Liberating Interdependence and a People-Centred Mission

Musa W. Dube's Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Mission Texts and the Evolvement of Her Concept of Mission in the HIV/AIDS Reading

Introduction

There's a well-known African dictum which goes more or less like this:
"When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible."[1]

These few sentences are extremely significant: they touch on a great many issues Musa Dube has been working on in her books and articles: race, patriarchy, colonisation, the role of Christians, their interpretation of Christianity and the problematic position of the Bible.

We find ourselves a couple of centuries from the beginning of the white man's travels to foreign yet inhabited lands and here's a white European woman coming to the SBL annual meeting in Philadelphia to talk on mission, the gospel of Matthew and postcolonial feminist and HIV/AIDS hermeneutics as constructed and conveyed in the works of the Motswana theologian Musa Dube! This is not to boast and say, 'how far we have come'. It is to say that the fact that I am here is a consequence of the processes set in motion when the white man first travelled to Africa and colonised both the lands and minds of the people he met, the ensuing struggles for political independence and today's globalisation.

So how did this young white Dutch woman start doing postcolonial feminist theology? Let me tell you a bit. I have been studying theology at various universities, both in The Netherlands and in South Africa. Rather early on I realized I was missing something in theology as it was taught at my school. With leaps and bounds I realized that the thing was missing I was people's faces and voices. Theology was not embodied. To me, there was no flesh on the theory and neither did it breathe or speak to me. The journey towards contextual theologies began there. After an exchange with a South African student and a switch of university in the Netherlands, I found a niche for myself and graduated recently with a Master's Degree in Cross-Cultural Theology. Most of my interest and work in CCT has focused on grassroots Bible reading, contextual hermeneutics and the work done by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the possibilities of translating methods developed in these three "fields" to a Western European context. The combination of the abovementioned three topics leads rather naturally to the works of Musa Dube, one of the best known and widely published African women Biblical critics.

In the following I will sketch how (among others) colonialism and patriarchy are intertwined with the interpretation of biblical texts and concepts of mission addressing three paragraphs from the Gospel of Matthew (in consequently this order: Matt. 28, 18-20, Matt. 15, 21-28 and Matt, 25.31-45). I will focus on Dube's hermeneutical methods, interpretation of the texts and the

[1] M. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St. Louis 2000, 3.

ensuing concept of mission, rather than on the correct translation of the verses, or the various concepts of mission espoused by theologians, churches and church organisations.

In the first section of this paper I will outline, using the example of the great commission (Matt 28.18-19), the way in which Dube analyses how Christian mission and colonialism cannot be separated from one another and how the Bible and Biblical texts are entwined in the colonial enterprise. I will also address the fact that colonial structures have persisted in the globalisation era: how can postcolonial subjects recognise and criticise these destructive power relations in their reading, writing and interpreting?

In the second section I will move on to Dube's postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. She proposes these as the alternative to colonising readings that arise from situations as described in the first paragraph. Reading the story of the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus (Matt 15. 21-28) I will address her methodological programme, a.k.a. Rahab's Reading Prism, to come to a reading which enhances relations of "liberating interdependence" between people – which can be regarded as an alternative missionary model based on social justice in contrast to the colonial missionary model addressed above.

In the last section I will show that the same concepts of mission underlie Dube's HIV/AIDS readings of the Gospel, addressing Matt 25. 31-45. What is the mission of the churches, theological institutions and Christians in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic? How can churches, biblical critics and theological institutions take an example in Jesus' people-centred mission?

At the end of this paper I will recapture what is at stake according to Dube in the act of reading and interpreting and why mission cannot and should not be isolated from this reading and interpreting of Biblical passages. To conclude I will return to my Dutch, Western European context. I will make some remarks on why postcolonial feminist and HIV/AIDS hermeneutics also have great importance as a starter for missionary models for and could contribute to the thinking on multi-cultural and secularised yet multi-religious societies in the West.

1 Matthew 28, 18-20: The Imperative to Travel and to Teach Deconstructed

Introduction

In July/August 2004 I had the opportunity to spend some weeks in Ghana. One day, we visited the Elmina slave fortress at the Cape Coast. During the tour we also passed through the fortress chapel. It was there that I received the direct blow in the face: this was my country's history! The eagerness of my landspeople for wealth was at the roots of suffering for millions, then and now. The stories we had heard mostly from the other side of the coin – how we in the Netherlands had become rich by trading cleverly – were staring at me with quite a different face. The chapel was placed directly above the dungeons in which the women were imprisoned before deportation to the West. The plaque depicted on the previous page was mounted on the wall of the chapel in the fortress.

The text reads – in old Dutch – a compilation of verses 13 and 14 from Psalm 132: "Zion is the Lord's resting place. This is his residence forever." This is how the Bible

was introduced to Africa: on the same ship as the merchants in human lives and above places of incredible suffering. These are the historical facts underlying world Christianity today.

Dube, in her work, addresses this history of colonisation. It is the history of her country, her people and herself: "As a Motswana woman of Southern Africa, my reading for decolonization arises from the historical encounter of Christian texts functioning compatibly with colonialism: of the Bible functioning as the 'talisman' in imperial possession of foreign places and people."[2] Reading and thus interpreting the Bible, the coloniser's book, is never an innocent act for those whose lands were taken away by the same persons who had brought the Bible. In her book *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube investigates the Gospel of Matthew for its views on mission and empire.[3] The following Biblical passage is included in the textual pattern she weaves in her postcolonial feminist analysis.

The Great Commission and the Colonial Era
"[18]And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. [19]Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."[4]

backgroundThroughout history this very text has been used as the motor for mission among non-Christians, and for their (forced) conversion to Christianity. According to Dube, this text not only contains the order to cross and ignore borders, but also contains a "pedagogical imperative", namely, to make disciples of all nations.[5] Markedly, these imperatives are preceded by a verse that states that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus, the one sending forth. The Matthean community has constructed Jesus as a king who has the authority to send forth his disciples, transferring his authority on to them. They in turn can establish an empire in his name and teach to obey. Regarding the historical setting of the gospel, Dube

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[2] M. Dube, "Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)", *Semeia* 75 (1996), 37-59, 44.
[3] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 127-155.
[4] All biblical quotations taken from: *Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford 1995.
[5] M. Dube, ""Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations" (Matt 28:19a). A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy", in: F.F. Segovia, M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, New York 1998, 224-246, 224.

remarks, "While Matthew and his nation were fighting against economic exploitation and the cultural imposition on the part of Rome, the vision that emerges out of the gospel is uncomfortably imperialist."[6]

Biblical texts thus were used as the basis of and the justification for missionary practices, creating and purporting situations of oppression and inequality. However, Biblical texts have not only been used as instigator for imperialism: the book itself is a product of co-opting, resisting or living with imperialism.[7] The texts of the Bible portray many layers of power struggle between and among peoples. However, texts of oppressed people living under imperialism are not necessarily texts of resistance: they may well strive to get a hold onto the power that is now oppressing them and turn it to the same purpose as their former oppressors. The colonised people's response is influenced by the literature of the imperial forces: the worldview and culture of the colonised have partly been taken over by those of the imperial forces, and some groups may well profit from this collaboration.[8] It is thus impossible to completely extricate the literary responses – or for that matter, the Biblical interpretations – of the colonised from the imperialising texts.

The commission thus gives the Christian listener a divine ratification of both the travelling and the teaching. Colonisers saw it as their moral duty to 'civilise the savages' they encountered. Part of their civilising programme was Western education, a tool craftily used in the imperialising programme. Text, a product a carrier and a creator of culture, does not confine itself to the page; it is read, received and acted out in history. To adopt the coloniser's language also meant adopting his culture and worldview – which was most of the time simply equalled to that which was considered Christian – and to lose one's own. Education finished what travelling started: not only the lands, but also the minds of the subjugated were colonised – yet the remainders of the own cultural heritage can well be the start of resistance.[9] The Bible was set as the only source of revelation, above and instead of all other texts. A great emphasis on textual tradition replaced the oral traditions, which were accorded no authority. The "[i]mperialist ideology of expansion uses the promotion of its own cultural values to devalue, replace and suppress diversity. Its strategy is characterized by a massive inclusivity but not equality."[10]

The Globalisation Era

Travelling, which once, in a one-way traffic manner brought the Bible and a certain Western, Christian view on education from the imperial centre to the colonies, now also brings the (formerly) colonised to those imperial centres among other reasons to receive a Western

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[6] "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of all Nations", 231.

[7] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 48.

[8] Idem, 51-2.

[9] M. Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Time Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999), 33-59, 34.

[10] "Reading for Decolonisation", 52.

education, continuing the colonisation of minds.[11] Globalisation has put peoples and cultures even more in touch than colonialism has done. Yet, Dube asks: "Who is globalizing and who is being globalized?"[12] Globalisation as it is happening at the moment continues the exploitative and oppressive structures set in motion by colonialism, minus the territorial occupation. These days, those who are globalised, are subjugated to Transnational Corporations, the IMF and the World Bank, instead of to a nation state. The people who are being globalised do not reap the benefits from globalisation as people in the globalising parts of the world can. The oppression, exploitation and inequality that were established by colonisation remain similar.

How to Recognise and Criticise an Imperialising Text

Uncovering the factor of imperialism, which often goes without explicit mention in the text, offers a broader understanding of these texts. To analyse imperialising texts, Dube has drawn up a set of questions.[13] First she asks if the implied author rejects or condones the colonialism/imperialism of his time, and how that is reflected in the text. She then moves on to question the text for its attitude towards travel to foreign lands. This is a question after the literary-rhetorical strategies of the implied author, i.e. the contrasting characterisations of the colonised and the colonisers and their lands, the authorisation of travel and the construction of anti-conquest ideologies.[14] After asking for these literary-rhetorical strategies and how they are employed in the text, Dube looks at how difference is constructed in the texts and how relations are built on this concept of difference. Is difference a positive thing, valued by equal relationships in which all have a place or is it to be condemned, and are universalising values espoused?[15] The last step is questioning the employment of gender representations and how they are used: to express subordination or equality?[16]

These questions are to be used to discern, analyse and to start to deconstruct the oppressive elements in texts. They arouse questions of power, of identity, of representation, of equality: issues trod upon by imperialism. In the next paragraph I will describe the ways in which Dube addresses both the imperialistic and patriarchal structures underlying Bible texts, using the

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[11] "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations", 229.

[12] M. Dube, "Ínhabiting God's Garden. Are We in the Global Village or God's Garden?", *Ministerial Formation* 96 (2002), 29-35, 31.

[13] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 57.

[14] The anti-conquest ideologies designate "the literary strategies by which the colonisers secure their innocence while asserting their right to travel to, enter, and possess resources and lands that belong to foreign nations […]", Ibid. Dube here uses a concept from M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York 1992.

[15] This question asks for the contact zone, "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other to establish ongoing relations.", Idem, 58. Also a concept from Pratt.

[16] In a later article, working with the same list of questions, Dube adds the question: "Which side am I reading from: the colonizer, the colonized or the collaborator?" M. Dube, "Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation", in: S. Schroers, S. Bietenhard (eds.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement series 374), Sheffield 2003, 60-76, 72.

example of the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus. Yet, she not only addresses these oppressive structures, but also draws up a programme to move beyond subjugation. How then can the deconstruction of oppressive models interpretation that lead to a subjugating practice of mission arrive at a model that respects difference and intends to liberate instead of subjugate? That will be the main question I will answer in the next section.

2 Matthew 15, 21-28: Reading through Rahab's Reading Prism for Liberating Interdependence

Rahab's Reading Prism

Before I describe Dube's analysis of Matthew 15, I will first address her reading strategy, which she has named Rahab's reading prism, after the whore Rahab, who, according to the Biblical tale about her, betrayed her people and took the side of those taking Jericho. In Rahab's reading prism, Dube makes clear that to address the power structures in the text she applies both feminism and postcolonialism as a critical category. Feminist (theological/biblical) analysis has mostly been a discourse of white Western women deciding what is best for all women. In doing so, they ignored and denied the diversity among women around the world and what all these diverse voices have to say on their own liberation – therefore they were no less oppressive than there male counterparts. Postcolonialism tries to set that balance straight. Yet, in postcolonial (theological/biblical) analysis often women's voices remain undetected and go unheard, thus sustaining the oppression of women. Rahab's reading prism takes on both. The prism is not just a reading strategy, it moves beyond the reading to the acting: where the mission practice starts.

Rahab's reading prism is a reading strategy "that takes cognizance of both patriarchal and imperialist forms of oppression and how they often utilize women's bodies. It is a prism in the sense that it seeks to lay bare, as much as possible, the colors of a text for its ideological tones and impact."[17] Let me summarise the different points to Rahab's reading prism and what it tries to achieve.[18]

Firstly, it sensitises the feminist and liberation reader to the tension between coloniser and colonised as a direct consequence of imperial and patriarchal oppression both today and in history (section one of this paper can be considered to be this first step). Recognising that we all come from different backgrounds, we can all make a choice to read for decolonisation and depatriarchalisation and to form feminist coalitions of liberation. *Secondly*, even though the Rahab of Joshua is a woman who totes the lines of her oppressor, Rahab's reading prism also consists of Rahabs who share in the resurrection experience: i.e. Rahabs that resist, stand up and speak out against oppression. These Rahabs manage to subvert the texts that construct them: they reject and recreate them. *Thirdly*, these opposing Rahabs of the resurrection experience are not afraid to name and analyse oppressive texts. But they do not live by one text alone: they

[17] Idem, 73.

[18] All points from *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretaqtion of the Bible*, 122-3.

create their own decolonising, hybrid discourse and create new postcolonial spaces for the making of new narratives. They tell stories of equality, liberation and the celebration of difference. *Fourth*, the reading prism takes a close look at all sides and wants to resist imperialism and patriarchy in its readings. It seeks to form political coalitions of equity and does not accept that some get to speak, and others get to parrot. It is about transgressing boundaries without condemning the culture and canon that is found on the other side of the border. *Lastly*, Rahabs reading prism does not stop at analysis, it moves beyond to the creation and use of postcolonial feminist new spaces. This new space wants to radically do away with inequality and the suppression of difference, and come to "[…] readings-writings of liberating interdependence, where differences, equality, and justice for various cultures, religions, genders, classes, sexualities, ethnicities, and races can be subject to constant re-evaluation and celebration in the interconnectedness of our relationships."[19]

The Encounter through Rahab's Reading Prism

"[21]Jesus left that place [Gennesaret, NP] *and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. [22] Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' [23] But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' [24] He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' [25] But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' [26] He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' [27] She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' [28] Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."*

Reading through the prism – which is more multi-faceted than a looking glass – Dube starts in her decolonising analysis of the story of the Canaanite woman with acknowledging the background of the gospel of Matthew as a rhetorical text created in a historical time of imperialism. The implied author is part of the power struggles within the setting of occupation by the Roman Empire, and this is reflected in the text he composes.[20] In this setting then, we should also see the story of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28), which can be regarded as a type-scene of land possession.[21] Dube analyses the text along the parameters of the geographical setting and the characters, i.e. Jesus, the Canaanite woman and the disciples.

Regarding the *geographical setting*, Dube notes that the pericope starts and ends with a new geographical identification. Geography not only refers to land, but also to the peoples living in

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[19] Idem, 123.

[20] Idem, 127ff.

[21] Idem, 144. Type-scenes of land possession mean to say that geography in postcolonial analyses is a physical reality and an ideological construction at the same time: it represents both the land and the bodies of the people inhabiting that land, bodies designated with and without power, described as male or female. Readers, writers, interpreters and characters in the tales carry those physicalities with them and carry them on. The imperialist and patriarchal domination is reflected in the persons that possess the land (and thus the bodies). Idem, 119.

the lands: Canaanites and Israelites, names that are ideologically laden. Dube questions the purposes of telling a story in which Jesus moves across the boundaries of his own country into Canaanite territory and meets with a Canaanite woman.[22] Reading the chapter, one should remember that the text reflects the power struggles between different factions of society, in this case between the Matthean community and religious authorities in Jerusalem under the pressure of occupation by the Roman Empire.

Jesus is portrayed as a divine traveller to the land of the Canaanites: on his arrival he is immediately asked to heal a child and after the begging of the mother does so by his word. The way he is addressed by the woman also implies that next to the Canaanite woman he is not underprivileged, but rather from the privileged gender, class and race.[23]

"[T]he *Canaanite woman* (italics NP) and her daughter represent foreigners who appear in stories they did not write. The woman character is notably the first point of contact, thus highlighting the reoccurrence of the type-scene of land possession and its ideology."[24] The Canaanite woman appears as another Rahab. She came out to seek healing for her daughter who was severely possessed. In a foreign land and a patriarchal society, a woman was the first point of contact for Jesus and his disciples. But it is somewhat unclear who has the initiative here: Jesus or the woman? The woman crying out her need is ignored by Jesus. Her identity as a Canaanite is derogated: she is identified with a dog. Only when she accepts this identity she is helped – because her faith is great, her daughter is healed.[25]

The disciples in this story are the hidden actors, but looking behind the text "the disciples would most probably represent the Matthean church leaders or community"[26] and the author of the gospel could well be seen as one of them. This makes the disciples travellers as well; they are the ones sent to the nations.[27]

When you take this story as an indication of how mission should be done, it is no strange fact that imperialism and Christianisation came hand in hand. There is hardly a sign of equality between the divine traveller and the "canine" woman. Besides the reception throughout history, the redactor of Matthew also had an agenda: his intention was to underline the fact that the divinity of Jesus was recognised by outsiders who were considered less, but not by insiders, i.e. the religious leaders of Jerusalem. This again can serve as a sanctification of travel. However, recognising divinity they may, but the outsiders will never become children; they will remain possessed, women-like dogs, begging for inclusion.[28]

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[22] Idem, 145-6.
[23] Idem, 146-7.
[24] Idem, 147.
[25] Idem, 147-153.
[26] Idem, 153.
[27] Idem, 153-4.
[28] Idem, 154.

Interpretations through Rahab's Reading Prism: Resisting Oppression

As a next step Dube debunks the readings and interpretations of metropolitan scholars, both white men and white women/feminists. She shows that in most of their readings there is little sensitivity for the imperial background of the text and the implications of this for the manner in which the text is written. Feminist scholars want to claim the Canaanite woman for their cause, yet glance over the fact that the woman debases herself to the level of a dog to receive healing for her daughter.[29]

Dube has applied various reading techniques come to resisting readings of Matthew 15, of which I will address two. First, she has read and reread as a divination set[30] in search for the healing of international relations, the unequal social relationships between Canaanites and Israelites are put forward. These need healing just as much as the possessed girl. Through the initiative of the woman the healing could take place, not just by Jesus' divine powers.[31]

Secondly, Dube read this story with women from the African Independent Churches (AICs)[32] and presented them with open questions on different parts of the text.[33] Besides her pre-set questions she asked the women to preach on the text. Combining the answers to the questionnaire and the analysis of the sermons, four aspects can be recognised:[34] First, the framework of Semoya[35], which resists discrimination and promotes the healing of relationships. Second, "the wisdom of a creative integration of different religious traditions"[36], resisting the imperial imposition of Christianity as the sole religion. By combining that which enhances life and difference from both traditional religion and Christianity, members of AICs subverted Christianity. Third, their readings also offer a feminist model of liberation. Not being bound by the limits of the written word, the women listen to the Spirit and retell stories and create their own stories of healing and empowerment. Fourth, healing is an act of political resistance and survival: the women can heal through God's Spirit. As such, they are in control of their situation

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[29] Idem, 127-195. My summary of these chapters is a very broad sweep, ignoring a great many nuances in Dube's analysis.

[30] A divining set is used by a healer diviner and usually consists of several pieces. By throwing the set and looking at the positions the pieces fall in several times for several phases of the process, the problem can be discerned and a diagnosis can be made. For a description of the process and why it is well fit to be used as a hermeneutical tool, cf. M. Dube, "Divining Texts for International Relations: Matt. 15:21-28", in: I. Kitzberger (ed.), *Transformative Encounters. Jesus and Women Re-Viewed* (Biblical Interpretation Series 43), Leiden 2000, 315-328,316-321.

[31] Idem, 323-328.

[32] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 184-195.

[33] The questions included: "Why do you think Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon? (v.21)"; "Why did Jesus not respond to the woman's request?"; "Who are the children and who are the dogs? (a) Israelites; (b) Canaanites; (c) other"; "Is this story a case of racism between Canaanites and Israelites?" Idem, 187-190.

[34] All four aspects, Idem, 192-5.

[35] Semoya means Spirit in Setswana. Pneumatology is central to the theology of the AICs: the Spirit gives women and men the power "to prophecy, heal the sick, assist those searching for jobs, restore family relations, ensure good harvest, good rains and good reproduction of life stock, and to dispel the ever-intruding forces from people's lives. Healing, as a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit, is an act of restoring life as a whole." M. Dube, "Readings of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations of Matt 15: 21-28", in: *Semeia* 71 (1996), 111-129, 112.

[36] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 192.

and are able to change it for the better. The answers to the questions naturally differed among the women and the sermons highlighted different aspects in the narrative. Dube remarked that the individual interpretations may not be liberating as such, but the strength lies in their interpretative practices: "Their vision lies in their continued history of resisting imperialism and patriarchy; in readings and practices that reject the privileging of biblical texts and religions above other cultural perceptions of reality (a radical transgression of boundaries); in their movements and practices, which have always included women and men in membership and leadership; and in their capacity to read the biblical text (and a substantial amount of resistance to interpretation), while insisting on the authority of hearing the unwritten word of the Spirit."[37]

Mission through Rahab's Reading Prism

Can a Biblical tale deconstructed, read against the grain and with many different interpretations serve as a start for mission and for change? Or is it not the Biblical tale, but the underlying attitude of reading and awareness of power structures that determine relations, in the text, in the theories applied and in the reader, that helps us to come to a liberating concept of mission through a story which is not necessarily "simply exemplary"?

The variety of interpretations as described above creates a wide spectre of reading and interpretation. The sheer diversity means that the interpretations both supplement and question each other. The purpose of this diversity in method and thus in interpretation hybridises and subverts the claims to authority of "The One and Only Correct Way of Reading". Hybridity and subversion aspire to create postcolonial feminist new spaces (cf. the last point of Rahab's reading prism). In these spaces women align and express themselves against patriarchy and imperialism and are able to form political coalitions. "As used here, new spaces, therefore, define new frameworks of imagining reality and building social, economic and political structures that do not espouse patriarchal and imperial forms of relationships, or any form of oppression. Such new spaces demand courage to constantly plant new seeds of critical assessment of social structures and build relationships of liberating interdependence."[38] In this open space, "global women can do their feminist hermeneutics in a multi-cultural setting, where other cultures/religions are recognized and read alongside (not above or below) the Bible."[39]

The aim of reading methods for the creation of postcolonial feminist new spaces – and thus also for the methods of decolonisation – is to come to liberating interdependence "between genders, races ethnicities, continents, cultures, nations, and the environment."[40] Liberating interdependence is the alternative to colonial and imperialising relationships. This means that biblical studies, churches and mission can no longer bracket either the category of imperialism or that of patriarchy; to do so would put us in the old pitfalls again, oppressing those who are

[37] Idem, 195.
[38] Idem, 116.
[39] "Jumping the Fire with Judith", 72.
[40] *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 201.

considered "other". Diversity is part of God's creation and must be valued as such. Liberating interdependence is about knowing and respecting the other as different. It is about accepting the fact that there are many stories that are reinterpreted in light of the other. Through "difficult dialogues", we can come closer to this liberating interdependence. Difficult dialogues are about meeting with and entering the conversation with different others: accepting that all participants are different yet equal.[41] This means that we cannot deny the influence of imperialism and patriarchy on who we are, but that we must counteract these together, in multi-cultural ways and as equal subjects.

3 Matthew 25, 31-45: An HIV/AIDS Reading Shouting Out for Social Justice

Theology at a Cul-de-Sac

Dube's works on HIV/AIDS is a change in emphasis – Dube uses the metaphor of a YOU-turn sign at the end of cul-de-sac[42] – yet a strong continuation of the themes of social justice that inspire the methods addressed above. There is a great sense of urgency in Dube's writings on HIV/AIDS, writings that are aimed not only for a scholarly audience, but also at church and faith readers. The disease has brought theology and its interpretative schemes and methods to a dead end, she says, and the only real option is to find another way around. Realising that HIV/AIDS hits hardest among the young and that Botswana has the highest percentage of HIV/AIDS infections in the world,[43] Dube started to question the purpose of teaching biblical studies: "[…] I began to ask a question which every student also had in mind; namely, if Jesus can heal this much, why can't Jesus heal us of HIV/AIDS in our nation and the world? With the HIV/AIDS death scare, stigma, suffering and fear of dying or contracting the disease, how do you read the synoptic gospels? The social setting of illness, fear and discrimination against the sick and orphans demanded a rereading."[44] The alternative is to keep ending up in that cul-de-sac. The recognition that millions have died, millions are infected and affected and that many more get infected every day is the greatest challenge ever to those who teach and preach: how can they help their communities stay alive?

The programmes for prevention are targeted at abstinence and being faithful, which is just not as easy as it sounds. This is especially true for women (and children); one of the major factors in the spread of the disease is that many women do not have the power to make decisions about their lives and their bodies.[45] HIV/AIDS attacks life itself and all dimensions in life: economic, social, political, spiritual, psychological and cultural.[46] All these need to be

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[41] M. Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible", *Semeia* 78 (1997), 11-25, 22.

[42] M. Dube, "Doing Theological/Religious Education. A Paradigm of Shattered Dreams & *Cul de Sac/ed* Roads", *Ministerial Formation* 102 (2004), 4-12, 11.

[43] M. Dube (ed.), *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum; Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, Geneva 2003, 105.

[44] "Doing Theological/Religious Education", 6-7.

[45] M. Dube, "Preaching to the Converted: Unsettling the Christian Church. A Theological View: A Scriptural Injunction", *Ministerial Formation* 93 (2001), 38-50, 43.

[46] *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum*, vii.

reviewed and addressed: "[T]he fact that HIV/AIDS is an epidemic within other social diseases of poverty, gender inequalities, violence, human rights abuse, ethnic conflicts/cleansing, national and international injustice and discrimination on the basis of sexuality, race, age, physical ability calls for a church whose approach is socially, economically, culturally and politically well informed."[47]

"You Did it to Me": A People-Centred Mission

"[31]When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. [32] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, [33] and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. [34] Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come that you are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; [35] for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' [37] Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? [38] And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? [39] And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' [40] And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' [41] Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; [42] for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, [43]I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' [44] Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not take care of you?' [45] Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

Reading the gospels and looking at Matt. 25: 31-45 in particular,[48] one can conclude that Jesus' mission was targeted at those who were marginalised in society, those in need for care and compassion; he identified himself with the less privileged. In *AfricaPraying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy* which Dube has edited, this text is used in a service on compassion: "In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus makes, perhaps, the most compelling case for the Christian church to be compassionate. Jesus calls upon all his followers to see him in the faces of those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and the imprisoned. Serving these or failing to serve these is tantamount to doing it to Jesus. This passage calls us in the most compelling way, […] to see, hear and feel the pains of Jesus in the faces and the cries of the

[47] M. Dube (ed.), *AfricaPraying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*, Geneva 2003, no page numbers in my downloaded version (http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/africapraying.html). This quote comes from the introduction to the handbook.

[48] M. Dube, "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era", in: *International Review of Missions* Vol. XCI no. 363 (2002), 535-549, 536 ff.

infected and the affected. We *must* be compassionate, if we count ourselves worthy to enter God's kingdom." Thus, if the less privileged suffer from HIV/AIDS, Jesus suffers from HIV/AIDS with them. And if Jesus' mission is the churches' mission, then also the church suffers of HIV/AIDS with them. The church will be judged on their compassion and care. Looking at Jesus' ministry, healing was an important component: "[…] health is God's will for all people. […] We need to operate from a standpoint that holds that health is a God given right to all people and the whole creation. HIV/AIDS is an illness, an epidemic that violates God's creation and kingdom – it is not and cannot be sent by God."[49]

Matthew 25 then becomes a mission-text, redefining mission as it has been understood from for example Matthew 28: it is not about going to far away countries converting people, but it is about a people-centred mission that proclaims the gospel of life through following Jesus' example of caring for the sick, the imprisoned, and the widowed.

Mission for the Church and the Academy in the HIV/AIDS Era

HIV/AIDS calls for a prophetic church, a church that bases itself in the social, political, economical and cultural circumstances of the people, and that does not shy away from addressing these.[50] Dube identifies a need for preaching to the converted: to bring the church back to valuing "life and all human beings as sacred to God."[51] The church has to put its hands where its mouth is. Justice, compassion and faith should be an integral part of theology, of the churches' teaching and practice.[52] Scripture needs to be reinterpreted like Jesus did: he was not afraid to do away with texts that inspired death and oppression instead of life.[53] The call to reinterpret is thus a call for a prophetic church in society, a church that is willing to learn and to cross the boundaries of tradition.

Reinterpretation of texts in the HIV/AIDS era is not done in ivory towers, but with the people infected with and affected by the disease. Only then can the church respond to the needs of the people. The gospel of life can be proclaimed by the church, but only if the church really becomes the body of Christ here on earth. The text of Matthew 25 shows how the church, the academy, the readers, the texts and the interpreters need to address, incorporate and read in the context of HIV/AIDS issues. This means that the church, but also academia as the educators of church leaders and theological scholars, should tackle issues of taboos (like human sexuality) and stigma (like considering HIV/AIDS as a punishment from God). Thus, the academy, at which another fair share of the articles and a book, *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum*, is aimed, needs to incorporate HIV/AIDS issues in its education: social justice issues cannot be separated from faith and academic training. "[A]ll departments, disciplines, all of us, wherever we are and whatever discipline we pursue, should ask how we are contributing now and how we can contribute in

[49] "Preaching to the Converted", 42.
[50] *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum*, viii-ix.
[51] "Theological Challenges", 544.
[52] "Preaching to the Converted", 47.
[53] "Theological Challenges", 545.

the future to the lessening and the final eradication of HIV/AIDS. It is our moral obligation as biblical educators to do all we can in the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the provision of quality care for the infected and affected, the elimination of stigma and discrimination, and minimizing its impact on our world. We must equip our students to live and operate in HIV/AIDS contexts and contribute towards eliminating this epidemic and gaining new knowledge that can improve life in general."[54] It is thus within the framework of searching for liberating interdependence in the footsteps of Jesus' people-centred mission that Dube seeks to connect the academy, the churches, faith based organisations, and social justice issues: these are not to be separated, and if they are, oppressive structures will continue.

4 Concluding

Having read three different texts from the Gospel of Matthew, it is interesting to notice that they do not all receive the same treatment. Firstly, the great commission which is taken as one of the causes of colonialism needs to supplemented by other mission narratives. Secondly, the story of the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus was thoroughly deconstructed and reconstructed through Rahab's reading prism. Whereas, thirdly, the paragraph from Matthew 25 situated at the end of times is used as a tool to be applied – by church and faith leaders, not just scholars which is more the case with the first two texts – directly for the mission of the church in the HIV/AIDS era. The differences in approach can be deduced from the very different character of the texts: one is a commandment, which has brought a lot of suffering for a lot of people through times. One is a story of an encounter, in which the one who is sent by God to the people turns out to set limits that further inequality between people. The third text surpasses those limits and pleads for care, compassion and justice. The least among us are the ones with whom God identifies: a very direct appeal for social justice that does not need to be deconstructed for a liberating practice of reading and mission.

The leitmotiv in all of Dube's work is that religion, churches, theologians, biblical critics should further that which enhances life and should counteract that which denies it: most of all in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Taking Jesus as the supreme example – despite the slip up in his encounter with the Canaanite woman as recounted by the Matthean community – doing mission is that which furthers life by putting the least in the centre, by healing and comforting them. This is a similar aim in its underlying motives to discerning the oppressive imperialistic and patriarchal tendencies in the text, the interpretation and in the reader so as to heal the unequal, broken relationships between people and to come to relations of liberating interdependence. These relations further life for all, in all our diversity.

Postcolonial Feminist and HIV/AIDS Readings in the Globalising World: A Return to my Dutch Context

At the end of this paper, I would like to return to my own context – for after all, my point of entry in the discourse on postcolonial feminist and HIV/AIDS hermeneutics is quite a different

[54] *HIV/AIDS and the* Curriculum, 11-2.

one from Dube's. I am a Dutch student of theology, but I am also trying to find answers to justice issues as they arise in the face of globalisation.

I have grown up with all the privileges that being born in Western Europe brings. Though my parents were far from rich, there never was any doubt about the fact that I would be able to choose my own path through education. I was encouraged to travel, to meet people from all over the world, to broaden my mind. All this is privilege – and I acknowledge that. But having had the privilege of travel, I also am able to see that my story is but one side of reality. In my country, HIV/AIDS is not a visible problem as it is in Southern Africa. Neither is poverty. Neither are human rights violations. That they are not visible does not mean that they do not exist. We would be like the naked emperor parading through the streets trying to deny this reality. And sometimes we are. There is comfort in the denial of realities beyond your doorstep.

Over the last couple of years that comfort has become more and more addled. September 11th 2001, the murder of the right wing politician Pim Fortuyn, who proclaimed that he would change the situation in the Netherlands by cutting back immigration and by singling out the Muslims as the scapegoats for many problems in May 2002, and the murder on a provocative and outspoken film director, Theo van Gogh, by a young Muslim extremist in November 2004 have changed the climate of the Netherlands considerably. Whereas before we were a quiet little country, internationally known for our progressive legislation and tolerance, tensions now have risen between groups in society – mostly between factions of "indigenous" Dutch and Muslims. These tensions are fed by the media and politics. It is spiralling, and may well spiral out of control one day.

Multi-cultural/religious societies are one of the consequences of white men going out to convert. The tensions between former Christians (because in a highly secularised country like the Netherlands most of the people do not belong to any church and are suspicious of organised religion. However, the majority does consider itself religious!) and Muslims go a long way back. These are not solved by easy solutions, or by denial of difference. Difficult dialogues may at one point bring about understanding and respect – I cannot think of any other way. Knowing where problems come from, knowing history, acknowledging our place in the present globalising world is something postcolonial feminist theories can help to bring about. The fact that people seek to settle in the metropolitan centres of the world is a direct consequence of the political, economical and social order sustained by, among others, the European Union. As long as we keep our borders closed, want the cheapest products against the cheapest prices we will keep people living in poverty – and thus seeking refuge in countries like my own.

For me, readings and interpretations that are aware of oppressive structures sensitise people towards each other. The churches, marginal as they may have become in my Dutch context, should stop navel gazing. Change can be worked from the margins: that is the place where an alternative culture, to the mainstream, fast and capitalist, can exist. The church and the theological academies should and could be a prophetic voice in our society, recognising and addressing the signs of the times.

Yet, so far, the church and the academies have mostly failed to welcome those that have settled in the Netherlands. The consequence is that there are innumerable migrant churches that keep a separate status – a shame. Neither have theological institutions taken responsibility; except for temporary exchange students, the few students that choose to do theology are white. Contextual theology is still a separate subject matter, not integrated in the main discourse of theology, as if a commentary on Bible by Two-Thirds World scholars should be placed at the shelf of intercultural theology, instead of with the other Biblical commentaries!

Churches, academies and scholars are still far from thinking global in a liberating way, acknowledging diversity, and abandoning their superior stance towards the other. What comes from outside is less good. This intellectual and spiritual xenophobia is something I wish to address applying postcolonial and feminist methods. I expect from churches and theologians to take on a leading role in society when it comes to meeting the other, to comforting the sick and to welcome the stranger – and not just those on our doorsteps, but also in solidarity with those further away. As long as we are too afraid and too pre-occupied to do so, judgement will be harsh.