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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JUSTIN UKPONG'S INCULTURATION
HERMENEUTICS

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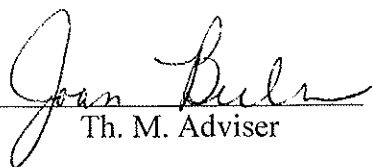
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For Laura

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of the Bible in Africa is a broad and rapidly developing field, and also one that has attracted relatively little attention in the academy. While Justin's Ukpong's theory and method of biblical interpretation has generated significant discussion in the field, this study offers the first broad, critical examination of the internal coherence of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics and of its broader usefulness for the theory and practice of interpreting the Bible in Africa. I begin by describing the assumptions, method, and practice of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics. I proceed by using Schreiter's criteria for contextual theologies to evaluate the coherence of Ukpong's theory, method, and practice of biblical interpretation, and to assess the usefulness of his method and practice. While Ukpong's theory and practice are largely consistent, his model would benefit from explicitly acknowledging and owning its critical exegetical assumptions and practices. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics would also increase its utility if it were to more effectively privilege the commitments and concerns of ordinary readers over those of academic readers.

INTRODUCTION: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JUSTIN UKPONG'S
INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS

**Types of African Interpretation of the Bible: Academic and Popular, Liberation and
Inculturation**

The interpretation and use of the Bible in Africa is a relatively young but also multi-

faceted and rapidly expanding academic field that crosses the boundaries of a number of

disciplinary areas (including biblical studies, hermeneutical studies, missiology, the

social sciences, and systematic theology) in the Western academy.[1] Although a variety of

typologies have been proposed, they generally agree upon a disjunction between

academic and popular readings and upon a division in recent academic readings between

inculturation and liberation approaches.[2] A number of scholars have observed that

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[1] For the two most comprehensive and helpful surveys of the field, see: Philip Jenkins, *The New
Faces of Christianity: Reading the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and
Gerald O. West and Musa Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Boston:
Brill, 2001). For some other helpful bibliographic and overview studies, see: Knut Holter, "The Current
State of Old Testament Scholarship in Africa: Where Are We at the Turn of the Century?" in *Interpreting
the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in
Nairobi, October 1999,* eds. Mary Getui, Knut Holter and Victor Zinkuratire (New York: Peter Lang,
2001), 27-39; idem, "Geographical and Institutional Aspects of Global Old Testament Studies," in *Global
Hermeneutics? Reflections and Consequences*, eds. Knut Holter and Louis C. Jonker (Atlanta: Society of
Biblical Literature, 2010), 3-14; idem, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and
Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (New York: Peter Lang,
2002); Grant LeMarquand, " 'And the Rulers of the Nations Shall Bring Their Treasures into It:' A Review
of Biblical Exegesis in Africa," *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 2 (2006): 243-255.

[2] For some typologies of academic readings, see: David Tuesday Adamo, "Historical Development
of Old Testament Interpretation in Africa," in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective,* ed. David
Tuesday Adamo (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 7-30; Grant LeMarquand, "The Bible
as Specimen, Talisman, and Dragoman in Africa: A Look at Some African Uses of the Psalms and 1
Corinthians 12-14," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22, no. 2 (2012): 189-199; Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The
Bible and African Theologies," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary Getui, Tinyiko
Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton, 2001), 165-176; Chris Ukachukwu Manus,
"Methodological Approaches in Contemporary African Biblical Scholarship: The Case of West Africa," in
African Theology Today, ed. Emmanuel Katongole (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2002), 1-
21; George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective," *Ghana*

scholars tend to pay a great deal more attention to academic African readings than to the methods and practices of popular, or ordinary, African readers. Gifford in particular has expressed the concerns that these academic African readings are often functionally based on Western methods and aimed at Western audiences.[3] In the realm of academic readings, scholars usually portray inculturation and liberation approaches as the two main types of interpretation in Africa. The liberation approach, with its various subsets, is generally regarded as centered in South Africa with some examples in other areas, while the inculturation approach is seen as more typical of sub-Saharan African—between Muslim North Africa and post-apartheid South Africa.[4]

Bulletin of Theology 2 (2007): 91-101; Timothy Palmer, "African Christian Theology: A New Paradigm," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 56 (2012): 4-15; Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 29-53; Victor Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message in Africa: Current Trends," *African Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2004): 41-70.

[3] Paul Gifford, "The Bible in Africa: A Novel Usage in Africa's New Churches," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and Asian Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2008): 203-219; idem, Review of *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trends and Trajectories*, eds. Gerald West and Musa Dube, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no. 3 (2004), 397-401; Knut Holter, "Whose Book Is It, By the Way? An Aspect of Popular Scholarly Strategies for Interpreting the Bible in Africa," in *Mission to the World: Communicating the Gospel in the 21st Century, Essays in Honour of Knud Jorgensen*, eds. Tormod Engelsviken, Ernst Harbakk, Rolv Olsen, and Thor Strandenaes (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 205-214; idem, *Yahweh in Africa: Essays on Africa and the Old Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); John S. Mbiti, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading? The Bible in African Homes, Schools and Churches," *Missionalia* 33, no. 2 (2005): 234-248. For some categorizations of popular readings, see: Gifford, "Bible in Africa," 203-219; Maluleke, "Bible and African Theologies," 174-175; Palmer, "African Christian Theology," 11-14.

[4] Knut Holter, "Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 54-71; Grant LeMarquand, "New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 72-102; Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 11-28; idem, "Models and Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Africa," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 55, no. 4 (1999): 279-295.

Timelines and Typologies of Inculturation Approaches: Comparative, Africa-in-the-Bible, Evaluative, and Inculturation Hermeneutics

Justin S. Ukpong (1940-2011), a Nigerian Roman Catholic scholar, has offered a broadly accepted timeline and typology for academic approaches to the Bible in his article "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions."[5] Although Ukpong's grid would not adequately encompass the work of every African biblical scholar, it does provide a broadly accurate picture of the trajectories of academic interpretation of the Bible in sub-Saharan Africa, and has been used by a number of other scholars.[6] On the inculturation line, Ukpong suggests the types of comparative, Africa-in-the-Bible, evaluative, and inculturation hermeneutics, and puts these types on a loosely representative timeline from the 1930s up to the present, though some of these types run through other periods.[7]

First, Ukpong suggest an initial, re-active phase from the 1930s to the 1970s, during which biblical scholars largely reacted against colonial and missionary denigration of African culture and religion. Early scholars, such as Kwesi Dickson and John Mbiti, offered comparative studies which drew parallels between biblical (especially Old Testament) and African lived experiences and worldviews. A number of years later,

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[5] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 11-28. Justin S. Ukpong was born in 1940 in southeastern Nigeria. He was an ordained Roman Catholic priest, and received his doctorate from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He taught for many years at the Catholic Institute of West African in Port Harcourt, Nigeria and then for a short time at the Veritas University in Abuja, Nigeria. Ukpong died of cancer in 2011. For more information about Ukpong's life, see: Gerald O. West, "Justin Ukpong 1940-2011," accessed December 19, 2013, url: https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/JustinUkpongObituary.pdf.

[6] For some scholars making use of this typology, see: Adamo, "Historical Development," 11-23; Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research*, 11-12; Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 48-56. For a similar typology but with more emphasis on text-focused approaches, see Holter, "Old Testament Scholarship," 54-65.

[7] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 12-25.

Ukpong's dissertation followed a similarly comparative method.[8] As Ukpong and Anum have pointed out, these studies often served to implicitly legitimate Africa and Africans and to provide a felt connection between Africa, the Bible, and contemporary Africans.[9]

In Ukpong's second general phase, from the 1970s to the 1990s, biblical scholarship in African entered a reactive-and-proactive stage, as African scholars moved more toward making use of African cultural and religious resources to interpret the Bible. On one tack, Africa-in-the-Bible studies attempted to show the significant, positive presence of Africa and African in the scriptural texts.[10] More commonly, scholars produced evaluative studies, which compared the biblical and African situations and teachings in order to mutually critique and inform the two.[11] Finally, in what Ukpong

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[8] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 12-13. For examples of the comparative approach, see: Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: SPCK, 1971); Justin S. Ukpong, *Ibibio Sacrifices and Levitical Sacrifices* (Rome: Pontifical Urban University, 1990). Ukpong spends almost the whole of his dissertation drawing out similarities and differences between sacrifices in Leviticus and in the sacrifices of the Ibibio people in Africa; he does very little application of his comparative study to the African context. Ukpong's later presentations of inculturation hermeneutics hardly even mentions his dissertation. Perhaps Ukpong's participation in a study of the oral interpretation of the Bible in Port Harcourt, Nigeria from 1991-1994 played at least equal significance in the later development of his interpretive model. For a report on that study, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings: Report on the Field Research Carried out on Oral Interpretation of the Bible in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Nigeria under the Auspices of the Bible in Africa Project, 1991-1994," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 582-594.

[9] Eric Anum, "Comparative Readings of the Bible in Africa: Some Concerns," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001), 457-473; Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 12-14.

[10] For recent significant examples of Africa-in-the-Bible studies, see: David Tuesday Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006); idem, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998).

[11] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 15-19. For one example of the evaluative approach, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "The Immanuel Christology of Matthew 25:31-46 in African Context," in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John Pobee (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 55-64. In this article, Ukpong basically develops an interpretation in dialogue with other Western-trained scholars and then applies that interpretation to the African context. In his later presentation of inculturation hermeneutics, Ukpong suggested that this earlier method failed to address the concerns of the African

presents as the third and most current stage of African biblical interpretation, from the 1990s up to the present, scholars have become more proactive in seeking to interpret the Bible in ways that fit with the African ethos and traditions and address the interests and needs of African Christians now. In this present stage, Ukpong has—perhaps with a dash of panache—portrayed his inculturation hermeneutics as one of the main streams of academic interpretation of the Bible in African, along with Gerald West's method of contextual Bible studies, or reading with ordinary readers.[12]

Justin Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics: Addressing the Descriptive and Evaluative Gap in the Scholarship

In the development of the field over the last couple decades, Ukpong's voice has certainly been significant in academic discussions about interpreting and using the Bible in Africa. However, while a number of scholars have interacted with Ukpong's proposed model of "inculturation hermeneutics," the analysis and assessment of his work has tended to be occasional and piecemeal. To date, no one has made a broad, critical analysis either of the internal cohesiveness of the elements of Ukpong's method or the coherence between his interpretive practice and his hermeneutical theory. Moreover, while scholars have responded to Ukpong's work on a variety of points, little has been

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context effectively. See: Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3-4.

[12] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 22-25. For some examples of his incorporation of the reading-with approach, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton, 2001), 188-212; idem, "Popular Readings," 582-594. For some examples of West's own work, see: Gerald O. West, "Do Two Walk Together? Walking with the Other through Contextual Bible Study," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2011): 431-449; idem, "Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 21-41; idem, "Reading from This Place (with These People and for This Purpose)," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 103 (1999): 94-100; idem, "Unpacking the Package That Is the Bible in African Biblical Scholarship," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 65-94.

done to draw the disparate strands of those discussions together. This study proposes to address that gap by making a critical examination of Ukpong's model for and practice of inculturation hermeneutics.

I will begin this examination describing the assumptions, method and practice of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics. Once that description is in place, I will shift from explaining Ukpong's model to evaluating it. This evaluation will proceed along two parallel lines. On the first line, I will analyze Ukpong's model for internal consistency and theoretical and practical strength. The key question here will be whether Ukpong's work makes sense on its own terms. That is, is his position self-consistent? Are there points of difficulty or tension in his assumptions, method or practice? Does his reported practice of inculturation match with his theoretical goals? On the second line, I will assess the broader worth of Ukpong's model. The guiding concerns for this assessment will be whether Ukpong's work offers valuable understandings and practices to the various interpretive communities that it seeks to address. That is, does his method and practice of interpretation enable different readers to interpret and use the Bible more fully? Does his model serve to build up the unity of the reading community of faith, or to balkanize it? Does using inculturation hermeneutics enable or hinder the encounter of the texts, traditions, and readers? Of course, what we consider to be consistent and what we regard as valuable depends to some extent upon our own contexts and viewpoints. My own perspective as a North-American, Protestant (specifically Reformed) Christian, as well as my experience of working as a missionary in Nigeria, will naturally shape my analysis and assessment of Ukpong's work. However, whether others agree with my conclusions or not, this paper's attempt to describe Ukpong's view both critically and

sympathetically, as well as to engage with the broader scholarship on his work, may at least serve to move the conversation forward.

Since the academic dialogue around Ukpong's work is widely disparate, and in some cases rather idiosyncratic, I will adapt Robert Schreiter's criteria for evaluating local theologies to provide a rubric for analyzing and assessing Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics.[13] While Schreiter's criteria are neither authoritative nor exhaustive, they do provide a useful means to evaluate the viability of a particular contextual theology. These criteria—a particular position's cohesiveness, usefulness in worship, relationship to praxis, ability to receive judgment from other theologies, and strength to challenge other theologies—provide a helpful grid to test both the internal consistency and broader viability of Ukpong's model for interpreting the Bible in Africa. Of course, since Schreiter's categories focus upon a full-fledged theology unfolding with a church community, I will need to nuance his criteria somewhat so that they apply more precisely to the development of a contextual hermeneutical model.

Ultimately, my analysis of Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics will show that his position is by and large consistent, but my examination will also reveal that his model fails to provide a fully satisfactory or useful hermeneutic for the African context. While Ukpong's model does offer valuable insights at a number of points, this study, in conjunction with the broader scholarly discussion and in light of certain criteria for a contextual hermeneutic, will indicate that the value of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics would increase significantly if it were to more openly recognize its exegetical, textually-focused elements and more clearly serve the interests of ordinary reading communities.

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[13] Robert. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 117-121.

Chapter One: The Framework, Procedure, and Practice of Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics

In my first chapter, I will draw upon a number of Ukpong's published pieces to describe the framework, procedure, elements and actual practice of his model. For the theoretical presentation of his model, I will focus mainly upon his seminal article "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," in which he first proposed the model of inculturation hermeneutics.[14] I will also draw upon other articles in which Ukpong further explained the concerns and method of inculturation hermeneutics.[15] In addition to describing his hermeneutical theory, I will also explore Ukpong's actual interpretive practice. Here, I will focus upon his interpretations of the parable of the shrewd manager and the parable of the talents.[16] While Ukpong published a number of other articles in which he practiced inculturation hermeneutics, these two provide a suitable frame and sample as they are the first and last published examples of Ukpong practicing his interpretive method.[17] This chapter's description of Ukpong's theory and

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[14] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 3-14.

[15] For other works where Ukpong expands upon his model, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "Can African Old Testament Scholarship Escape the Historical Critical Approach?" *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* 7 (1999), accessed December 19, 2013, url: http://www.mhs.no/aotp?10#Can%20African%20Old%20Testament; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds. Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 17-32; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities," *Neotestamentica* 35, nos. 1-2 (2001): 147-167; idem, "Popular Readings," 582-594; idem, "Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 9-39; idem, "Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology," *Mission Studies* 16, no. 2 (1999): 100-124.

[16] Justin S. Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 189-210; idem, "The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30): Commendation or Critique of Exploitation?: A Social-historical and Theological Reading," *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 1 (2012): 190-207.

[17] For other examples of interpretive practice, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 193-212; idem, "Environmental Degradation in Nigeria and the Christian Theology of Creation," *African Journal of*

practice of inculturation hermeneutics will lay the foundation for an analysis and
assessment of his model.

Chapter Two: The Cohesiveness of Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics and Its Ability to Build Upon, Critique, and Receive Judgment from Other Interpretive Models

Once the descriptive foundation is in place, my second chapter will transition to
evaluating Ukpong's position. In this section, I will begin by describing Schreiter's five
criteria for evaluating contextual theologies as well as how I will apply those criteria to
Ukpong's contextual hermeneutical models. I will then employ Schreiter's first criteria—
the cohesiveness of a particular position—to consider whether Ukpong's theory is
internally self-consistent, especially with regard to how he makes use of historical-critical
methods within a contextual hermeneutical model. After that, I will evaluate whether
inculturation hermeneutics has the ability to relate meaningfully with other positions in a
give and take of affirmation and criticism. On that point, critical examination indicates
that inculturation hermeneutics builds upon some other interpretive models, has the
wherewithal to challenge other viewpoints, and also could effectively incorporate
responses from other viewpoints. Among scholars who engage Ukpong's position
productively, the consensus appears to be that Ukpong's model has significant value in
some respects, but in order to be more broadly useful, it requires some modification
either in framework or procedure to resolve the tension between its contextual and critical
concerns. The best way forward would appear to be for inculturation hermeneutics to

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Biblical Studies 20, no. 1 (2004): 77-91; idem, "Leprosy: Untouchables of the Gospel and of Today,"
in *Return of the Plague*, eds. Jose Oscar Beozzo and Virgil Elizondo (London: SCM Press, 1997), 63-70;
idem, "Luke," in *Global Bible Commentary,* ed. Daniel Patte (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2004), 385-394;
idem, "The Story of Jesus' Birth (Luke 1-2): An African Reading," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds.
Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 59-70; idem, "Tribute to Caesar,
Mark 12:13-17 (Mt 22:15-22; Lk 20:20-26)," *Neotestamentica* 33, no. 2 (1999): 433-444.

acknowledge and make explicit its own exegetical, text-based components as a helpful, valid part of the interpretive process. This move would not only resolve the internal tension of the model but also facilitate its broader utility for biblical interpretation.[18]

Chapter Three: The Practice and Usefulness of Inculturation Hermeneutics

In my third chapter, I will evaluate how well the practice of inculturation hermeneutics matches with its theory, and also evaluate its potential utility for ordinary readers in the African context. While some have criticized Ukpong on this point, his theory and practice actually do align fairly closely, and his practice of inculturation hermeneutics essentially fulfills his goals for it. However, Ukpong's model functionally privileges the concerns and interests of academics over ordinary readers. This generates a number of problems. In this schema, academic and ordinary readers may find it difficult to do interpretation in ways that are mutually open and enriching. Ukpong's approach also does not adequately address the real-life, survival concerns of many ordinary African readers, nor does it respect or work well with those readers' often dogmatic and traditional understandings of the Bible. Finally, the model of inculturation hermeneutics requires the involvement of scholars trained in Western academic readers, and this ultimately promotes a new dependency and hegemony in the reading process and undercuts the priority the method claims to place upon ordinary readers and their concerns. Ukpong's position would be

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[18] Hans de Wit, "Intercultural Bible Reading and Hermeneutics," in *Intercultural Readings of the Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 477-492; Holter, *Old Testament Research*, 97-98; Chris Ukachukwu Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003); Teresa Okure, "I Will Open My Mouth in Parables:' A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics," *New Testament Studies* 46, no. 3 (2000): 445-463; Timothy Palmer, "Dividing the Word Correctly: An Evaluation of Exegetical Models," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 50 (2008): 4-13; Daniel Patte, "Biblical Scholars at the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings: A Response," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 263-276; Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 55-70.

strengthened if his procedure and practice were to relativize academic interests and

privilege ordinary readers and prioritize their concerns more effectively. [19]

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[19] Eric Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings of the Bible in Africa," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton, 2001), 104-122; idem, "Ye Ma Wo Mo! African Hermeneuts, You have Spoken at Last: Reflections on *Semeia* 73 (1996)," in *Reading Other-wise*, ed. Gerald O. West (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 7-18; Andrew Curtis, "An Encounter with Ordinary Real Readers Reading the Gospels: Implications for Mission," in *To Cast Fire upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multicultural Context*, ed Teresa Okure (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster, 2000), 126-147; Bernard C. Lategan, "Scholar and Ordinary Reader—More Than a Simple Interface," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 243-255; Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, *Triple Heritage: Gospels in Intercultural Mediations* (Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo: Ceril, 2005); John Riches, "Interpreting the Bible in African Contexts: Glasgow Consultation," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 181-188; Jan G. van der Watt, "A Hermeneutics of Relevance: Reading the Bible in Dialogue in African Contexts," in *Miracles and Imagery in Luke and John*, eds. J. Verheyden, G. Van Belle, Jan G. van der Watt (Dudley, Mass: Peeters, 2008), 237-255.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FRAMEWORK, PROCEDURE AND PRACTICE OF
INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS

Describing Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics

In this chapter, I will describe the framework, method and practice of Ukpong's

inculturation hermeneutics to provide the necessary foundation upon which to construct

my evaluation of his model. I will organize my discussion around Ukpong's 1995 article,

"Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," in which he

first laid out the framework and procedure for his inculturation hermeneutics. I will also

bring in a number of other articles at points where they further develop Ukpong's initial

position. After describing the assumptions and methods of Ukpong's position, I will

survey his actual interpretive practice in two articles, "The Parable of the Shrewd

Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Hermeneutics" and "The Parable of

the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30): Commendation or Critique of Exploitation?: A Socio-

historical and Theological Reading."

The Framework and Procedure of Inculturation Hermeneutics

"Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics"

For some time prior to proposing inculturation hermeneutics, Ukpong participated in the

worldwide—though especially Roman Catholic and Third-World—discussions regarding

contextual/inculturation/Third-World theologies and their methodologies.[1] In 1994,

Ukpong laid out the contours of his "inculturation theology" as a particular form of

contextual theology that would make the African context the subject of interpretation and

would seek to address the religious and social experience and concerns of Africa.[2] A year

later, he published "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and

Hermeneutics," which applied that general theory specifically to the hermeneutical

realm.[3] Ukpong begins this article by expressing the concern that traditional theological

models have not only offered answers to questions that people in Africa were not asking

but also have failed to answer many pressing questions from the African context.[4] The

traditional models have been intellectualist rather than existential, pragmatic and

contextual.[5] He expresses the need for a new reading method to put the questions of

African readers at the forefront of academic biblical interpretation and then to answer

those questions from an African perspective, and he proposes his model of "inculturation

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[1] For some of his works in this broad arena, see: Justin S. Ukpong, "A Critical Review of the *Lineamenta*," in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives,* ed. Maura Browne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 32-42; idem, "Inculturation and Evangelization: Biblical Foundations for Inculturation," *Vidyajyoti* 58, no 5 (1994): 298-307; idem, "What Is Contextualization?" *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 43, no. 3 (1987): 161-68.

[2] Justin S. Ukpong, "Towards a Renewed Approach to Inculturation Theology, "*Journal of Inculturation Theology* 1 (1994): 16-17. Torres and Fabella's methodology for Third-World theologies provides some of the framework for Ukpong's construction. See: Sergio Torres and Virgina Fabella, eds., *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History: Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar es Salaam, August 5-12, 1976* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978): 269-271. For some discussion of Ukpong's appropriation of this method, see: Ukpong, "Towards a Holistic Approach," 108-120.

[3] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 4.

[4] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 4.

[5] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 17.

hermeneutics" to address that need.[6] Ukpong portrays this as an approach "which seeks to make the African, and for that matter any socio-cultural context the *subject* of interpretation."[7] Ukpong distinguishes inculturation hermeneutics, first, from approaches that develop interpretations based on Western assumptions and then apply them to Africa and, second, from approaches that simplistically read the African context into the biblical text. In Ukpong's view, making a particular socio-cultural context the subject of interpretation requires that the lived experience and worldview of that culture be allowed to form the conceptual framework, the methodology, and the interpreter's input in the process of hermeneutics.[8]

The Interpreter (and the Interjection of the Ordinary Reader)

Ukpong begins to unpack the meaning of inculturation hermeneutics by laying out its view of the interpreter, context, text, conceptual framework, and procedure for interpreting the biblical text in the African context. Ukpong situates his understanding of the interpreter within Barton's classification of modern critical biblical approaches. Barton divides modern criticism into types that focus on the biblical texts, on the historical events behind the text, on the author of the text, or on the reader of the text.[9] Ukpong places his model into this final category, since it focuses primarily upon the interpreter of the biblical texts. This seems to bring inculturation hermeneutics under the

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[6] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 4; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 32; idem, "Reading the Bible," 20.

[7] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 5.

[8] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 5; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 18.

[9] John Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984): 19-35. Barton builds his classification of biblical criticism on Abram's classification of literary theories. For Abram's taxonomy, see: M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

umbrella of reader-response theories of interpretation. However, Ukpong indicates that

reader-response views are really just a subset of the literary-critical approach, and his

model does not fit in that category.[10] Even though his model focuses upon the interpreter,

he situates his inculturation hermeneutics within the Third-World contextual approach.

This approach is most commonly identified with liberation theology, but does have a

number of other strands within it. Ukpong considers the historical-critical, literary, and

even reader-response approaches to be focused on "the communicative function of

language," while this contextual approach is instead focused on "the performative

function of language."[11] This approach does not do away with the text and its context, but

its primary interest lies in the context of the interpreter and in how the text exerts power

in that context.[12] Thus, Ukpong emphasizes that his model focuses on the "reader-in-

context." The community and the context of readers, not the response of a single reader

in isolation, provide the foundation for interpretation. Interpreters of the Bible may be

indigenes or aliens, but they must have experiences and commitments that give them with

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[10] Ukpong bases this assertion on Tompkins' argument that, while New-Critical literary theory and reader-response theories locate meaning in different places (text and reader, respectively), they both assume that the point of critical reading is to specify where meaning occurs, and so they are fundamentally similar. This argument provides rather weak support for a broad, close identification of reader-response and literary-critical approaches, but Ukpong apparently adopts it in order to distance his own position from hermeneutical methods arising from the Western academy. See: Jane P. Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, eds. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 201-202.

[11] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148.

[12] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148-151. For some of the sources Ukpong uses to construct his position, see: Randall Bailey, "The Danger of Ignoring One's Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text," in *The Postcolonial Bible,* ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 1998), 67-90; David J.A. Clines, "Possibilities and Priorities of Biblical Interpretation in an International Perspective" *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (1993): 67-87; Jacques Derrida, "Living On," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. G.H. Hartman (New York: Seabury, 1979), 75-176; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Tompkins, "The Reader in History," 201-231; Gale A. Yee, "The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 109-118.

an insider's understanding of the context. Finally, all readers are conditioned by various factors, which must be analyzed, controlled, and used in the interpretive process.[13]

Over time, Ukpong came to focus more specifically upon the interpretive roles of academic and ordinary readers of the Bible. Ukpong draws this terminology from the reading-with methodology developed by Gerald West in South Africa. In this methodology, scholars trained in the methods of Western biblical studies study Bible passages together with ordinary readers, who are understood to be the non-elite, poor and underprivileged. The goal of this reading-with process is to have the academic and ordinary readers together produce a critical reading of the biblical text.[14] In connection with this, Ukpong declines to view the Bible as simply a literary "classic" (which would privilege academic readers) or as a "sacred text" (which would privilege official churchly readers); rather, he portrays it as a "sacred classic," reflecting the experiences and reflections of ordinary people (which provides reason to privilege contemporary ordinary readers who have had similar experiences). This leads Ukpong to insist that ordinary readers ought to have "epistemological privilege" in the process of interpreting the Bible, and he indicates that academic readers can effectively grant that privilege to ordinary readers by the practice of reading with them.[15] In this practice, scholars refrain from directing the process or teaching in favor of facilitating an interpretive event. Accordingly, academic readers participate with a community of ordinary readers in an "interactive process that leads to the community producing a critical meaning of the

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[13] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 5.

[14] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 189-190; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 20; idem, "Reading the Bible," 22-23. For some presentations of West's model, see: West, "Reading the Bible Differently," 21-41; idem, "Do Two Walk Together," 431-449.

[15] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 161.

text."[16] For Ukpong, this critical meaning of the text needs to incorporate an understanding of the socio-historical context of the text (unearthed through the use of anthropological and sociological methods) as well as a critique of past and present ideologies of power.[17]

However, while he does assign "interpretive priority" to the ordinary reader, Ukpong also to some extent relativizes that priority within the academy. In part, he does this by affirming the worth of popular interpretation in terms of its value to the academy, rather than portraying it as valuable in its own right.[18] More directly, when Ukpong discusses popular readings of the Bible, he portrays ordinary readers as naïve and dogmatic and suggests that academic readings need to overcome the "dogmatic stance" of ordinary readers.[19] As he puts it, "ordinary readers must be helped to overcome a naïve and dogmatic attitude to the bible, and to approach the bible with a critical mind."[20] In Ukpong's model, while the ideal interpreter functions with a community of ordinary and academic readers working together to produce a meaning for the text in their context, it is crucial that the interpretive community ultimately produce a *critical* meaning—one that builds upon historical-sociological insights and promotes liberation.

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[16] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 21.

[17] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 19-22.

[18] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 161.

[19] Ukpong, "Popular Readings," 587, 590.

[20] Ukpong, "Popular Readings," 590.

The Context and the Text

Inculturation hermeneutics insists that interpretation be "*consciously* done from the perspective of a particular context," its total situation, and its worldview.[21] Moreover, this model insists that all readings—regardless of their espoused hermeneutic or theory—are in fact contextually formed. Thus, all readings are particular to their context and can appropriate only part of the meanings of the text, and while different contextual readings can speak to each other, any claim to a universal meaning is suspicious and untenable.[22] Following from this, the biblical texts themselves are to be seen as culturally conditioned. This means that neither the texts nor any reading of them can ever be "acultural," and so every reading and text must be unpacked in terms of their contexts.[23] Ukpong aims interpretation at developing "the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context," and insists that texts must be interpreted holistically, with reference to both religious and secular issues.[24] As part of that, he proposes a number of axes along which the interpretive process rotates; these include the inner logic or structure of the text, its literary context, its historical context, and the context of the contemporary interpreter. This last axis is especially significant for Ukpong, as he views the text as a living reality speaking in the contemporary context rather than as an "archaeological specimen."[25]

The Conceptual Framework: Cultural Assumptions

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[21] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 6. Source's italics.

[22] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 6; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 27.

[23] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 6; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148-151.

[24] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 6-7; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 29; idem, "Towards a Holistic Approach," 107-108.

[25] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 7.

Following his discussion of the interpreter, context, and text, Ukpong expounds upon the

conceptual framework of inculturation hermeneutics.[26] He presents the historical-critical

method, literary criticism and liberation hermeneutics as three examples of exegetical

conceptual frameworks for biblical interpretation, but goes on to present inculturation

hermeneutics as a framework that more satisfactorily address the concerns of African

Christians.[27] He defines an exegetical framework as a set of "theoretical assumptions

which frame the understanding of exegesis, its operation, and condition the exegete in

his/her activity."[28] Conceptual frameworks, or frames of references depend upon the

basic assumptions and collective experiences of their particular cultures, and different

frameworks lead to particular reading methods, which in turn are implemented in specific

types of reading practice. [29] Conceptual frameworks can make use of tools from other

frames of reference, but the use of these tools will have to be re-defined to fit their new

framework. Ukpong decries the uncritical use of Western interpretive methods, but he

insists that Western academic tools ought to be "used critically and made to function

within the African conceptual frame of reference."[30] He presents four basic cultural

assumptions of African worldviews that shape the framework of his inculturation

hermeneutics. The first assumption is the basic unity, rather than dualism, of reality in its

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[26] Ukpong uses the terms "conceptual framework," "exegetical framework," and "exegetical conceptual framework" interchangeably.

[27] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 7. Ukpong presents conceptual frameworks along the lines of Kuhnian paradigms—useful in particular situations but vulnerable to conceptual or situational shifts. See: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[28] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 8.

[29] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 8.

[30] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 23-24.

visible and invisible aspects, and the second is that God created the world and that God, humanity and the cosmos exist in a web of inter-connected relationships among the three. Third, this framework assumes that individuals exist fundamentally within the structure of the community, and its final assumption, or perhaps more precisely feature, is a preference for the concrete and practical over the abstract and theoretical.[31]

<p style="text-align:center">The Conceptual Framework: Methodological Presuppositions</p>

At this point, Ukpong presents two methodological presuppositions for inculturation hermeneutics, the first dealing with the nature of the Bible and the second with the goal of biblical interpretation. Again, in inculturation hermeneutics, the Bible is a "sacred classic," a book for Christian devotion and practice as well as a significant, ancient text.[32] Ukpong is aware of the cultural and temporal differences between the ancient text and the contemporary context. He wants interpretative efforts to deal with the Bible as both a book of the faith and a literary artifact—but always with the aim of developing a meaning for the present context. The fact that the Bible is an ancient text requires that the interpreter makes use of academic, critical methods to understand the text's historical context, but these methods are to serve merely as tools that enable the interpreter to discern the meaning of the text for today.[33]

Ukpong expands upon this point to insist upon the use of Western academic methods in the interpretation of the Bible in Africa for three reasons: because post-

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[31] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 8-9.

[32] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 9.

[33] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 10.

Enlightenment readers can no longer offer uncritical readings to the academy,[34] because historical-critical readings can undercut abuses of the biblical text (such as it being used to support apartheid), and most significantly, because a comparison between the African context and the biblical context can only proceed on the basis of a "credible" analysis of the text's original context.[35] Ukpong's last point here discloses his interpretive method's dependence upon finding parallels between the text's original historical context and its contemporary interpretive context, and he posits certain Western academic methods as the tool necessary to provide a basis for drawing those parallels. However, he does not believe that classical historical-critical methods can serve as effective tools in the African context. He advocates for the use of more recent critical approaches that employ anthropological and sociological methods, and he believes that these methods provide the necessary tools for understanding the cultural and social context of the text. Since Ukpong's method ultimately aims to draw a comparison between the contemporary cultural-economic-religious-social context and that of the text, he prefers critical methods that unearth the socio-cultural context of the text.[36]

Still, in the perspective of inculturation hermeneutics, whatever meaning an interpreter find in the text can be only one among many possible meanings. The goal of interpretation is not to find the one correct meaning of the text, but rather to construct a meaning from the text for the present context. Ukpong insists that "The meaning of a text in not seen as hidden in the past history of the text. Rather it is seen as a function of the

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[34] Ukpong does not exactly define what he means here by "post-Enlightenment," but presumably he intends to say that the contemporary academy cannot return to the uncritical ('pre-critical' would be a more nuanced term) interpretive strategies of pre-Enlightenment readings.

[35] Ukpong, "Can African."

[36] Ukpong, "Can African;" idem, "Towards a Holistic Approach," 108.

interaction of the contemporary context with the text and its context."[37] He rejects any

sharp distinction between exegesis, the process of recovering the original meaning of the

text, and hermeneutics, the process of applying the text's original meaning to the present

context.[38] Rather than two separate processes of exegesis and hermeneutics, interpretation

involves only "one process of a reader who is critically aware of his/her context

interacting with the text analysed in its context."[39] Ukpong insists that "what texts have is

not actual definitive meanings but potential meanings or meaning potentials."[40]

Readers—working with their own biases and constructs—actualize potential meanings

along the lines of their own perspectives and context. The biblical text is

"plurivalent…capable of yielding many different but valid meanings depending on the

point of departure of reading it."[41] Ukpong's view is that the interaction of the

interpreters, their context, the text, and its context serves to produce a contextual

meaning: "Meaning is understood as *produced* in the process of a *community* of ordinary

readers within their *sociocultural context* reading the *text* against its *sociohistorical*

context."[42] This approach has much in common with reader-response theories, but its

emphasis on the community and context's roles in generating meaning distinguishes it

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[37] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 10.

[38] Ukpong, "Reading the Bible," 18. Ukpong does not define exactly which activities would count as exegesis and which as hermeneutics. Presumably under exegesis he would include any activity focused on the text and its context—everything from syntactical analysis to cultural-historical reconstructions. Under hermeneutics he might include any activity focused on interpreters and their context.

[39] Ukpong, Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 24.

[40] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 156-157.

[41] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 10; idem, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 190.

[42] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 27-28. Source's italics.

from theories that emphasize the individual reader's construction of meaning from the text.

For Ukpong, the interpreter's construction of meaning of a text is not entirely boundless but must be controlled by the meaning of the entire Bible as well as by basic principles such as God's creative and sustaining work and by love for God and neighbor.[43] Elsewhere, he offers as basic biblical values "love and respect for others, community building, justice and inclusiveness."[44] At one point, Ukpong even speaks of "dynamics built into a text for guiding interpretation," which "can function in different contexts to produce different but valid interpretations."[45] Texts do exercise loose control over the production of interpretive meanings, but the cultures and contexts of different readings do much more to shape and define the production of valid meanings. Although the Bible and broader theological concerns do provide some boundaries for right or wrong readings, the meanings of the texts come into being in dialogue with and in the situation of particular contexts.[46]

<div align="center">The Procedure of Inculturation Hermeneutics</div>

Ukpong lays out five steps for inculturation hermeneutics' interpretive procedure:

1. Identify a situation in the interpreter's context that dynamically corresponds to the text's context

2. Analyze the interpreter's context to provide a background for interpreting the text

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[43] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 10.

[44] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 191-192; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 151.

[45] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 190.

[46] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 10; idem, "Bible Reading," 192.

3. Analyze the socio-cultural context of the text

4. Analyze the text in light of the contemporary context

5. Formulate a program of action based upon the analysis in the previous steps

Throughout his description of inculturation hermeneutics' interpretive procedure, Ukpong applies his method to the two particular texts of the parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1-13 and in much less detail to the story of the woman with the flow of blood in Luke 8:40-56. The first step in Ukpong's procedure is to identify an aspect of the interpreter's context that has some dynamic correspondence to the text's historical context. At this point, the contexts of the interpreter and text need to be brought into dialogue to find a point of dynamic equivalence or approximation upon which to proceed. This is accomplished specifically through historical research into the background of the text to find a social, political, economic, or religious situation that reflects the life situation of the interpreter. Ukpong considers the background of the parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16 to provide a historical context of exploitation and usury that can be paralleled to exploitative situations in the present, and he also draws a parallel between the social circumstances of the women in Luke 8 with those of contemporary African women suffering from similar conditions.[47]

Inculturation hermeneutics' second step analyzes the interpreter's context to provide the background for interpreting the text. This contextual analysis develops through a number of levels: phenomenological, socio-anthropological, historical, social, and religious. Phenomenological analysis seeks to clarify the specific contextual issues that will be addressed in a given reading. For example, with regard to the parable of the shrewd manager, Ukpong notes parallels between the biblical text and the contemporary

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[47] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 11.

Nigerian example of middleman traders who buy farmers' produce at very low prices and charge very high interest on farming loans, and between the woman with the flow of blood and the plight of those suffering from similarly incurable sicknesses in the African context. Socio-anthropological analysis considers the issues in light of the people's worldview. On this point, Ukpong suggests that the traditional African worldview sees goods as a divine gift to the community and so considers the material exploitation in the parable of the shrewd manager fundamentally unacceptable. He also suggests a correspondence between the woman's struggles in Luke 8 and barren or ailing women in African communities. Historical analysis discerns how the issue in question came into being. In Ukpong's examples, historical analysis considers how exploitative practices came to exist in African society in the face of traditional worldview's stance against such practices, but he does not consider the case of the women with the flow of blood to require historical analysis. The analysis of social dynamics provides insight into how the issue in question relates to various aspects of society, especially the economic and political. In Ukpong's examples, this analysis would consider how exploitation and the poor treatment of people with diseases is managed and perpetuated by society in its various aspects. Finally, religious analysis considers the specifically religious aspects of the issue in the life of the people in the context—exploring, for example, how exploitation and ailments would affect people in the religious sphere.[48]

The third step in Ukpong's interpretive procedure is to analyze the context of the text, with the goal of providing a clear focus for interpretation. This historical analysis employs anthropological and sociological lenses to get at the cultural, economic, and social situation of the text. In Ukpong's examples, analyzing the economic and social

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[48] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 11-12.

conditions of Jesus' time can provide evidence to suggest that the manager's altering the notes of debt owed to his master may have been a proper exercise of his authority rather than a set of fraudulent acts, while the woman with the flow of blood would have been considered unclean and so would have been excluded from participation in worship.[49]

In the fourth interpretive step, the interpreter analyzes the text in light of the contemporary context. This step has a number of components, among them a critical consideration of current interpretations of the text in question, a detailed textual analysis, and a placement of the text within its immediate or broader literary context. The goal is to pose questions from the interpreter's context in order to discern the dynamic meaning of the text in that particular interpretive time and place. This sort of analysis would discern that the parable of the shrewd manager is a critique of the rich man, or master, in the parable, who had made his living by exploiting peasant farmers. The parable, then, also serves as a critique of present-day traders in the African context who exploit peasant farmers. Following from this, the shrewd manager's actions provide economic relief to the exploited farmers, and Christians now ought to act similarly to work against exploitation with whatever means they have at hand. While Ukpong sees the parable of the shrewd manager leading Christians to act against contemporary exploitation, he sees the story of the woman with the flow of blood directing Christians to triumph over hopeless situations by acting in faithful commitment to Jesus.[50] The fifth procedural step

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[49] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 12.

[50] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 12.

is to bring together the results of one's interpretive work to actualize the meaning of the text in the contemporary interpretive context.[51]

In summary, inculturation hermeneutics begins by identifying some point of correspondence between the interpreter's and text's contexts and by analyzing the interpreter's context, then proceeds by analyzing the text's historical context and interpreting the text in light of the interpreter's context, and finally concludes by calling for action in the contemporary world. Broadly speaking, Ukpong's method begins with the social context of the interpreter, moves to the historical context of the text, and then returns to the contemporary social context. Ukpong does indicate that interpreters may combine some of the steps or take them in a different order, if they believe that doing so would enable them to deal with the texts more effectively. However, he insists that an analysis of the interpretive context form and direct the rest of the interpretive process. At the end of this seminal article, Ukpong indicates that the methodology of inculturation hermeneutics succeeds in addressing contemporary interpretive concerns by providing an approach to biblical interpretation from a different cultural perspective and by using an inter-disciplinary methodology in biblical interpretation.[52]

The Practice of Inculturation Hermeneutics

Examples of Ukpong's Interpretive Practice

Shortly after publishing his "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes,", Ukpong offered a more detailed interpretation of the parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1-13, and in 1997, he implicitly employed the procedure of inculturation hermeneutics to deal with the

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[51] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 12.

[52] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 13.

topic of leprosy in the Bible.[53] Over the next few years, he more explicitly employed his

method to interpret the texts in the Synoptic Gospels regarding the tribute to Caesar

(1999), the parable of the vineyard in Luke (2001), the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 1-2

(2002), and a general interpretation of the Gospel of Luke (2004).[54] In 2004, he also

offered a meditation on environmental concerns in which he interpreted Genesis 1-2, and

in 2012, a final article was published in which Ukpong interpreted the Parable of the

Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 according to the method of inculturation hermeneutics.[55]

Although a few scholars have interacted with one or another of Ukpong's interpretative

works, most commonly his treatment of the parable of the shrewd manager, they have

generally focused upon assessing the utility of his interpretation for their own schemas

rather than upon evaluating how Ukpong's practice relates to his own stated goals and

procedures for inculturation hermeneutics.[56] With the goal of addressing that evaluative

gap in the scholarship in the next chapter, this section will provide a window into

Ukpong's interpretive practice by examining the two articles in which he interprets the

parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1-13 and the parable of the talents in Matthew

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[53] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 192-210; idem, "Leprosy," 63-70.

[54] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 193-212; idem, "Luke," 385-394; idem, "Story of Jesus' Birth," 59-70; idem, "Tribute to Caesar," 433-444. Ukpong's treatment of the story of Jesus' birth is in a volume that also includes hermeneutical reflections and interpretive examples from scholars in Asia and Latin America. See: Elsa Tamez, "Reading the Bible under a Sky without Stars," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds. Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 3-16; idem, "A Star Illuminates the Darkness," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds. Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 53-58; Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 17-32; Seiichi Yagi, "Ego and Self in the New Testament and Zen," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds. Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 33-51; idem, "Mary and Maya," in *The Bible in a World Context*, eds. Water Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 71-76.

[55] Ukpong, "Environmental Degradation," 77-91.

[56] Eric Anum, "The Reconstruction of Forms of African Theology: Towards Effective Biblical Interpretation" (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1999), 61-64; Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Rise of Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64, no. 3 (2008): 1347-1364; Chris Ukachukwu Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), 139-151; Palmer, "Dividing the Word Correctly," 12.

25:14-30. While working with these two articles will necessarily provide only a

representative picture of Ukpong's interpretive practice, it will provide a meaningful

sample for subsequent chapters' evaluation of the internal consistency of Ukpong's

theory and practice.

<p style="text-align:center">The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13)</p>

Ukpong's study of the parable of the shrewd manager follows the same basic interpretive

trajectory as his earlier treatment of the text in "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes,"

but the later article offers a much more in-depth example of his method. Ukpong begins

by again offering the African situation of poor farmers and exploitative middle-men

traders as the context of interpretation.[57] Following that, Ukpong discusses and rejects a

number of contemporary academic interpretations of the parable. First, he considers the

interpretation that the manager was fraudulent but still clever and prudent, either in his

reaction to a crisis or in his use of money, but he rejects this interpretation because it

identifies with the rich man in the parable.[58] Secondly, the interpretation that the manager

was foregoing his own fees but collecting his master's debt in full is untenable because it

fails to critique the rich man and the crisis his actions bring about.[59] Finally, the

interpretation that connects this parable to Luke 15 and focuses upon the rich man's

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[57] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 192-193. Ukpong does not cite any sources for his description of the situation, though regardless of what his sources are, Ukpong is bringing up a real-life issue in the African context.

[58] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 193-194. For this interpretation, Ukpong cites: Richard H. Hiers, "Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9)," *Journal of The American Academy Of Religion* 38, no. 1 (1970): 34; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963), 46-48; Thomas Walter Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 292; Francis E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the Point of the 'Unjust Steward'?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83, no. 3 (1983): 294.

[59] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 194-195. For this view, Ukpong cites: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk. 16:1-13)," in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament,* ed. Joseph A. Fitzmyer (Atlanta: Scholars, 1974), 177-178.

forgiveness of the manager's actions is inadequate because it depends upon a speculative

connection to the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 and, once again, because it

absolves the rich man of any wrong-doing.[60] Next, literary analysis sets the parable

within the broad context of Luke 9:51-19:57 and, in dialogue with other scholars,

develops a variety of literary points that place the focus in this text upon themes of wealth

and care for the poor. The article places the parable of the shrewd manager in line with

the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21 and the rich man and Lazarus in Luke

16:19-31, rather than in line with the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31.

Lining up the parable of the shrewd manager with other parables dealing with rich men

supports the argument that this parable is concerned primarily with exploitation and the

use of riches, and so Ukpong concludes that the rich man in the parable does not

represent God or Jesus. Instead, the parable of the shrewd manager is critique of the rich

man's exploitative practices and a commendation of the manager's ingenuity.[61]

Ukpong's social-historical analysis focuses upon usurious practices in first-

century Palestine, especially the practices of hiring managers to run large estates and

charging very high interest rates on agricultural loans. He pays special attention to the

practice of writing bonds that included only the total amount to be repaid, rather than

separating loans' principal and interest, as this allowed managers to charge exorbitant

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[60] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 195. Here, Ukpong cites: John L. Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk. 16:1-13," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1975): 225-227.

[61] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 196-201. In this section, Ukpong primarily agrees with Fitzmeyer over against Jeremias. See: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:l-8a)," in *The Gospel According to Luke 10-24* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1096-1097; idem, "Story of the Dishonest Manager," 172-173; Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus,* 46-48.

interest without being called to account for usury.[62] Ukpong uses this view of the

historical context to dismiss two explanations for the manager's reduction of the amounts

to be repaid on the loans owed his master—one that the manager was simply defrauding

the master who was about to fire him, and another that the manager was foregoing the

fees he was allowed to collect for himself and simply collecting the amount to be paid to

his master. He instead suggests the view that the manager was acting within his authority

to reduce the interest that would be paid to his master. Ukpong then portrays this as an

'unjust' action only in the sense that it critiques the existing 'justice' of an exploitative

economic system in which the poor had to pay excessive, burdensome interest to the

rich.[63]

As Ukpong brings his interpretive work back to the contemporary African

context, he portrays the rich man in the parable as a wealthy absentee landlord, while the

manager and debtors of the estate—presented as "local peasant farmers"—are victims of

exploitation in an oppressive economic situation. Consequently, the manager's reduction

of others' debts is a (somewhat self-interested) expression of solidarity with the poor.

More than that, since usury was forbidden by law, the manager's efforts are an act of

justice rather than charity; they are "restitutive…an action of self-criticism."[64] In contrast

to the existing system of economic exploitation, the manager's actions were in line with

the proper Old Testament and contemporary African worldviews, in which exploiting

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[62] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 201-202. For this material, Ukpong cites: J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on St. Luke 16," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1961): 198-219; Fitzmeyer, "Parable of the Dishonest Manager," 1097.

[63] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 202-204. Ukpong cites Jeremias in connection with the first view and Fitzmeyer in connection with the second. He does not offer any sources for the third view. See: Fitzmyer, "Story of the Dishonest Manager," 175-177; Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 46-47.

[64] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 205.

other humans beings is wrong and justice means sharing the wealth so that all will have enough.[65]

At this point, Ukpong draws a parallel between the situation of the parable's farmers and that of countries in the Two-Thirds World who owe huge international debts; the requirement to repay these loans is part an exploitative economic system in which justice is equated with the repayment of burdensome loans that lock the rich and the poor into their respective positions. The parable of the shrewd manager thus serves to challenge the global economic system and its exploitative concept of justice and challenges Christians to reverse that system. In that parable, the manager becomes a hero at the crisis point when he turns against the system and acts on behalf of the poor. Christians now have a call to act similarly to support true justice and the values of the coming kingdom. Ultimately, this parable serves a challenge for Christians to work against exploitative economic systems and to use life crises as springboards to promote kingdom values in their context.[66]

<p style="text-align:center">The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30)</p>

Ukpong demonstrates similar concerns in his article on the parable of the talents. He does express a preference in this article for the term "inter-contextual hermeneutics" rather than "inculturation hermeneutics" (apparently to emphasize his model's focus on the text's historical context and the reader's contemporary context),[67] but he employs basically the same method as in his earlier works, though he re-orders the procedure

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[65] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 205-206.

[66] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 207-208.

[67] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 191, note 3.

slightly. Rather than beginning with the contemporary interpretive context, he begins by

discussing three current interpretations of the parable. First, he considers the

understanding that the parable is basically an exhortation for Christians to use their gifts

with due diligence to build up God's Kingdom,[68] and second, he looks at attempts to

unpack the parable as a polemic against opponents either of Jesus or of Matthew's

community.[69] Ukpong dismisses these approaches because they are too narrowly

religious and too quickly assign theological meaning to the parable apart from its social

world. Thus, Ukpong expresses a preference for a third view, which understands the

parable to be addressing the exploitative socio-economic context in first-century

Palestine.[70] Working from that perspective on the text, Ukpong finds a contemporary

correspondence to the parable in the situation of money lenders in contemporary Nigeria.

These money lenders provide quick, unsecured loans to those in need, but they charge

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[68] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 192-193. For scholars who Ukpong cites here, see: Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 487-488; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 3 (London: T&T Clark, 1997), 402-403; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 109; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 355; Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 278-279; Archibald Macbride Hunter, *The Parables of Then and Now* (London: SCM, 1971), 96-97; Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, *The Roman Economy: Studies in Ancient Economic and Administrative History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 480; Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 234; Joel R. Wohlgemut, "Entrusted Money: Matt. 25:14-28," in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today,* ed. V.G. Shillington (Edinburgh: T&TClark, 1997), 103-120.

[69] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 193-194. For discussions of this view, see: Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 354, Hunter, *Parables of Then and Now*, 97; Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus,* 58; Lane C. McGaughy, "The Fear of Yahweh and the Mission of Judaism: A Postexilic Maxim and Its Early Christian Expansion in the Parable of the Talents," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 2 (1975): 235-245.

[70] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 194-195. For scholars who adopt this perspective, see: William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Lousiville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 150-168; Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23, no. 1 (1993): 32-39; Luise Schottrof, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 29-37, 223.

exorbitant interest—up to 300% a year—and are quick to take advantage of any debtors who cannot keep up with their payments.[71]

With that contemporary context in sight, Ukpong turns to a textual analysis of the parable. Based on the large amounts of money given to each of the servants, Ukpong concludes that the parable presents a situation in which a rich member of the elite provided a number of his retainers with significant resources, according to each one's place within the household. The rich man intended for his servants to use this money in the common exploitative economic practices of the time in order to increase his own wealth. In Ukpong's analysis, the first two servants' use of the money to gain such large profits indicates their complicity in an oppressive, unjust economic system, which burdened the poor with huge interest payments and benefited the wealthy. He sees the third servant's burying of the talent as a defiant condemnation of his harsh master's greedy practices.[72] Ukpong analyzes the historical context of the parable in terms of small elite class using a retainer class to oppress the poor via giving agricultural loans at huge interest and foreclosing on land (the primary means of production at the time) when the poor were unable to pay back the loans. Viewed from this context, the only way the two servants could have made 100% interest would have been by taking advantage of the poor. Thus, the master in the parable represents the social elites, and the first two servants

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[71] Ukpong, "The Parables of the Talents," 195-196. Again here, Ukpong does not cite any sources for his description of this contemporary situation, though it certainly reflects the realities of contemporary Africa.

[72] Ukpong, "The Parables of the Talents," 196-199. In this section, Ukpong appropriates points from Derrett, "Fresh Light," 471; Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 159-160; and Scott, *Hear the Parable*, 430.

are agents of oppression. The third servant is a "casualty of the system," and the peasant

farmers are victims of exploitation and usury.[73]

Based on this analysis of the text and its context, Ukpong insists that we must not

identify the master in the parable with Jesus, but must rather understand that the parable's

characters provide social types to consider the issue of economic exploitation in first-

century Palestine.[74] He also sets this parable within the broader literary context of

Matthew, specifically between Jesus' instructions for Christian living and a discourse on

the last judgment, both of which focus on how people respond to the needy.[75] Ukpong

concludes that the third servant is the "lone voice in a non-violent protest against the

system," who suffered in the here and now but was among those to whom Jesus promised

salvation. In this parable, this servant is the template for Christian action. As with the

parable of the shrewd manager, Ukpong indicates that the parable of the talents is a

critique of the rich man and the exploitative economic system from which the rich

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[73] Ukpong, "The Parables of the Talents," 199-201. In his analysis, Ukpong cites: Derrett, "Fresh Light," 21, 60; G.E.M. De Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth Press, 1981), 39; Seán Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988), 157-159; Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 3 (2004): 347; Martin Goodman, "The First Jewish Revolt: Social Conflict and the Problem of Debt," *Journal Of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 1-2 (1982): 326; Jones, *Roman Economy*, 40; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM, 1983), 71; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 124; Helen Parkins, "The Consumer City Domesticated? The Roman City in Elite Economic Strategies," in *Roman Urbanism: Beyond the Consumer City*, ed. Helen Parkins (London: Routledge, 1997), pp 83-97.

[74] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 201-203. Ukpong draws this view from: Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 487-488; Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 154-155; Schottroff, *Parables of Jesus*, 29.

[75] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 203-204. In his discussion of this point, Ukpong cites: Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 428-430; Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 110; Sherman Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL, 1989), 255-257; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 312-313.

benefited. He believes that the parable challenges present-day Christians to stop collaborating with the system and instead take a stand against economic exploitation.[76]

Inculturation Hermeneutics: Framework, Procedure and Practice

Ukpong's account of interpretive process focuses attention upon the interpreter rather than the author or the text. This puts him in the neighborhood of reader-response theories of interpretation, but he prefers to connect his model to communal, contextual hermeneutical methods. Over time, he came to credit epistemological privilege to ordinary readers, although he insists that academic and ordinary readers need to work together to produce critical readings of the Bible. Along with that, Ukpong insists that all readings are contextual and can only ever appropriate part of the meaning of a text. Ukpong presents inculturation hermeneutics as a conceptual framework able to yield interpretive results of relevance to Africa, though his model employs the tools of various Western academic disciplines (especially anthropology and sociology) in its methodology. These tools provide insight the text's socio-cultural context, which opens the way for the text to speak meaningfully into the present context. Of course, Ukpong believes that interpreters, texts, and their context together produce a plurivalency of legitimate meanings, and though he insists that the text does somehow limit potential meanings, he prefers to speak of many valid contextual meanings rather than any one particular universal meaning.

Ukpong's interpretive procedure begins with finding some correspondence between the present context and that of the text. Inculturation hermeneutics then proceeds to a textual and socio-historical contextual analysis, and this analysis is applied to the

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[76] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 205.

initial concerns discerned in the contemporary context with the goal of producing action and socio-cultural transformation. In the examples we considered in this chapter, Ukpong connects issues of economic exploitation in contemporary Nigeria with the texts and socio-historical context of two of Jesus' parables. After making an extensive analysis of those texts, he calls for Christian to act against exploitation in today's world. With Ukpong's model in front of us, the time has come to turn from explaining the model of inculturation hermeneutics to evaluating it.

CHAPTER TWO: THE COHESIVENESS OF UKPONG'S INCULTURATION
HERMENEUTICS AND ITS ABILITY TO BUILD UPON, CRITIQUE, AND
RECEIVE JUDGMENT FROM OTHER INTERPRETIVE MODELS

Evaluating Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics

Working from the previous chapter's description of Ukpong's interpretive model, this

chapter will begin to analyze the self-consistency and broader value of inculturation

hermeneutics. In both this chapter and the next, I will use Schreiter's five criteria for

evaluating local theologies to provide a framework for my analysis, but will modify them

somewhat to increase their usefulness for a critical examination of a hermeneutical model

rather than for a full-fledged theology. I will first evaluate the internal coherency of

Ukpong's model, and then proceed to assess how it could incorporate criticism from

other positions. I will also consider some ways in which Ukpong's inculturation

hermeneutics builds upon and offers points of criticism to other hermeneutical models. I

will conclude that Ukpong's model would be strengthened if it were to moderate its

claims for the contextual determinacy of all readings and also explicitly acknowledge the

exegetical components already present within its interpretive procedure.

Schreiter's Five Criteria for Evaluating Local Theologies

Schreiter's criteria seek to evaluate whether a particular contextual theology grows out of

the three roots of the Gospel, the Church, and the cultural context.[1] He acknowledges the

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[1] While Schreiter uses the term "local theologies," the more common terminology has become
"contextual theologies," and I will be using the latter term in this paper. For an influential discussion of

diversity of the Christian tradition and the world's cultures, but he also insists that

contextual theologies remain accountable to the Gospel and the Church. Contextual

theologies must be rooted both in their contexts and in the broader realities of the

Christian faith.[2] Schreiter's five criteria for a contextual theology are:

1. Demonstrated cohesiveness;

2. Usefulness in the worshipping context;

3. Development of a proper action-reflection praxis for the Christian community;

4. Willingness to stand under the judgment of other churches;

5. Ability to contribute to the broader church.

Schreiter's first criterion, cohesiveness, requires that a particular theology exhibit logical

consistency as well as more intuitive or symbolic consistency, and so I will analyze

whether Ukpong's position demonstrates self-consistency and fits with its expressed

goals and priorities.[3] Schreiter's second and third criteria focus upon the usefulness of a

particular theology and the results it produces in its community and context. These two

criteria follow the principle "By the fruits shall you know them."[4] Bevans later

summarized this point in terms of "orthopraxis," whether the particular theology leads to

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contextual theologies, see: Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

[2] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20-21, 117. For Schreiter as a Roman Catholic, the Church has a quite concrete and powerful role to play in holding different theological and hermeneutical models accountable. Interpreters working from other Christian traditions—contemporary evangelicalism, for example, in both America and Africa—might emphasize accountability to the Bible much more strongly and either minimize or simply neglect the role of the Church. The African context, with its emphasis on the community and the traditions, could provide fruitful ground for hermeneutical models that emphasize the role of the interpreting *community* of faith. For some discussion of this issue on the postmodern American scene, see: James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

[3] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 118.

[4] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 118-119.

proper action and reflection.[5] In this project, I will employ these criteria to assess whether Ukpong's interpretive practice matches with his theoretical model and to evaluate whether his model enables other readers to interpret the Bible more effectively. Schreiter's fourth criterion, the catholicity and unity of the Church, requires that all theologies subject themselves to the judgment of other theologies rather than closing themselves off in self-assured truth,[6] and for his fifth criterion, Schreiter proposes testing contextual theologies' ability to contribute effectively to other churches in both affirmation and criticism.[7] As I apply these criteria, I will examine whether the framework of inculturation hermeneutics enables it to speak critically to other hermeneutical models, as well as to build upon the insights of those models and receive criticism from them.

In addition to adapting Schreiter's criteria to evaluate a contextual hermeneutical model, I will also discuss the criteria in a different order. In this chapter, I will consider the internal consistency of Ukpong model's in line with Schreiter's first criterion and also use Schreiter's fourth and fifth criteria to evaluate how Ukpong's model interacts with other hermeneutical models. In my next chapter, I will use Schreiter's second and third criteria to evaluate whether inculturation hermeneutics' praxis matches its theory and also whether it is useful for ordinary readers' interpretation of the biblical texts.

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[5] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18-19.

[6] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 119-120.

[7] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 120-121.

Ukpong's Internal Consistency: The Usefulness of Critical Methods in a Contextual Hermeneutical Model

African scholars do not generally choose to employ critical academic tools to engage the biblical texts merely as historical specimens.[8] While Ukpong himself insists that the texts are not merely specimens,[9] his method is rather remarkable in its employment of certain Western academic methods within an African, contextual hermeneutical model. However, Ukpong's attempt to incorporate both critical and contextual methods creates tension and even inconsistency within his interpretive model. On the critical side, Ukpong argues that anthropological-sociological critical methods enable scholars to reconstruct the historical context of the text, and this historical-sociological reconstruction provides boundaries for valid interpretations of the text.[10] On the contextual side, he insists that the biblical texts are "plurivalent," bearing a number of potential meanings actualized by particular readers in their different contexts, so the validity of a particular interpretation depends largely upon its usefulness for a given context and interpreter.[11] A tension arises here between Ukpong's views that all readings are contextual and that anthropological and sociological methods are effectively able to open up the historical context of the text.

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[8] LeMarquand has examined North Atlantic and African scholarship on the texts regarding the woman with the flow of blood and concluded that North Atlantic readings tend to focus on historical and critical issues, while African readings usually emphasize the needs of their context. See: Grant LeMarquand, *An Issue of Relevance: A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman (Mk 5: 25-34; Mt 9:20-22; Lk 8:43-48) in North Atlantic and African Contexts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 3-6; idem, "Bible as Specimen," 189-191.

[9] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 7.

[10] Ukpong, "Can African;" idem, "Rereading the Bible," 9-10.

[11] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 27-28; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 156-157; idem, "Rereading the Bible," 10.

Oeming's classification of contemporary biblical hermeneutics provides helpful

categories to make sense of this tension in Ukpong's model. Oeming places

contemporary hermeneutical models within the broad categories of methods focused on

authors and their worlds, on texts and their worlds, on readers and their worlds, and on

the reality behind the text.[12] He offers two sub-categories that apply to Ukpong's work:

historical sociology and liberation theology and exegesis.[13] Historical sociology, which

Oemings presents as a method focused on authors and their worlds, draws upon the views

of Marx and Engels and holds that the economic interests drive the production of texts. In

this "historic-materialistic" view, interpreters "must understand the social circumstances

of the biblical world(s) in order to fully understand the biblical authors in their world."[14]

Historical sociology's interpretive method consists of discerning the economic, political,

and social context and interests of the biblical authors and texts.[15] Ukpong brings in

cultural and social concerns along with economic and political ones, but his appropriation

of Western anthropological and sociological methods identifies him with the approach of

historical sociology.[16] His use of these methods to open up the social-historical context of

the biblical texts also fits nicely with historical sociology's emphasis on understanding

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[12] Ukpong place his model in Barton's classification, which also has four categories. However, while Barton distinguishes views focused on the author of the text from those focused on the historical events behind the text, Oeming combines those two into his category of methods focused on authors and their worlds. See: Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," 19-35; Manfred Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, trans. Joachim Vette (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 31-54; Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148.

[13] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics,* 42-45, 98-105.

[14] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 22, 43.

[15] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 44.

[16] Ukpong, "Can African;" idem, "Towards a Holistic Approach," 108.

the social circumstances of the authors in order to understand the biblical texts.[17]

Ukpong's appropriation of historical-sociological methods places his model within

Oeming's category of historical sociology, a method focused on the biblical authors and

their worlds.

However, Ukpong himself draws upon Barton's classifications to place his

inculturation hermeneutics among methods that focus upon the readers of the text.

Ukpong distinguishes his model from reader-response theories of interpretation, but that

distinction mainly services to distance his model from Western-derived interpretive

strategies.[18] While Ukpong's emphasis on the community and its concerns does reflect

African priorities, Oeming's detailed taxonomy provides a way to explain how Ukpong's

model also fits in the broader category of reader-focused methods.[19] Oeming includes

liberation theology and exegesis in methods focused on readers and their worlds. Like

historical sociology, liberation theology draws upon the views of Marx and Engels, but

unlike historical sociology, its primary emphasis lies on producing change in

contemporary societal structures. Liberation theology focuses upon contemporary

economic-political concerns, and stresses orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Although it

can draw upon historical-critical efforts, its primary interest lies in doing away with

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[17] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 12.

[18] Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," 19-35; Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148.

[19] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 192; idem, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 190; idem, "Rereading the Bible," 10. While Ukpong attempts to distance his model from Western influences and root it Third-World and African views, many of his sources are clearly imported rather than indigenous. His use of anthropological and sociological tools places him in the Western academic tradition, and his description of the contextual approach also owes much to liberation and even reader-response theories of interpretation, both of which have their roots in the Western academy. Ukpong is, of course, entirely within his rights to draw from these sources, but it would be helpful if he were to be more clear about where the forebears of his hermeneutical framework came from. Obscuring the influence of Western academic and theological traditions cuts off the branch that contextual theologies are sitting on, and moreover undercuts the broader communities of scholarship and of faith.

exploitation and oppression in the contemporary world.[20] Ukpong broadens his concerns

out to include the socio-cultural, but Oeming's description of liberation theology and

exegesis provides an apt description for his interpretive interests. Ukpong speaks of the

contextual approach rather than liberation theology,[21] but he calls for changes in

contemporary social structures, insists that interpretation result in action, and repeatedly

condemns exploitative cultural and economic practices.[22]

Ukpong employs sociological methods as tools to reconstruct the socio-cultural

context of the text, and he insists that the context and interests of interpreters unavoidably

define the meanings they construct from the text. Thus, Oeming's classification enables

us to observe that inculturation hermeneutics bear the characteristics of both historical

sociology and liberation (or in Ukpong's terms, 'contextual') theology and exegesis.

These approaches both depend upon Marxist assumptions and so have some interpretive

interests in common, but his classification also indicates that they have somewhat

different orientations and goals in the interpretive process. Both of these approaches play

a role in the modern academy, but Ukpong's incorporation of historical-sociological

methods and liberation-contextual approaches creates an unresolved tension in his model.

Holter noted this tension even in Ukpong's dissertation on Old Testament and

African sacrificial practices.[23] Ukpong's interpretive work is problematic, according to

Holter, because in its comparison of Old Testament and African views, its interaction

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[20] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics,* 98-105.

[21] This appears to be largely a semantic point, though Ukpong does tend to portray liberation theology as a subset of a broader category of contextual theologies.

[22] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 207-208; idem, "Parable of the Talents," 205; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 148-151.

[23] Ukpong, *Ibibio Sacrifices*, 1-222.

with the Old Testament assumes and depends upon the validity of Western academic methods, and so it seems "to presuppose the possibility of doing a non-contextual interpretation, where African concerns are not reflected."[24] Holter then goes on to argue that the adoption of these Western methods precludes inculturation hermeneutics from truly allowing African concerns and views to challenge traditional, Western interpretations.[25]

Holter's critique lays bare a fundamental difficulty in Ukpong's position. The framework of inculturation hermeneutics insists that all readings arise from and are limited to specific contexts, but its procedure allows historical-sociological discussions and methods an apparently non-contextually-determined interpretive privilege with regard to the text and its historical context. Ukpong wants to do away with the classic distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics, understood as two separate processes in which one finds the original meaning of the text (exegesis) and then applies it to the present context (hermeneutics). However, he smuggles exegesis right back into the middle steps of his proposed contextual hermeneutical method at the points in which he engages with other contemporary interpretations and seeks to develop a picture of the texts' socio-cultural context. In short, he maintains that all meanings and all reading methods arise from particular contexts, but he also insists that the use of historical-sociological methods allows scholars to discern at an objectively preferable, textually-bound understanding of the text and its historical context.

However, if the use of historical-sociological methods yields an interpretation of the text that is demonstrably preferable to other interpretations, then this critical method

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[24] Holter, *Old Testament Research*, 97.

[25] Holter, *Old Testament Research*, 97-98.

operates outside of the contextually-bound nature of other interpretations. It is as if the historical-sociological method allows readers to leave behind their context (even temporarily) to engage in a critical pursuit that ultimately provides support for a particular understanding of the text's historical meaning. On this point, the steps of Ukpong's procedure that involve the analysis the historical context of the text, interaction with other current interpretations, and detailed textual and literary analyses do not seem entirely consistent with that hermeneutical method's theoretical framework. All readings may be equally valid in their contexts, but historical-sociological readings appear to be more equal than others.

Patte takes Ukpong's reading of the parable of the shrewd manger to task on this matter. He finds the article's interpretation of the text and its context in the light of the contemporary context of poor West African farmers helpful, but he blasts its critique and rejection of a number of contemporary academic interpretations of the parable. According to Patte, these attempts to show the illegitimacy of other interpretive options are basically a move—against Ukpong's own established principles—to establish one true, valid interpretation of the text at the expense of other interpretive voices.[26] While Ukpong may be able to dodge this critique insofar as he presents his findings as valid for their interpretive context and not necessarily for others,[27] Patte's critique highlights a tension in Ukpong's position. If a particular set of Western academic methods are really able to determine that certain meanings have more validity than others, then it is difficult to insist that all readings are contextually-bound and relative. However, if the validity of all meanings depends only upon their usefulness in a particular context, then a scholar

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[26] Patte, "Biblical Scholars," 274-275.

[27] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 17.

employing historical-sociological methods will be just as limited and contextually-bound as a scholar employing any other type of method.

In this view, historical-sociological methods simply add more noise to the cacophony of interpretive voices. Ukpong's assumptions do not ultimately allow his method to claim interpretive authority over any other method. As Patte argues, if one adopts Ukpong's approach, it is difficult to see why inculturation hermeneutics should include any demonstration of how or why its proposed view of the text and its historical context would be any more legitimate than any other view.[28] Ukpong demonstrates an unresolved tension in his thought here. On the one hand, he wants to insist that readings are contextually-bound. On the other hand, he at least implicitly allows the historical-sociological method to serve as an arbiter among interpretations. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics does not yet, on its own terms, appear to be able to account adequately for its use of particular critical methods within its framework and procedures as a contextually-focused hermeneutical method. In light of Schreiter's first criterion of cohesiveness, Ukpong's hermeneutical model falls short.

Inculturation Hermeneutics' Ability to Incorporate Criticism from Other Models

Passing Judgment: Options for Modifying Inculturation Hermeneutics

While inculturation hermeneutics does demonstrate a significant point of tension in how it combines critical and contextual interpretive strategies, this tension is not necessarily irresolvable. Schreiter's fourth criterion—the ability of a particular contextual theology (or particular hermeneutical model) to stand under the judgment of other interpretive models—will come into play in this section as I examine some proposed modification to

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[28] Patte, "Biblical Scholars," 274-275.

Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, and more specifically to its account of the activities classically referred to as exegesis and hermeneutics. Scholars have proposed essentially three ways to enable inculturation hermeneutics to move beyond its internal tension between employing critical, exegetical methods and insisting upon the contextually-bound nature of all interpretive activity.

The First Option: Drop the Critical Component and Celebrate Plurality According to Patte's critique, Ukpong should have simply demonstrated how inculturation hermeneutics enabled him to draw upon particular aspect of the text to create a viable meaning, while allowing that other readings might be attuned to other dimensions or voices in the text.[29] While Patte focuses upon Ukpong's criticism of other positions, he assumes an interpretive model that celebrates a plurality of readings, without significant concern for whether any particular reading can demonstrate a more or less solid grounding in the actual text and its historical context. Although it could go in a more maximalist or minimalist direction, this option would enhance the consistency of Ukpong's model by eliminating its more critical, historically-focused components in favor of a yet more contextually-bound reading practice.

However, this modification would come at a heavy price in terms of Ukpong's concerns and interests. In the first place, Patte's approach at least raises the issue of why one ought to bother studying the text anyway if it is to become such a blank canvas for the production of different interpretive meanings. In a more specific vein, this approach undermines the multiple steps in Ukpong's interpretive procedure in which he engages the critical scholarly community and reconstructs the historical context of the text.

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[29] Patte, "Biblical Scholars," 274-275.

Moreover, this approach goes against Ukpong's explicitly stated priority upon the use of historical-sociological methods to understand the text.[30] If inculturation hermeneutics were modified along these lines, almost everything related to historical and textual analysis would have to be severely trimmed or eliminated, and the place of Ukpong's preferred academic methods in opening up the text's historical context would have to be greatly diminished. These seem like very heavy prices to pay in order to save the remnants of inculturation hermeneutics' actual procedure. Since this option for refining inculturation hermeneutics requires such a heavy price of that model, it seems best to leave it to the side and consider other strategies for fine-tuning Ukpong's model.

The Second Option: Re-Introduce Objective Exegesis to Inculturation Hermeneutics

On the other side of the debate, a number of scholars have proposed a second type of tactic for refining Ukpong's model. This option consists in one way or another of re-introducing the distinction between exegesis as the activity in which one seeks to understand the text in its historical context and hermeneutics as the activity in which one seeks to apply the understood meaning of the text to the contemporary context. Broadly speaking, those who take this option follow one of two lines, either criticizing inculturation hermeneutics for not insisting upon a discoverable, set meaning in the text or adding an explicitly objective, scientific exegetical component to the model's interpretive process. However, while both of these interpretive lines offer some insight into how inculturation hermeneutics could be strengthened, neither of them deals effectively with the existing tension within inculturation hermeneutics between what might be termed critical and contextual approaches to the texts.

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[30] Ukpong, "Can African;" idem, "Rereading the Bible," 10.

Scholars on the first line insist upon the validity of exegesis—or to put it another way, they insist that interpreters can simply read the texts and discover an authentic, authoritative meaning in them. Thus, Palmer and the evangelical tradition in Africa insist upon an interpretive model in which interpreters carry out the activity of 'exegesis' to get at the single, authorially intended meaning of the text and then engage in the activity of 'hermeneutics' to apply the text's meaning to the contemporary context. From this standpoint, Ukpong's rejection of the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics is simply unacceptable. While Ukpong argues that the interpretive context necessarily shapes both how the text is understood and how it is applied, scholars on this line insist that interpreters can understand the intended meaning of the text and then shift to applying that meaning in different contexts. At the very least, while interpreters may not always be able to understand the author's original intended meanings, they should always attempt to seek them out, lest "we fall into the deep sea of subjectivism."[31]

Scholars on the second line tend to assume that certain interpretive methods provide an objective understanding of the text, and they build on that assumption to call for a process in which an objective, scientific exegesis first provides the meaning of the text, after which inculturation hermeneutics applies that meaning to the present context. Manus, for example, believes that Western biblical studies have a "purely objective

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[31] Palmer, "Dividing the Word Correctly," 12. For a variety of similar evangelical critiques, though less focused on Ukpong in particular, see: D.A. Carson, "A Sketch of Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, ed. D.A. Carson (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 11-29; Adekunle Dada, "An Evangelical Reflection on Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa," *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 24, no. 1 (2007): 3-20; Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation," 95-104; Tite Tienou, "The Church in African Theology: Description and Analysis of Hermeneutical Presuppositions," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, ed. D.A. Carson (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 151-165. Some evangelical scholars present a rather flat, objective understanding of the interpreter's role, but others present a more nuanced understanding of how interpreters' contexts shape their understanding of the biblical texts.

character…which must remain faithful to absolute, intemporal, and universal norms," much like the hard sciences.[32] Manus employs Ukpong's model for inculturation hermeneutics not to discern the meaning of the text, but rather to develop an application of the text to a specific context and set of readers.[33] Thus, Manus proposes that scholars begin with the objective, scientific methods of Western biblical scholarship and then use "intercultural hermeneutics" to enable the Bible and tradition to speak to a specific, new context.[34] In particular, he believes that historical-critical methods enable the interpreter to peel away the accretions and errors in the Bible to get at its core meaning, which is then interpreted according to the context and framework of the contemporary interpreter.[35] Ultimately, Manus proposes an interpretive procedure that reflects some of the concerns of Ukpong's model, but that is more explicit in its dependence upon a historical-critical exegesis of the biblical texts. Manus also appears to be more interested in classical historical-critical concerns than in the historical-sociological methods that Ukpong emphasizes.[36]

Similarly, although he does not explicitly criticize Ukpong's position, Zinkuratire's summary of inculturation hermeneutics redefines its framework in a number of ways. Specifically, Zinkuratire indicates that historical-critical and literary methods do in fact enable scholars to get at the original meaning of the texts, and so he calls these methods still "necessary" for the interpretation of the Bible in Africa. However, he

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[32] Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 29.

[33] Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 30.

[34] Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 29-32.

[35] Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 34-37.

[36] Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 42-50.

presents inculturation hermeneutics as the method necessary to bring the text's original meaning to the contemporary context. Inculturation hermeneutics provides a particular hermeneutical tool to pick up the results of exegesis and apply them to a specific context. "Inculturation biblical hermeneutics begins where historical critical methods stop and thus completes the process of interpretation."[37] In essence, Manus and Zinkuratire both reduce inculturation hermeneutics to a hermeneutical tool that applies the results of an objective, critical exegesis of a text to a particular context.

However, while Palmer, Manus, and Zinkuratire all call for inculturation hermeneutics to provide more room for critical, exegetical components in its interpretive process, their critiques remain unsatisfactory for a couple reasons. In the first place, none of these proposals grapple quite adequately with Ukpong's insistence upon the that all readings are contextually-bound. Although they all acknowledge that reading occurs in particular contexts, they do not adequately address the concern that interpretive contexts might in fact shape one's exegetical work.[38] This may be more of an oversight than a principled choice, but it remains something of an issue with regard to their takes on Ukpong's model. More significantly, these proposals fail to deal with the reality that the procedure of inculturation hermeneutics already involves a critical, even exegetical, component, albeit one that is in tension with the model's insistence that all interpretive work is determinatively shaped by its context. In their discussion of inculturation hermeneutics, both Manus and Zinkuratire seem to be moving toward this point, but they do not quite get all the way there. Rather than proposing ways to resolve the tension

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[37] Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 63.

[38] Palmer, "Dividing the Word Correctly," 12; Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 36-37; Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 58.

within Ukpong's model and procedure, they go the direction of adding additional components to Ukpong's interpretive procedure. In doing so, they effectively reduce inculturation hermeneutics from being a full-fledged model for interpreting texts to instead being a model specifically for applying text's already-established meaning to a particular context. This, of course, ends up obliquely undercutting a great deal of Ukpong's proposed interpretive framework, and so while it works from the opposite angle as Patte's approach by privileging the critical rather than contextual aspects of inculturation hermeneutics, it also requires that the model pay a heavy price. While either radically undercutting the critical components of inculturation hermeneutics or introducing an additional exegetical component can relieve some of the tension of the model, both of these approaches demand too high a price for the benefit that they bring.

The Third Option: A Contextual Exegetical and Hermeneutical Model

Other scholars have suggested an interpretive middle way that incorporates both critical and contextual views while softening the sharp edges of both. This middle way acknowledges that all readings occur in and are shaped by particular contexts, but also insists that the texts speak with a voice that interpreters *can* hear and *must* listen to. If inculturation hermeneutics were to take this middle way, it could more smoothly integrate the critical, exegetical components of its procedure with its understanding that readers' contexts shape their interpretive practices. This ultimately would enable the model to resolve the tension between its use of historical-sociological methods and its insistence that all reading methods and approaches are determinatively shaped by their contexts.

Even many scholars who maintain a quite objectivist view of exegesis, broadly understood as the process of understanding the text itself, also agree that interpreters' backgrounds and commitments shape their exegetical work. Evangelicals in particular are quite willing to grant that people's backgrounds shape their reading, but they insist that this does not entirely prevent people from hearing and understanding the voice of the text. Pre-understandings may be operative in the reading process, but they are not entirely determinative of its results.[39] In response to the hermeneutical methods of contextual and liberation views, Corrie agrees that different contexts may produce different readings but argues that the Bible must be allowed to speak with an authoritative voice that determines the boundaries and possibilities of the interpretive conversation. The Bible's own interests and priorities define which meanings may legitimately be drawn from the text. Corrie believes that the biblical text has an original meaning that can be discerned through the use of various exegetical tools, but he also grants that different contexts may open up secondary meanings that legitimately illuminate the text.[40]

Teresa Okure, a Nigerian Roman Catholic scholar, similarly agrees interpreters' contexts and commitments always influence their interpretive activity, but she also insists that the texts do speak meaningfully in the process. Whether one approaches the Bible with traditional historical-critical and literary methods or with more recent feminist or inculturation methods, one is necessarily doing hermeneutics. Although Okure conflates 'hermeneutics' as the whole reading process and 'hermeneutics' as the application of

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[39] Carson, "Sketch of Factors," 12-15; Dada, "Evangelical Reflection," 16-20; Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation," 95-104.

[40] John Corrie, "Evangelicals and Liberation Theology," in *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*, eds. John Corrie and Cathy Ross (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 70-73. Corrie's critique of liberation theology on these points draws significantly upon Kevin Vanhoozer's hermeneutical work. See: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 320-323, 462-467.

exegetical results to a particular context, she does agree with Ukpong that the context and methods of interpretation necessarily shape the results of the reading process.[41] However, rather than relativizing all meanings as contextually-determined and therefore legitimate only in particular contexts, Okure proposes an interpretive model of "exegetical hermeneutics," in which interpreters acknowledge their own limitations but nonetheless respect the texts and their authors by seeking to understand their original meanings.[42] Okure uses the term "exegetical hermeneutics" to prioritize hermeneutics—the activity of applying the text to the contemporary context—but she also insists upon the validity of exegesis. She understands exegesis to be "a faith-filled scholarly effort to reveal the meaning of the extant texts in their own contexts, using all available concrete resources."[43] While this recognizes that the reading context influence the interpretive process, it focuses upon recovering a set meaning from the text, not simply constructing meanings from different contexts.

Both Corrie and Okure acknowledge that people's context does shape what meanings they draw from the texts, but they also insist that the texts serve as real conversation partners, with their own voices that must be heard and applied to the present interpretive context. On this point, Ukpong's frameworks mutes the voice of the text so much in the interpretive process that it is difficult to see how the text could serve any guiding function at all. If inculturation hermeneutics were to take a softer stance on how much context shapes reading and how little the text itself is able to speak and be heard meaningfully, it could more consistently maintain its use of critical methods along with

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[41] Okure, "I Will Open," 445-450.

[42] Okure, "I Will Open," 456-461.

[43] Okure, "I Will Open," 456.

its principle that interpreters' contexts seriously impact their readings. Taking this line would also enable inculturation hermeneutics to steer between those who would undercut its use of critical methods and those who would minimize its insights into how interpreters' contexts shape all readings of the Bible.

Going this route would also help inculturation hermeneutics to more effectively address the concerns of scholars—Manus and Zinkuratire in particular—who consider it necessary to add an explicitly exegetical component (an avowedly objective examination of the text's original meaning) to the procedure of inculturation hermeneutics. While this move does make intuitive sense insofar as Ukpong's position seems to undercut any really objective approach to the texts, it ends up either duplicating the more critically, historically focused steps in Ukpong's procedure or reducing his interpretive model to simply a method for applying the results of exegesis. Of course, as long as Ukpong's framework requires that the texts have no set meanings, it is difficult to see how he can theoretically support his insistence upon critiquing contemporary interpretive options, discerning the historical context of the text, and engaging in significant literary and historical analyses of the text. However, if inculturation hermeneutics could adopt a less strident version of the contextual determination of text's meanings, it would be much better situated to highlight the exegetical, text-focused aspects already present in its interpretive procedure. Moving in this direction would make inculturation hermeneutics more internally self-consistent and would also increase its broader value by addressing a number of critiques that scholars have raised. This would indicate for its viability in light of Schreiter's criterion that a contextual hermeneutical model be able to receive judgment and incorporate insights from other models.

Inculturation Hermeneutics' Ability to Build upon and Contribute to Other Hermeneutical Models

Schreiter's fifth criterion leads us to consider whether inculturation hermeneutics is able to contribute effectively to other hermeneutical methods. I will broaden out Schreiter's criterion to include not only how inculturation hermeneutics could constructively criticize other models but also how Ukpong used other models as a resource to construct his own interpretive framework and procedure.[44] Returning to Oeming's categories, Ukpong most clearly builds upon the perspectives of historical sociology and liberation theology. Ukpong's procedure depends upon the use of anthropological and sociological methods to reconstruct the context of the biblical texts. Without those historical-sociological tools, he would find it much more difficult to draw the desired parallels between the context of the interpreter and the text. While he builds upon these methods, Ukpong also carries them forward by using them within his contextual hermeneutical model focused particularly upon the interpretive needs of African context.

Ukpong's (at least theoretical) focus on real African readers and their concerns can provide a counterpoint to historically-focused methods that might not pay adequate attention to contemporary issues. The interpretive priority Ukpong gives to contextual concerns can challenge practitioners of historical-critical and even historical-sociological methods to bring the texts meaningfully into their present contexts, rather than simply leaving them in past. Of course, his model is not unique in offering this challenge to traditional historical-critical studies. Okure also challenges Western biblical studies to get

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[44] One could reasonably consider how Ukpong's model builds upon other models under either Schreiter's fourth (stands under judgment of other views) or fifth (contributes effectively to other views) criteria. In either case, the point would be to pay attention to how his inculturation hermeneutics builds and depends upon previous positions, along with standing under their judgment and critiquing them.

its feet back on the ground of real-life issues,[45] and LeMarquand's research indicates that African academic interpreters in general tend to focus on contextual, real-life concerns much more than North Atlantic biblical scholars.[46]

Even in Western biblical studies, several schools of thought have challenged historical-critical—and to some extent, literary—methods for their obsession with theoretical reconstructions of the past at the expense of present engagement. Reader-response methods pose this challenge to some extent,[47] but it is more clearly observable in the canonical interpretation methods of Brevard Childs and his followers. This canonical method also challenges biblical studies to move past its historical obsession to serve the present community—specifically, the church as the traditional community of faith.[48] Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics do not stand alone in confronting historical-critical interpretive methods with the need to grapple with real-life concerns. Nonetheless, he does sound that call specifically within the African context, and while employing Western academic tools, he does present an interpretive model that aims to connect academic interpretation of the Bible with real-life African concerns. Ukpong's model can also present scholars who embrace missionary and evangelical models with

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[45] Okure, "I Will Open," 445-463; Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 4; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 17.

[46] LeMarquand, *Issue of Relevance*, 3-6; idem, "Bible as Specimen," 189-191.

[47] For a typology of these methods, see: Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 77-112.

[48] For a helpful summary of this approach, see: Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 65-70. For some of Childs' key works, see: Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); idem, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); idem, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

the question of whether their interpretive work is really addressing the needs of African believers or just rehashing Western interpretive arguments and interests.[49]

Ukpong's model also builds significantly upon the foundation of contextual or liberation perspectives. Liberation theology's emphasis on praxis and action against oppression provide Ukpong with a ready-made set of interpretive tools to analyze and call for change in exploitative systems in Africa, and these tools play a significant role in his inculturation hermeneutics. Ukpong's model also broadens out the concerns of liberation theology. As de Wit has pointed out, while liberation theology self-consciously seeks to develop from the concerns of the context, it often focuses exclusively upon social and, especially, political concerns to the exclusion of considering broader cultural issues and values.[50] Ukpong insists upon the holistic interpretation of texts in terms of religious and cultural concerns, as well as economic and political ones. This carries the insights of liberation theology forward to address a more holistic set of human concerns, rather than concentrating—at times reductionistically—upon a narrow range of socio-political considerations.[51] Moreover, Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics brings liberation theology together with other streams of African interpretation. His model incorporates the comparative and evaluative school's interest in comparing the Bible and

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[49] For a variety of takes on how missionary and evangelical theologies have dealt with African concerns, see: LeMarquand, "New Testament Exegesis," 74-75; Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics,* 41; Mbiti, "Do You Understand," 245; Palmer, "African Christian Theology," 11-13; Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 12; idem, "Luke," 385-394; idem, "Models and Methods," 282; Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 41.

[50] de Wit, "Intercultural Bible Reading," 487-488.

[51] Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible," 6-7; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 29; idem, "Towards a Holistic Approach," 107-108.

the contemporary African contexts together with liberation theology's emphasis on societal change and orthopraxis.[52]

In a more popular vein, Ukpong's model might serve to provide a theoretical framework for the practice of many popular African preachers who tend to take a shortcut from reading the text to applying it to their context, without much exegetical or interpretive effort between the two.[53] In this vein, Ukpong's model could provide a theoretical rationale for beginning from and emphasizing the concerns of the context—as this popular preaching does—while also pushing the preachers to put more effort into understanding the text's historical context so as to draw parallels between it and the contemporary situation. Of course, the practical difficulties certain to come with bringing Ukpong's hermeneutical model to actual, popular-level preachers are legion, but at least hypothetically, it could offer theoretical grounding and interpretive depth to popular methods of homiletic interpretation in Africa. Ukpong's model builds upon and critiques a wide variety of other reading methods—including historical-critical, evangelical, liberation, and popular approaches. His inculturation hermeneutics measure up to Schreiter's criterion that a particular interpretive model must be able to contribute effectively to other models if it to be considered viable itself.

Evaluating Inculturation Hermeneutics in the Light of Schreiter's Criteria of Consistency and Connectivity

Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics exhibits a significant internal tension because it relativizes all interpretive activity to particular contexts and also grants overarching interpretive validity to historical-sociological methods. Because of this tension, Ukpong's

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[52] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 11-28.

[53] Palmer, "Dividing the Word Correctly," 8.

model does not match up well to Schreiter's criterion that a particular position needs to display internal cohesiveness if it is to be considered a valid contextual hermeneutical method. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics fare considerably better with regard to Schreiter's criterion that a contextual hermeneutical method be able to stand under the judgment of other approaches. While some scholars want to over-emphasize the contextual or critical aspects of inculturation hermeneutics to the detriment of the other side of the equation, the solid middle way acknowledges the real use and value of critical exegetical tools but also insists that interpreters are shaped by their context and must aim their work at real-life contexts.

Inculturation hermeneutics could best proceed if it were to moderate its claims for the contextual determinacy of all readings and also explicitly acknowledge the exegetical components already present within its interpretive procedure. Ukpong's model appears to be able to receive these criticisms, and even to modify its framework and procedure to address them. On this point, Ukpong's model does well in the light of Schreiter's criterion. Finally, Ukpong's model builds upon elements from several other hermeneutical methods also offers points of constructive criticism to interpretive frameworks and practices, and so it quite successfully addresses Schreiter's criterion that a contextual hermeneutical method be able to contribute effectively to other hermeneutical models.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PRACTICE AND USEFULNESS OF INCULTURATION
HERMENEUTICS

Evaluating the Practice and Utility of Ukpong's Model

In this chapter, I will evaluate whether Ukpong's method and practice fulfill the goals of

his framework and whether his hermeneutical method could be useful for believing

communities' reading of the Bible. I will first consider whether Ukpong's work

demonstrates orthopraxis according to its own sensibilities—whether his interpretive

practice produces the results his theory prescribes. I will conclude that Ukpong's

interpretive practice is largely consistent with his theory, but its value for understanding

and applying the biblical texts remains uneven. Moreover, Ukpong's framework and

procedure demonstrate some friction in their account of academic and ordinary readers,

and they neither adequately privilege ordinary readers nor effectively address such

readers' real-life concerns. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics would benefit from

shifting interpretive priority away from academics and their concerns and towards

ordinary readers and their interests.

Evaluating how Ukpong's Practice Relates to his Interpretive Theory

Schreiter's third criterion requires that contextual theologies be evaluated on the

basis of the results they produce (their orthopraxis, as Bevans puts it),[1] and so at this

point I will evaluate whether Ukpong's practice demonstrates integrity with his own

model. In the two examples I considered in my first chapter, Ukpong's actual practice

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[1] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 119; Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18-19.

does indeed fit well with his theoretical procedure. In his interpretation of the parables of the shrewd manager and of the talents, Ukpong follows his procedure quite closely. In his article on the shrewd manager, Ukpong begins by identifying and explaining the situation of poor West African farmers exploited by middle-men traders, thereby fulfilling the first two steps of his procedure. He performs the next step of his procedure by delving into current academic interpretations, textual analysis, and social history to develop a picture of the historical context of the text. Rounding out his method, Ukpong draws a parallel between his construction of the text's historical situation and the contemporary situation in West Africa. He then calls for his readers to critique exploitative economic practices, just as he understands the shrewd manager to be doing in the parable.[2] Although Ukpong expends more effort upon historical-sociological analysis than one might have expected, he basically follows the trajectory of his interpretive procedure.

In his study of the parable of the talents, Ukpong varies the order of his method but still goes through the same steps. He begins by discussing some current interpretive options for the parable, and then he presents the contemporary interpretive context of Nigerian money-lenders' charging excessive interest rates. Following that, he analyzes the text and its historical context to develop a picture of similarly usurious practices in ancient Palestine. Ukpong finishes by arguing for a parallel between the third servant in the parable, who speaks out against exploitation and critiques the rich man, and contemporary Christians, who should speak out against exploitation and critique the rich of today's world.[3] Although Ukpong discusses some options for interpreting the parable before he presents the contemporary interpretive context, his interpretive practice fulfills

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[2] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 192-208.

[3] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 191-205.

all the steps of his proposed procedure, and his interpretive interest follows his model's emphasis upon the contemporary context. In short, Ukpong's practiced method fundamentally lines up with his proposed method for interpreting texts.

Additionally, Ukpong's interpretive practice produces results that fit the goals of his method. Ukpong proposes inculturation hermeneutics as a model for addressing African concerns and answering African questions that more traditional hermeneutical methods have neglected.[4] Although this could be attributed more to his interpretive interests than to his methodology, Ukpong's interpretations certainly do highlight exploitation and injustice in the contemporary context, draw parallels between exploitation in the past and present, and call for contemporary action. If we evaluate Ukpong's interpretive practices in terms of his own interpretive structure and goals, it appears to demonstrate orthopraxis according to its own model. On its own terms, inculturation hermeneutics does well with regard to the criterion that a contextual hermeneutical method be judged by the results it produces.

Evaluating the Usefulness of Ukpong's Interpretive Practice

If we step outside of Ukpong's own framework, his interpretive practice yields uneven results in both the exegetical and applicatory spheres. Of course, Ukpong sets out to give a particular reading, not a universally valid one, and he insists that practitioners of inculturation hermeneutics must be insiders to a particular context.[5] In one way, this undercuts any possibility of evaluating Ukpong's interpretative practice from the outside. If only an insider can understand Ukpong's take on the texts, then others have no place in

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[4] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics" 17; idem, "Rereading the Bible," 4.

[5] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 190; idem, "Rereading the Bible," 5.

that conversation. However, Ukpong's theory and practice both open him up to external evaluation. His method's incorporation of historical-sociological methods indicates for some measure of critical, meaningful dialogue with other positions, as well as to external assessment of how well his views match up with the texts. In keeping with his method, Ukpong's interpretive practice involves a critical appraisal of other interpretive options. Turnabout is fair play, and if the method and practice of inculturation hermeneutics call for its practitioners to analyze and evaluate others' interpretive practice, they must in turn be willing to submit their own views to dialogue and assessment. Interpreters' contexts and commitments will naturally shape which interpretations they find more or less fitting. Nonetheless, if a hermeneutical method wishes to be taken seriously, it must be willing not only to present its own voice, but also to receive the affirmative and critical input of the other voices in the discussion. When Ukpong's interpretive practice is viewed from the outside, it does offer some helpful insights into the historical texts and contemporary context, but it also bends the texts or flattens out their meanings and messages to fit Ukpong's own interpretive interests.

Ukpong's study of the parable of the shrewd manager provides a reasonable understanding of that notoriously difficult parable. Ukpong understands the manager to be the parable's hero, because his actions critique the rich man and the abuse of wealth. This provides a way of making sense of that particular story, and it also fits with other Lucan parables that critique rich men.[6] However, Ukpong's dismisses other interpretations simply because they view the parable from the perspective of the rich man, and unless one is already committed to the notion that the rich man is villainous, this dismissal does not seem very well-warranted. Other scholars draw parallels between

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[6] Ukpong, "Parable of the Shrewd Manager," 192-204.

this parable and that of the prodigal son, which comes right before it in Luke, and this parallel puts the rich authority figure in quite a positive light.[7] Isaak offers another interpretation from Africa that simply emphasizes that believers must use their gifts for the benefit of others.[8] While Ukpong does find continuities between historical Palestine and contemporary Africa, Kenneth Bailey interprets this parable through the lens of recent Middle Eastern cultural practices and views.[9] He finds the rich man to be unbelievably gracious and the manager to be clever but shockingly unjust, which is diametrically opposed to Ukpong's view.[10] On this parable, Ukpong's view is far from being the only reasonable interpretation. However, Ukpong's exegesis does offer an interpretation that makes some sense of this difficult parable, and his economically-focused application resonates in the contemporary African context of rich land-owners, exploitative middle-men traders, and poor farmers.

Ukpong's understanding of the parable of the talents is more problematic. He dismisses a number of other interpretations because they are too religious and theological, and instead interprets the parable in terms of the socio-economic context of first-century Palestine. Much of his textual work here involves projecting a general picture of historical injustices into the specifics of the parable, without adequate regard

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[7] Fitzmyer, "Story of the Dishonest Manager," 177-178; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus,* 46-48.

[8] John Paul Isaak, "Luke," in *African Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1262.

[9] Insights from contemporary Middle Eastern contexts would seemingly bear at least as much relevance for the ancient Biblical contexts as contemporary African contexts would. Of course, the assumption of meaningful similarity is a debatable move, in Bailey's approach and in contemporary African comparative, evaluative, and inculturation-hermeneutics approaches.

[10] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 332-342.

for the actual interests or meaning of the text.[11] This parable clearly appears to be concerned with how believers will use their divinely-given gifts, in the light of Christ's return and a final apocalyptic accountability to God.[12] People's use of economic resources certainly matters for the parable, but to focus exclusively on that aspect flattens the text out to only the socio-economic level and leaves out wide swathes of human experience. Ukpong's understanding of the text leads him to apply it exclusively in socio-economic terms, again calling for Christians to stand against exploitative practices.[13]

Oeming's general critiques of historical sociology and liberation theology and exegesis apply quite directly to Ukpong's studies of these two parables. Oeming points out that historical-sociological readings tend to flatten the religious points of the text into simply expressions of social-interest groups, and also often reduce the Bible to being a party platform for their own Marxist philosophical assumptions.[14] Liberation theology takes the specific direction of reducing the text's concerns to the political-economic, rather than allowing the text to offer transcendent dimensions or speak to all of human life. Additionally, liberation theology condemns the rich in ways that simply do not fit with the biblical witness.[15] Ukpong's interpretive works reflects all of these hermeneutical missteps. His studies portray the actors in the text almost exclusively in terms of the rich oppressors, collaborative middle-men, and oppressed poor, and so he

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[11] Ukpong, "The Parables of the Talents," 195-203.

[12] See: Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* 402-403, Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 354-355. For an African expression of this view, see: Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew," in *African Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1189-1190.

[13] Ukpong, "Parable of the Talents," 201-203.

[14] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 45.

[15] Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 103-105.

interprets their actions in line with the interests of these reconstructed groups rather than according to the sense of the parable. For Ukpong, the rich are only ever allowed to represent the oppressor, but many other well-founded interpretations of the texts offer a quite positive view of the wealthy and powerful, even in these two parables.[16] While Ukpong's approach yields at least a reasonable understanding of the parable of the shrewd manager, it does not deal well with the parable of the talents. Ukpong reduces the second parable from a call for the proper use of all of God's gifts to a Marxist-leaning demand for social change. While his point has some legitimacy as part of the broader picture, focusing only upon the socio-economic implications reduces the impact of a parable that otherwise could speak to more areas of human experiences.

Ukpong's practice of inculturation hermeneutics fails to yield a genuinely holistic—cultural, economic, and religious—interpretation of the text, instead yielding an impoverished, Marxist party-platform view. This flattening of the text to the socio-economic level is typical of historical-sociological and liberation approaches, but Ukpong's expressed interest in addressing the range of African cultural-economic-religious concerns should enable him to broaden out his interpretive efforts to address the whole range of human experience. Ukpong's practice may be able to offer helpful understandings and applications of texts that genuinely reflect socio-economic concerns, but he unhelpfully reduces other texts to addressing only those sorts of concerns. Ukpong's practice of inculturation hermeneutics produces uneven interpretive results with respect to the integrity of the texts and the whole range of human experience, and so it does not entirely measure up to Schreiter's criterion that a contextual hermeneutical method be judged by its results.

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[16] For example, Isaak, "Luke," 1262; Kapolyo, "Matthew," 1189-1190.

Evaluating Ukpong's Consistency with Regard to the Relationship between Academic and Ordinary Readers

Ukpong has attracted significant criticism for the ways in which he relates academic and ordinary readers of the Bible in his appropriation of Gerald West's reading-with methodology. All the way back to Schreiter, scholars have argued that professional academics need to serve as a resource for the reading community, not as hegemonic figures standing over and determining the outcomes of the discussion.[17] However, along with other practitioners of the reading-with methodology, Ukpong has been criticized for excessively privileging the concerns and interests of the academic readers and community at the expense of ordinary readers and their interpretive communities. Anum and Loba-Mkole indicate that, when Ukpong and others have engaged in the practice of reading with ordinary readers, they have by and large projected their own scholarly agendas and methodologies onto ordinary readers instead of allowing them to develop their own agenda and methodology.[18] If one is considering Ukpong's actions in specific cases, this is a difficult charge to confirm or deny. It requires a great deal of reading between the lines of what Ukpong actually writes, and it dives too deeply into the murky water of discerning another's intentions. However, if this criticism is applied to how Ukpong develops and presents his model, then one can indeed inquire, first, whether Ukpong presents the relationships between academic and ordinary readers in a self-consistent way and, second, whether his model for the relationship between academic and ordinary readers is really satisfactory.

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[17] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 18.

[18] Anum, "Effective Scholarly," 111-112; Loba-Mkole, *Triple Heritage*, 33.

On the first question, Ukpong's own framework functionally places a higher priority upon academic readers and interests than upon ordinary ones. Ukpong identifies the Bible as a "sacred classic," the property of the ordinary readers (rather than a "classic" belonging to the academy or a "sacred text" belonging to church authorities).[19] Nevertheless, while he says that ordinary readers have interpretive priority, Ukpong ultimately insists that the reading-with process must generate a critical reading that fits with the concerns and practices of academic, and specifically historical-sociological, approaches to the Bible.[20] Ukpong tips his hand in his discussion of ordinary reading when he argues that scholars need to overcome the naïve, dogmatic understandings of ordinary readers so as to enable them to move to more critical understandings of the Bible.[21] His model claims to grant interpretive privilege to ordinary readers but in fact more highly values the interpretive priorities and interests of academic readers. Even if Ukpong is correct in believing that academic readers need to help ordinary people understand the Bible more critically, it is still inconsistent for him to overtly privilege ordinary readers but tacitly place a greater priority upon the interests, methods, and practices of academic readers. This inconsistency could be resolved if Ukpong were simply to acknowledge his position's implicit priority upon academic readers, but that would raise the question of whether Ukpong's model adequately serves ordinary readers and their interests.

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[19] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 189-190; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 20; idem, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 161.

[20] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 21.

[21] Ukpong, "Popular Readings," 587, 590.

Evaluating Whether Ukpong's Model Properly Privileges Ordinary Readers

Unearthing Ordinary Readers' Assumptions

A number of scholars have highlighted the need for academic readers such as Ukpong both to give greater interpretive privilege to ordinary readers and to more directly address the real-life concerns of those readers. Patte has argued that academic readers, or "critical readers" in his terminology, ought not to urge or coerce ordinary readers to produce academically conceived critical, contextual, or inculturated readings. Rather, he indicates that academic readers ought to seek "simply to bring to light ('bring to critical understanding,' as I like to say) which epistemology and hermeneutical categories ordinary readings have used—with the understanding that one epistemology is as appropriate as another."[22] Patte proposes that academic readers ought to help ordinary readers unearth and understand their own assumptions and perspectives, and then the academics should get out of the way and allow ordinary readers to develop any interpretation of the text that makes sense to them in their context. He accordingly relativizes the distinction between academic and ordinary readers and insists that ordinary African readings are just as legitimate as Western critical ones. He ultimately concludes that ordinary readers should be allowed to develop any meaning from the text that they believe promotes justice and liberation. Academics should play the role of enabling ordinary readers to be self-critical—or at least self-aware—without requiring them to produce academic, critical readings of the texts.[23]

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[22] Patte, "Biblical Scholars," 273.

[23] Patte, "Biblical Scholars," 275-276.

Patte promotes similar interpretive values as Ukpong's model, and he provides a greater priority to ordinary readers over against academic ones. However, adopting Patte's proposal in its entirety would require largely jettisoning inculturation hermeneutics' critical sensibilities and, more broadly, would seem to require an extremely relativistic take on the meaning of texts. If one already finds Patte's own interpretive framework compelling, then its ability to privilege the ordinary reader more significantly has a great deal of appeal. However, if one wants to engage in critical scholarly dialogue, or even just maintain that interpreters can actually understand texts more or less accurately, then Patte's particular proposal seems to exact a heavy price for providing more interpretive privilege to ordinary readers. As Curtis points out, legitimatizing any and every ordinary reading discounts the voice of the text and leads to an "anarchy of interpretive strategies."[24]

Recognizing Differences in Interests and Inequalities in Power

If we can appropriate just Patte's point that academic readers ought to focus more upon serving the interests of ordinary readers, then we are on much firmer ground. A number of scholars have proposed ways in which Ukpong's model could more effectively address the concerns of ordinary readers while also continuing to value the critical input of academic readers. Anum has argued that Ukpong and other scholars who practice the method of reading with ordinary readers ought to allow greater "epistemological privilege" to those readers. Ordinary readers should be equal participants in all the steps of the interpretive process and, more significantly, should have their own agendas and

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[24] Curtis, "Encounter with Ordinary," 136.

interests play a greater role in the process.[25] Anum and Lategan both point out that

scholars need to be more aware of the power inequalities inherent in a situation in which

well-trained, well-connected academic readers attempt to read together with lower-class,

poor ordinary readers.[26] Anum therefore proposes that academic readers more

intentionally develop relationships and practices that open the way for ordinary readers to

share their actual beliefs and concerns, rather than simply going along with scholars'

views or (more or less) subtly resisting them.[27]

<div align="center">Providing Ordinary Readers with a Guide to Survival</div>

Anum also raises the question of whether Ukpong's understanding of the interaction

between academic and ordinary readers really enables his model to get at the real-life

concerns and issues of those ordinary readers. Ukpong's interpretive practice does deal

with real issues of exploitation and injustice in the African context, and it does call for

liberative action with regard to those issues. In this sense, inculturation hermeneutics

addresses real-life issues in the African context. However, one can observe from

Ukpong's theory and practice that the issues he discerns and the action he calls for

largely coalesce with the assumptions and concerns of academic liberation theology.

Additionally, his framework, procedure, and practice all place significant priority upon

the concerns and questions of academic theologians. Of course, if one shares certain

theoretical commitments with Ukpong, one might believe that he is making all the right

moves. However, it does still leave the question of whether he is projecting academic

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[25] Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings," 111-112.

[26] Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings," 112-114; idem, "Ye Ma Wo Mo," 13; Lategan, "Scholar and Ordinary Reader," 243-255.

[27] Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings," 115-116.

priorities or engaging the real-life issues of ordinary readers. On this point, scholars have pointed out a number of interpretive foci that ordinary readers might prefer over Ukpong's model.

In the first place, ordinary readers are generally less interested in producing inculturated readings of the Bible than they are in finding help from the Bible to survive difficult life circumstances. Anum and Riches both insist that ordinary readers' interpretive agenda has to do with approaching the Bible as an aid to survival, not with reading the Bible in line with a critical or inculturation agenda. Thus, they maintain that Ukpong and other scholars have prioritized academic concerns rather than engaging with the actual, on-the-ground issues that ordinary readers face. The agendas of academic and ordinary readers clearly demonstrate tension in their interests and goals.[28] Although he is again getting again into the murky realm of discerning intentionality, Anum even argues that ordinary readers want to interpret the text for their immediate context, while scholars are ultimately seeking to make a contribution to their academic context.[29] Ordinary readers do appear to have a much greater interest in finding encouragement from the Bible in the face of the harsh realities of their lives than in developing critical, liberative readings of the biblical texts. Ukpong and other academic readers have not managed to resolve that tension in favor of the concerns of ordinary readers.[30]

This tension may arise because ordinary and academic readers tend to view the Bible differently. It is almost a truism in the field that popular readings in Africa often

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[28] Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings" 111; Riches, "Interpreting the Bible," 184.

[29] Anum, "Ye Ma Wo Mo," 13.

[30] Anum, "Effective Scholarly Readings," 110; Gifford, "Bible in Africa," 218-220; Riches, "Interpreting the Bible," 183.

view the Bible as a book of magical power, while scholars generally approach the Bible primarily as a literary document.[31] Le Marquand has offered a helpful typology for this point. In this typology, reading the Bible as 'specimen' means focusing upon historical analysis of the text, often along the lines of academic biblical scholarship. This is the approach that most formal scholarship takes. Ordinary people, though, often view the Bible as a 'talisman,' a magical book or sacred physical object which has some inherent power. Probably the most common approach to the Bible in Africa is to see it as a 'dragoman.' This is an archaic term for an interpreter or translator who provides guidance for life.[32] LeMarquand's typology suggests that inculturation hermeneutics might more effectively engage with the agenda and concerns of ordinary readers by de-emphasizing critical readings in favor of readings that acknowledge the power of the Bible and provide guidance for navigating the dangerous waters of life in contemporary Africa.

<div align="center">Taking Ordinary Dogmatic Stances Seriously</div>

Ukpong himself points out that ordinary readers tend to approach the text with a variety of naïve, dogmatic stances, but he wants to do away with those views in favor of a more critical approach.[33] However, truly privileging ordinary readers would mean working within the bounds of their preferred interpretive structures rather than seeking to substitute a more academically acceptable conceptual framework. As van der Watt points out, developing a genuinely contextual hermeneutical model requires working within the understandings of the people in the context. In his words, "In Africa the view is still

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[31] Anum, "Ye Ma Wo Mo," 13.

[32] LeMarquand, "Bible as Specimen," 189-199. LeMarquand does not himself use the term 'guide,' but that seems to get the sense of what he means by 'dragoman.'

[33] Ukpong, "Popular Readings," 587-590.

widely accepted that the Bible is the authoritative and inspired word of God that speaks to our problems today. Contextual hermeneutics implies that this view is taken seriously, although one might not agree with it."[34] Even if its scholarly practitioners disagree with the dogmatic positions of ordinary readers, truly giving those readers epistemological privilege entails respecting and—at least to some extent—working with the assumptions and goals of those positions.

Although Ukpong's framework defines ordinary readers particularly in terms of the non-elite, poor, and underprivileged,[35] it might enhance its utility by broadening its definition to include the representative or typical readers of the Bible in Africa. These typical African readers would still be poor and underprivileged, but they might also be explicitly charismatic or evangelical in their hermeneutical and theological concerns.[36] In this vein, Okure has challenged the whole reading-with school of thought to do away with its romantic privileging of a particular sort of ordinary reader. Instead, she suggests, a proper hermeneutical method would open up the reading process to all comers— popular readers of various kinds, pastors, scholars, and any others—to read the texts together in a mutually challenging and enriching process. Ultimately Okure wants to grant interpretive privilege to the whole believing community.[37]

A number of other scholars also want to grant a guiding interpretive function to the past and present Church. While Ukpong portrays the Bible as a "sacred classic" which belongs to the ordinary readers, Zinkuratire obliquely critiques his approach by

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[34] van der Watt, "Hermeneutics of Relevance," 254, note 60.

[35] Ukpong, "Bible Reading," 189-190; idem, "Inculturation Hermeneutics" 20.

[36] Gifford, "Bible in Africa," 203-219; Jenkins, *New Faces of Christianity*, 4-18; Palmer, "African Christian Theology," 11-14.

[37] Okure, "I Will Open," 462.

presenting the Bible as a sacred text, which belongs first of all to the Church rather than

to individual interpreters.[38] Protestant scholars make this point less institutionally and

magisterially than Zinkuratire, but a number of scholars in the discussion on contextual

hermeneutics call for the past and present believing community to exercise some guiding

role in the interpretive process. In these views, it is not ordinary readers as individuals

who exercise interpretive privilege, but rather it is the body of the faithful which bears

interpretive privilege and discerns which meanings are valid expressions of the text and

which are not.[39] While granting epistemological privilege to this much broader set of

ordinary readers would certainly challenge some of Ukpong's own assumptions, working

within the assumptions of the typical readers and the Church in Africa could pave the

way for Ukpong's model to develop a healthier relationship between academic and

ordinary readers, and could also enhance its usefulness for the African context.

<center>Creating Dependencies on the Academic Reader</center>

Ukpong's insistence on the use of historical-sociological tools, and his account of the role

of the academic reader, render his hermeneutical method largely irreproducible in the

African context. The model depends so heavily upon academically-trained readers and

their critical tools that it is difficult to see how the procedure could be meaningfully

duplicated in the absence of those readers. This interpretive model thus creates a new

dependency, or even hegemony, in the interpretive process. While Ukpong faults

traditional biblical studies for not engaging African concerns and for failing to answer

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[38] Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics," 161; Zinkuratire, "Inculturating the Biblical Message," 56-57.

[39] Corrie, "Evangelicals and Liberation Theology," 70-73; Curtis, "Encounter with Ordinary," 136-138; Loba-Mkole, "Rise of Intercultural," 1359-1363; idem, *Triple Heritage,* 140-142.

African questions, his own model seems to require that ordinary readers depend upon and even follow the lead of academic readers working through the methodology of inculturation hermeneutics and the reading-with process.[40] Inculturation hermeneutics thus creates dependencies on academic readers, rather than providing ordinary readers with reproducible resources for interpreting the Bible according to their own concerns and contexts.

Evaluating the Orthopraxis and Utility of Inculturation Hermeneutics

Ukpong's interpretive practice basically lines up with his proposed method and fulfills the goals of his model, but its interpretive results do not adequately reflect the interests of the texts or the cultural and religious aspects of human experience. Moreover, Ukpong's model functionally prioritizes the concerns of academic readers over those of the ordinary readers, so it fails to privilege ordinary readers or deal with their real-life concerns satisfactorily. His model would privilege ordinary readers more effectively if it were to bring the practices and results of critical study forward for consideration and appropriation within the conceptual and contextual concerns of the ordinary readers themselves. This would require re-conceptualizing how academic readers approach ordinary readers. To begin with, this modified model would have scholars attempt to respect and function within ordinary readers' own dogmatic theologies, while aiming to provide encouragement for people in the midst of their struggles. Although the interpretive results would be less critical than Ukpong might prefer, this would place academics and their interpretive resources more clearly in the service of ordinary readers,

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[40] Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics" 17; idem, "Rereading the Bible" 4.

and so in the end would increase inculturation hermeneutics' value for ordinary readers'

interpretation of the Bible.

CONCLUSION: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JUSTIN UKPONG'S
INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS

Describing Ukpong's Inculturation Hermeneutics

Ukpong proposes inculturation hermeneutics as a method of reading the Bible that

grapples with the concerns and questions of the contemporary African context. While

Ukpong's model has some similarities to reader-response theories of interpretation, he

places it in the stream of Third-World contextual approaches to reading the Bible,

emphasizing how the community and the life situation of interpreters affect their

interpretative priorities. Drawing upon the reading-with methodology, Ukpong calls for

academic readers to read the Bible together with ordinary readers. He theoretically grants

ordinary readers interpretive priority in this reading-with process, but his approach

functionally prioritizes the interests of academic readers. The framework of inculturation

hermeneutics calls for the use of historical-sociological tools to open up the text's

historical context so that it can be meaningfully applied to the present interpretive

context. At the same time, Ukpong fuses the process of understanding the historical text

(exegesis) with the process of applying it to the contemporary context (hermeneutics),

and insists that readers' interpretive activity itself produces whatever meaning they find

in the text.

The procedure of inculturation hermeneutics begins by identifying a

contemporary situation that has some correspondence to the historical context of the text,

and proceeds by analyzing that situation to develop a background against which to

interpret the text. Inculturation hermeneutics then analyzes the socio-cultural context of the text on a variety of levels. This provides the material for an analysis of the text in light of the contemporary context, which leads finally to a call for action in the present situation. Ukpong used this procedure to interpret the parable of the shrewd manager and the parable of the talents. His reading of the parable of the shrewd manager portrays the manager as a hero whose actions aid the exploited poor and critique the rich oppressor. He interprets the parable of the talents to a similar end, there interpreting the third servant's actions as a protest against an economic system that benefited the rich and exploited the poor.

Evaluating the Cohesiveness of Inculturation Hermeneutics and its Connection to Other Methods

Schreiter offers five criteria for evaluating contextual theologies, and I have employed these criteria to evaluate Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics as a contextual hermeneutical method. Schreiter's first criterion focuses upon the logical and intuitive cohesiveness of a particular approach. Ukpong's model demonstrates inconsistency between its insistence that all readings are contextually-bound and its use of historical-sociological methods to reconstruct the historical context of the text. Schreiter's fourth and fifth criteria speak to a particular model's ability to engage in a critical give and take with other models, and the tension between contextual and critical concerns in Ukpong's model provides an entry point for considering its ability to incorporate criticism from other perspectives. While some scholars propose dropping either the contextual or critical aspects of inculturation hermeneutics, middle-way views suggest that Ukpong's model

would be best served if it were to moderate its claims for the contextual determinacy of all readings and acknowledge its existing critical, exegetical components.

While taking this middle way would involve some adjustment to inculturation hermeneutics framework, it would both strengthen its internal consistency and enable it to measure up to Schreiter's fourth criterion that a contextual hermeneutical method be able to incorporate criticism from other models. On Schreiter's criterion that a particular method be able to contribute to other models, Ukpong's model fares well as it both builds upon and contributes to a number of other hermeneutical approaches. The framework, procedure, and practice of inculturation hermeneutics draws upon historical-sociological methods, liberation theology's views, and African comparative and evaluative interpretive approaches to the Bible. Ukpong's approach also offers a corrective to interpretive efforts that fail to engage with real-life African issues, and it seeks to broaden out liberation theology's socio-political focus to include the cultural and religious aspects of human existence. While inculturation hermeneutics has some internal tension, it has the ability both to speak to and receive input from other hermeneutical methods. With some adjustments, Ukpong's model could stand up well to Schreiter's criteria on these points.

Evaluating the Practice and Usefulness of Inculturation Hermeneutics

Schreiter's second and third criteria focus upon the results that a given hermeneutical method produces. A comparison of Ukpong's interpretive practice and theory indicates that they align closely, and that Ukpong's practice fits the goals of his model. However, when Ukpong's interpretive practice is evaluated in the broader conversation, it does not always pay proper attention to the voices of other readers or of

the text. While Ukpong's view of the parable of the shrewd manager offers a reasonable reading of that difficult text, his interpretation of the parable of the talents flattens the religious dimensions of the text into the socio-political and turns the text into a platform for espousing liberation interests. This does not grant sufficient power to the voice of the text, nor does it manage to address the full cultural, economic, and religious range of human needs. Ukpong's practice of inculturation hermeneutics sometimes draws good results from the text, and sometimes employs the text only as a mirror for its own preoccupations.

Additionally, Ukpong's account of the relationship between academic and ordinary readers does not allow for ultimately helpful interpretive practices. Ukpong's tacit prioritizing of academic readers undercuts his model's ability to produce useful results for ordinary readers of the Bible in Africa. Ukpong could do much more to address the differences in priorities and power between academic readers, and to protect the hermeneutic interests of ordinary readers. In particular, his model would have greater utility if were intentionally to work within ordinary readers' own dogmatic views, with the aim of encouraging them in the midst of their struggle for survival. Ukpong's model does measure up well to some of the criteria for a contextual hermeneutical method, but this critical examination has shown that he does not provide a fully satisfactory or useful hermeneutic for the African context. The value of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics would increase significantly if it were to more openly acknowledge and own its critical, exegetical components and more effectively serve the interests of ordinary readers of the Bible in Africa.

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