose and significance. So, if we discern what Limburg's relationships and Larkin's biblical givens or imperatives or prerogatives in terms of concepts or what we popularly refer to as conceptual metaphors or paradigms, then we will be able to bridge both the historical and cultural gaps between the horizon of the author and his audience on one hand, and the horizon of the reader on the other hand.

Since the context of the prophetic message is a socio-political and economic one, it is logical to derive the conceptual metaphors from the hermeneutical tool of social scientific criticism. Elsewhere we define what we mean by this method (See Bishau, 2010). J. Elliot's (1995:7) definition suffices and according to him social scientific criticism is a phase of the exegetical task which analyses the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of the perspectives, theory, models and research of the social sciences. Thus, for Elliot, it is a sub-discipline of exegesis that seeks to complement the other exegetical methods, all of which are designed to analyse specific aspects of the text. However, we mark a departure from Elliot in that for us, social scientific criticism helps the reader to move from the social environment of the text to the social environment of the reader. Thus, social scientific criticism is in fact a phase of the hermeneutical task.

Conceptual metaphors that can be derived from social scientific criticism include relative deprivation; the concept of image borrowed from the sociology of knowledge, familiar conceptual metaphors namely the honour-shame and honour-discourse models respectively (see DeSilva, 2004:280), patron-client and patronage models respectively (see DeSilva, 2004:334), the conceptual metaphor of ideological texture (for a detailed discussion and application of this see DeSilva, 2004:463), and 'the power of incumbency', which in our view is the concept that Limburg (1977:44-53) uses to interpret the prophets under the theme of power, and many other concepts that scholars have applied to penetrate the biblical text. In the last part of our chapter we use one conceptual metaphor that may not be familiar to several biblical studies scholars to exemplify our hermeneutics, namely the social scientific conceptual metaphor of 'social capital'. Briefly we use this conceptual metaphor to derive meaning from Isaiah and a brief conceptual understanding of selected contemporary prophets in Zimbabwe today is attempted.

The Conceptual Metaphor of Social Capital

'Social capital' is a social scientific concept referring to connections between and within social networks; the social connections or relationships or networks are established purposefully and are employed by those wielding the social capital to generate tangible and intangible benefits in the short or long term (for a detailed definition and coverage see Coleman, 1988, 1994; Portes, 1998; Field, 2003). We need, however, to underscore the point raised by Field (2003:1) that the central thesis of the social capital theory is that relationships matter and therefore, social networks are a valuable asset that allow communities to commit themselves to each other through concrete relationships of trust. Once trust is built it becomes a shared value that allows individuals participating in the networks to put at each other's disposal actual or potential resources for purposes of forming a durable network (Bourdieu, 1985:248). From P. Bourdieu's definition social capital can be broken down into two basic components. First, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates and second, the quantity and quality of the resources to which members have access. Sources of social capital are many and varied but the chief ones are: families, communities, firms, civil society, public sector, ethnicity and

gender (www.web.worldbank.org.) The biggest social capital one could have is networks involving political leadership at various levels because when one is involved in such networks easy access to the 'king' would accord them opportunities to influence political decisions that may then precipitate into all other benefits which of course, include economic benefits.

It is reasonable to argue that the concept of social capital is as old as humanity because we cannot envisage a period when human beings ever lived without social networks in which they actually benefited or had potential to benefit by mere participation in the networks. Therefore, hermeneutically, the concept of social capital transcends time, space and culture and hence, it can be used successfully as a conceptual metaphor that bridges the historical and cultural gaps respectively that exist between the horizon of the author of the biblical text and the horizon of the reader of the text.

Isaiah and Social Capital

We give here just an example of how this conceptual metaphor can be used to interpret the prophetic book of Isaiah and how the meaning we derive from there applies to our own context. While the full background of the prophet Isaiah is hazy, we deduce from the superscription that he was the son of Amoz (Isaiah 1:1) and from the fact that he could be seen to go in and out of the king's court we are able to deduce that indeed Isaiah was either a member of the royal family or he was well connected as a member of the social network of the king, Ahaz himself. From the point of view of the conceptual metaphor of social capital we are able to gain a lot of probable information about Isaiah and his family but, what is more important, we are able to conceptualize and rationalize Isaiah's actions.

While we do not know much about Isaiah's father Amoz, we know that he was a Southerner and probably had tribal ties with Ahaz who was himself a Southerner. This we can deduce from the level of knowledge Isaiah had about Ahaz's personal problems that only a member of Ahaz's inner circle would have. When Isaiah approached Ahaz during the Syro – Ephraimite crisis he demonstrated that he was aware of the psychological stress that Ahaz was experiencing due to a number of factors. Ahaz's father Uzziah had died from leprosy; there had been a natu-

ral disaster- the earthquake recorded in Amos 1:1 – and there had been a political disaster – a military invasion organized by Rezin and Pekkah – that saw the death of three key people in Ahaz's government, Ahaz's son, his deputy and his commander-in-chief (2 Chronicles 28:7). Ahaz's refusal to accept Isaiah's advice was probably based on a shared ideological conviction that the inner circle (probably the remnant that Isaiah spoke of) would be eternally protected by Yahweh. Those three disasters were evidence enough that for some reason Ahaz was no longer under such protection. We deduce this from Isaiah's prescribed solution based on signs from Yahweh. So, Isaiah's family was probably closely related to Ahaz, but this alone would not have accorded Isaiah the kind of social capital that he enjoyed. His association with Ahaz was based on a relationship further and perhaps more valuable than familial ties.

If we cannot explain Isaiah's social capital from the perspective of familial ties, it is highly possible that he was a member of an important civic group that belonged to the same social network as Ahaz. This is why Ahaz would accord Isaiah access to the king's court and would even lend him an ear each time he came with advice. Apart from the deep knowledge of Ahaz's personal problems cited above, there is no record to show that any other prophet other than Isaiah visited the King's court as frequently as, and with the kind of message carried by, Isaiah, in the book of Isaiah itself and both in the two books of Kings and Chronicles respectively.

Indeed the social group of prophets and their sons or disciples was a very important civic grouping and a rich source of social capital. Surrounded by the myth and mystical aura associated with the prophetic call, the king was bound to listen and respect such a grouping. Indeed too, since the dividing line between the political leader and the religious leader that time was tissue thin, we have every reason to surmise that Isaiah and Ahaz were part and parcel of the same social network, with Ahaz reaping spiritual benefits from the network and Isaiah and company reaping political and economic benefits and vice versa. One important benefit of social capital of this nature for a prophet is that the prophet's legitimacy may not always be derived from his call but from access to the king and the state machinery surrounding him. During that time kings were known to be guided by gods and either victory or defeat in a battle was attributed to the gods. If the king for whom a prophet was advisor was always victorious in battle and successful in

leadership then logically the prophet would be regarded as legitimate. Thus, the social network was not only developed and made durable from trust, but also from such subtle benefits of the social capital. It becomes understandable when later Ahaz ignored Isaiah's advice that Isaiah became so frustrated that he even abandoned his so-called second ministry, depositing his prophecy among his disciples (Isaiah 8:1).

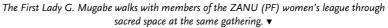## Social Capital and Selected Contemporary Prophets in Zimbabwe

It is not possible to do justice to the history of the Johanne Marange and the broad range of prophets among them in a section of a chapter on many other issues to do with prophecy in an African context. We seek here to understand only a minute aspect of them from the perspective of the conceptual metaphor of social capital.

One very spectacular phenomenon among the apostolic groups in Zimbabwe today is the presence of politicians at important gatherings of the groups. Similarly, the apostolic group members are also conspicuous by their presence at important national events unreservedly clad in their religious regalia. What is intriguing is that under normal circumstances the gatherings are addressed by specific prophets in the apostolic sects' hierarchy who take turns to do so. Ritual observance is strict. There is sacred space within which ordinary apostolic members may not enter, and non-members worse, if they are not in the required regalia and do not actually have bald heads, those sacred places are taboo. Towards the 2013 harmonized elections in Zimbabwe various politicians visited the Johanne Marange apostolic sect in Marange area in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe. The pictures were taken during some visits by some of the politicians. It is interesting to note that contrary to their strict ritual regulations and taboos, the politicians were allowed space into the sect's sacred space. Not only that, the president of Zimbabwe and the first lady and some of female politicians around her were even allowed to put on the religious regalia that is a preserve of members. We know the president to be a Catholic and a staunch one, but to see him with an apostolic sect prophet's rod and staff has to be explained by some other theory other than that he was converted into the Johanne Marange sect. We know the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader Morgan Tsvangirai to be a member of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe and a staunch one, his presence among the

Johanne Marange apostolic prophets warrants explanation. Exactly what is the nature of the relationship between these politicians and the Johanne Marange prophets that we see being depicted in part in the pictures below?
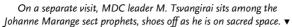

▲ *The President of Zimbabwe R.G. Mugabe walks clad in apostolic sect prophetic regalia.*
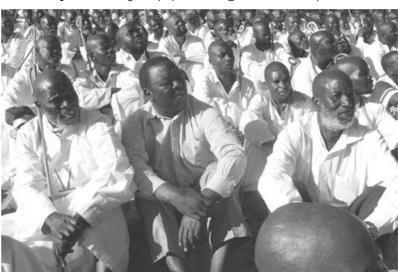
The First Lady G. Mugabe walks with members of the ZANU (PF) women's league through sacred space at the same gathering. ▼

▲ *In typical prophetic posture, Mugabe addresses the Johanne Marange sect members.*

On a separate visit, MDC leader M. Tsvangirai sits among the
Johanne Marange sect prophets, shoes off as he is on sacred space. ▼

Among other paradigms to conceptualize the relationship, we argue that the social capital paradigm that existed between Ahaz and Isaiah and the social group to which they belonged can be a conceptual metaphor to discern what was happening here. Sometimes prophetic activity is much more than just a religious phenomenon. In the case pictured above, we see the apostolic sect prophets breaking their religious rituals and norms, even profaning their sacred space, in order to gain the much needed social capital. It needs to be noted that neither of the politicians, Mugabe or Tsvangirai, forced their way into the sacred space. It is inconceivable that Mugabe was even allowed to address the gathering with the staff of a prophet as if to suggest that he was a prophet himself. As was the case with the Ahaz-Isaiah scenario, the social capital is created and strengthened through legitimating and promises. At these gatherings apostolic sect prophets make crucial prophetic pronouncements either to legitimize the leadership of the politicians or prophecies predicting the perpetuation of the politician's regime. In return the politicians make certain promises to support economically or otherwise, the activities of the apostolic sects. More details can be given but what we have said here suffices to demonstrate the applicability of social capital as a conceptual metaphor and the kind of penetrative fecundity it has in hermeneutics.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have sought to demonstrate that indeed the prophets in the Old Testament can speak to the contemporary reader through the application of appropriate hermeneutics without seeking, as the proponents of the New Hermeneutic did, to assert that the biblical message itself needs to be reformulated in the light of contemporary culture. What we seek to do with our hermeneutics is to ask what the prophetic books mean for the contemporary context, paying attention to what the text meant for its own time. That way we avoid what Limburg (1977:18) refers to as 'the method of the religious quack, who picks a verse here, another there, and then patches together some comments on current events and predictions of future happenings for which one claims biblical authority.' Such is some kind of misuse of the Bible to support practically any opinion and to predict practically any event, which our proposed hermeneutics seeks to overcome.

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