

## „To push the boundaries“

### Acknowledging the many histories of the Bible

An Interview with Musa Dube

*Musa Dube is a distinguished scholar from Botswana promoting postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible. During spring 2011 she stayed as guest at Bamberg university. The interview was held by Bernhard Offenberger on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011.*



**Bernhard Offenberger:** *I would like to start with a personal question: What is your source of motivation, of your dreams, which give you strength?*

---

**Musa Dube:** Certainly there are many dreams and inspirations. Part of my drive to write is having been educated, primarily my postgraduate education, both in Britain and in the US and getting the feel on how westernized the scholarship was and how colonizing it felt to be in that type of postgraduate program. What I read and the lessons I heard were for me very exclusionary.

One time I did ask my professor why they didn't have African scholars in the program and he said: Well, if you can give me African biblical scholars – I will enter them. So, that is one of my aims, that I must make sure that my own scholarship really contributes to making African voices heard.

Also I wanted to use my experiences of having had a postgraduate education here and discovering how westernized and exclusionary it was and being colonized again. I determined to ask different questions.

For me, for example the doing of historical critical method and its focus on ancient times, very useful but was also very exclusionary in the sense that it did not allow me to talk about my historical experience as colonized person.

So, basically since this historical critical method and asking about the ancient times, background, cultures, etc., exegesis was strongly defined as the art of bringing out things from the text that meant trying to read what the author intended.

You know, my history as being a colonized person having experienced the Bible as coming with colonialism, I had no space for these questions.

So I found that the privileging of the ancient context was one useful and had its purposes, but in the end of the day: very colonizing.

For me what we needed was to acknowledge various histories of the Bible, not just one.

I think even the text itself, the Bible itself does propound that people must preach it. So if there is any book that must have various histories and places, where it isn't gone in tabernacle, than it is the Bible

I'm not against the study of the ancient times. That is one history of the Bible. But we need to pay attention to all the histories of the Bible and the places, where it has gone, and how it has functioned and how our history informs how we read the text.

My inspiration – and I have to thank God for coming into the scholarship. I still remember when being in Britain and studying about hist criticism I asked myself: what the hell is this, and thinking: how on earth can I continue with this thing, because it was so useless to me, till we had this one lesson on feminist studies. I think that that was the first redeeming factor. That made me feel: Huuu – maybe I can continue with this.

Of course what feminism did was to say: I have to do my scholarship from my own experience. My experience isn't just nothing. It is a political data that I assume to access and read the text. That was the first redeeming factor! That made me feel: Ok – maybe I can continue with this. Maybe there is something I can do, that addresses the issues of my life with it. Of course, when I continued with feminist biblical studies, I became increasingly aware that I am still excluded, that it didn't answer the concerns of being a Two-Thirds World scholar, scholar from a colonized history.

So I began to ask different questions.

I am very thankful to what the feminist scholarship has opened. But it felt that it more had to be pushed further. So when I went to do my PhD I was asking: how do I read the Bible, as woman, who has been colonized, I was dealing with issues of patriarchy, but I was also dealing with issues of colonialism

Again I have to say that I am very thankful that I happened to be in the scholarship, doing my PhD in a time when the scholarship was opening up to other methods of reading. Reader response, narrative criticism, all sorts of things doing critical analysis. Liberation also gave much hope to Two-Third World scholars.

When I moved from Britain the only thing of hope was feminist criticism. So going to the US, it was much more contextual, much more open to debate. I must say that one thing I really like about the US is because of its racial diversity, issues of identity are discussed, issues of race are discussed, where we come from, why we are here, is discussed, how that affects what we read, is discussed.

You know, the modern history is a place where you just cannot delete various differences, especially the issue of race, whether you are African, native, ...

It becomes a place where at least history is discussed: how do we come here, what kind of coalitions have informed our knowledge, how does that actually influence on how we structure our programs of learning, of reading. The kind of knowledge that we produce. So being in the US in that context was very very helpful.

Because of the different minorities, African American, Native American, gays and lesbians have pushed the boundaries of knowledge production.

You feel like you're at a place where you can at least put your question.

But sometimes you're in a place where you find the scholarship so narrowly defined in the historical critical method, that they have not come to the point, where it is problematized where it is put in the context of colonization, where it is asked how it has contributed.

So my motivations have been to contribute to the production of knowledge through my experience. And to push the boundaries of knowledge, in producing knowledge which really is diverse and representative of the world as it is, in all its diversities. I think that we need a scholarship which is not narrowly defined from one single perspective.

**BO:** *To what extent did other African scholarship and African intellectual movements influence you and how do you view African scholarship today?*

---

**MD:** I think that one of the scholarships which have been very very useful to me in the African context is the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which was begun by Mercy Oduyoye. Also having realized in the early 80s that she was amongst male scholars and that the scholarship was defined by male perspective, she began the movement of finding other African women and encouraging us to look at our religion from our perspectives, how it affects the lives of women, and how we can produce knowledge that actually counteracts patriarchy.

So when I finished my PhD I very much got involved in that Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and for some time headed the section which was doing African Women bible Interpretation.

So we did other ways of reading. We tried to contribute to scholarship by reading the Bible as African women and from African perspectives of analysis. So in that movement we did reading the Bible in story telling perspectives, from divination perspectives, through African proverbs and stories. We also tried to begin rereading the colonial translations. And one of our issues had to do with the fact, that normally most African languages did not have gender for the names of God. So when the Bible was translated during colonial times, they used the names of the Gods which were there, and which didn't have any gender and

So we had to reread and we struggled with the question of how can we translate in a way that doesn't bring patriarchy into our languages. Because what happened with these translations, that occasionally it made people think that originally these names had been male.

**BO:** *Did you also do new Bible translations?*

---

**MD:** I wish. But it is a major economic projects. So it still is a project to be underdone. But we can still begin to reread and to problematize, and to push the boundaries of both theory and practice of translation, and hope that some of the readers will take some of our observations.

**BO:** *I imagine, that it is also difficult to get these translations into the communities.*

---

**MD:** Actually that is an amazing thing: apparently if a text has been with a community for more than a century, even if you produce new versions.

Therefore in a current project I want to research: in the colonial times they had translated “demons” as “ancesters”. In the new version from 1993 they had changed that. But when I went to read with my indigenous women from the 1993 version they still read the old text. Because this is the text they know, even the orthography, the old orthography to them has been nearly installed as a holy language.

So yes, it is really an interesting thing that once new versions are made and taken into communities, that have been using the colonial texts for more than a century, you find that the community is not receptive. The old version is colonizing in a way. A number of people are doing translation studies. But the old translation, it has such a grip on the people.

**BO:** *How do you feel in general. If you come up with things like feminist or postcolonial theology. Is it accepted? Either in communities or in academy.*

---

**MD:** It depends with who we are with and where we are. Of course you always have some people accepting and others not, but for me I feel that this is the way that I need to make my contribution. To push the boundaries. Of course it is more than I can do in my lifetime. So my work is just a drop in the ocean, in terms of how much more needs to be done.

The whole scholarship with historical criticism was developed during colonial times and worked with colonialism. And during the time that missionaries were up and out with the colonialism was the time when we became to be Bible reading people.

So just when the scholarship will own up to this we will meet to realize that the world has interacted, and that that history is not gone or cannot really be forgotten.

That somehow we need to be asking ourselves that how what we do in our small corners of the world is still already framed in the history, modern history that has affected us all. Whether you read Third World scholars or you don't read it – you are already framed in the modern colonial history. In fact you're choosing not to read it. It's an indicator of who you are and where you stand.

For me, I feel that I didn't have the choice not to read certain things. In fact I have had to read all the historical critical things. And to read, to be subjected to Western philosophers as well, on top of that. To go and try to find my own context and how I read. In any case, globalization has produced a much more vivid picture of what is already there.

I think this context in itself, when we realize that we are actually interconnected, and we are also interconnected with the structures of the world, the movements of the world, the powers and the powerlessness.

So we need to interrogate ourselves about the ways that we produce knowledge, how we produce it, and how it is related to the structures of power and powerlessness.

**BO:** *Does it happen to you, that postcolonial theory is perceived as just a new Western invention, which has nothing to do with reality?*

---

**MD:** The term “postcolonial” is quite recent. It came out of the analyses of literature, of commonwealth literature, and they discovered that there are a lot of writers who all had to do with empire.

But postcolonial criticism has not begun with the word.

People in the contact zone have been dealing with the structures of domination. All third world theologians, you can pick any context, and you see, that the dealing with empire has been in their writings without the use of “postcolonial”.

So for me, the term postcol is quite a recent naming for something that has been going on, and I think it is a useful naming in the sense that it has forced us more and more to position ourselves, and to realized that it is not just the Third World scholars who must talk about these things, but all of us, we’re all in that history, we have to position ourselves in this history.

As Edward Said said: Modern imperialism was so pervasive that it affected all of us, that none of us is outside of it, in fact even if you think that you’re not dealing with it, you’re already indicating your position. I think the word postcolonial theory is helpful in the sense that it has pushed us more and more to acknowledge that we are in this history and to interrogate ourselves how we are positioned in that particular history and what is our role in it, whether we own up or not. That’s the importance of what postcolonial theory does, and then for us in the academy what it has done is to tell us, where our knowledge production, how we produce it, how we analyze it, where it is placed in that history, and to trace the kind of things we do, where they come from, to tell us the history, how they have been shaped by modern colonialism; whether we respond or not, postcolianism has a place and shows us where we are coming from. Of course for that we thank people who have done massive analysis on that: Edward Said’s work on orientalism and even the following up volume on culture and imperialism, showing where the scholarship comes from, how Enlightenment was involved, how the whole study of philology, where the scientific approach comes from, how it functions in the ideologies it legitimated.

It’s been a very helpful theory in putting us in the map of world history, and the power of what we do, what we read.

So even if we don’t respond, own up, still the history highlights where we are.

**BO:** *When you talk about “reading strategies”, I sometimes notice reservations especially from Marxist Liberation Theologians, who feel that this is insufficient. How do you view the relationship between Liberation Theology and Postcolonial Theology?*

---

**MD:** I think Liberation Theology has been one of the most helpful discourses in pushing the boundaries of a very eurocentric scholarship. In the beginning of the late 60s it became one of the first to push the boundaries and to insist in a very different kind of scholarship, Insist in reading the Bible within a context, that we live in. So the liberation paradigm was extremely helpful in its claims that we will read the Bible from our context, from our society, we will begin by analyzing our context, looking our needs, and we will resist the empire.

And even firstly claim that we have a better understanding than the historical scholarship because we live in a reality.

So, regardless of all other weaknesses that have been produced now, the liberation hermeneutic has been helpful and I think remains very helpful, in terms of the history into the scholarship of resistance it has been one of the most important in pushing the boundaries of a eurocentric scholarship.

But of late of course with any paradigm people begin to see its holes.

namely when we talk about liberation theology it has been very very Christian-centric. In Latin America where there are other religions they didn't speak about other religions. And also, liberation theology was not always very gender sensitive. It hardly spoke about issues of gender.

So now postcolonialism begins to say: Ok, Liberation theology was helpful but it is still a criticism from within, from a Christian point of view. From a religion, which has already been the masters' tools, too unrelated to the Other, that in its own articulation it didn't really own up to other religions that are there, to other groups who have been suppressed that are still fighting, it didn't own up to Columbus' history and the whole colonization of the Americas.

Postcolonialism, what it does is to widen the scope, to provide more skills. I don't think that postcolonialism is this about Marxism. I think Marx is perhaps the European philosopher that we claim to be our own than any other I bet, from Third World Karl Marx has been the best lance.

We have waged all our struggles mostly through and in the name of Karl Marx. It is a philosopher who did philosophize from a point of view of the disadvantaged and the oppressed, and he did provide avenues for resistance, those who are oppressed to rising up and organizing themselves, and understanding even the structures of their oppression. So Marxism has been very very helpful.

And I don't think that any of the postcolonial scholars has not been influenced by Marxism. Edward Said – you know, people like Gayatri Spivak came from a group who was writing the subaltern history, which is about people, the masses, the oppressed, the voiceless.

You know, in the postcolonial context the whole picture becomes much more complex. Many people did not take into account gender issues, it is much more complex.

Liberation theology at this moment is been really challenged, it's boundaries are being pushed further, to own up to speaking primarily from a religion of the colonizer, to being gender sensitive, to being sensitive to other religions. – This is part of what colonialism does, of what the Bible does, it oppresses the Other –

But still we own up, and the challenge for me is that Liberation hermeneutic like any other has to find ways of asking new questions, in a way that it expands its boundaries of dealing with oppression. And I think other voices inside are helping to articulate: How Latin America has to value its cultural diversity and religious diversity, and the history as well not just of recent oppression but also of Columbus and the Bible as functioning together with Columbus.

Postcolonialism also has the advantage of not only being in Biblical studies but also rising the separate themes of the study of colonialism and commonwealth.

Postcolonialism somehow has more ownership from more or less all of the scholars. It's not only liberation theology.

People in philosophy, in literature are all looking at the postcolonial history and background of how we make knowledge, how we analyze knowledge.

But I wouldn't like to see both fields as being competitive as replacing each other. I think both of them have brought new ways of thinking, new ways of reading, of constructing, of how we can imagine the world.

**BO:** *Which further challenges do you see in this type of scholarship?*

---

**MD:** I would like to think of methods, as methods that help us to understand the structures of the world, and how power is distributed.

But being in oppositional scholarship myself, being a feminist, being a postcolonial, I would like to think, that what we do should help in changing the world, by producing better relationships.

This is where the question of doing a socially engaged scholarship comes in. Just how do we actually come down to having impact.

**BO:** *You often talk about building alliances, while highlighting the danger of "narrow identity politics". Where do you see the role of identity politics? What kind of alliances do you think of?*

---

**MD:** For me it is really important that we tell our stories to each other, and to hear our stories, to divine our stories within the history. Divine means to read and analyze our stories of life within the history of the world in order to see our connectedness.

You might be here and I might be in Botswana, how are we connected.

I was speaking to one man who said: Germany has nothing to do with colonialism.

I said: Germany has been really a scourge for Africa.

The Berlin Conference was held here, 1884. And I think, I recall that the consequences were huge. But the Germans say they are not involved.

How do we begin to see our roles in history, and how do we begin to hear other stories, and to build other stories, other visions.

when I said that I like being in the US, part of what I like there is that at least there is a conversation. Because if we don't have a conversation, if we're not even able to tell our stories, then we're not even able to divine our stories, we're not able to diagnose ourselves, because we need to diagnose ourselves. That's the importance of telling a story and to see where that story is in world history. how what we do, how it fits in the world history.

Many times I get into the scholarship the problems maybe they make us reproduce what is there, the gates are really kept very tightly. how to opening a gate can be very very difficult, especially if we don't have conversations with others.

I think coalitions begin to happen when we tell stories and we empathize with what is happening and we are having a vision or wanting to change.

But if we are at a place where we are very satisfied with what we do and we don't want to hear other peoples' story, we don't even want to diagnose our stories, we don't want to ask new questions, we are satisfied with asking the same old questions and we are satisfied with talking only amongst ourselves, only you and me, only a certain set of professors, then coalitions become difficult. Then we don't even want to deal with the questions that other people are asking.

**BO:** *Where do you see these coalitions on the political level?*

---

**MD:** One thing for sure: there is a shift, if we look at the Bible, if we ask who are the Christians today, definitely there is a shift. Maybe more in Africa and Latin America. So somehow we will have to listen to their stories, to the voices that are coming. According to data there are almost 500 Mio Christians in Africa, and one in every 5 World Christians is an African. So I think there is a shift. And because of this shift we need to listen.

But also we will need to analyse the knowledge that we produce: Who is served by that knowledge that we produce? Is it continuing to be helpful to produce knowledge that is not relevant to where the Bible is really being read?

So part of what I'm struggling with is to read the Bible from an African perspective, because the Bible is tabernacling with African people. They are reading it from their cultural perspectives, with their stories, with their experiences

And I think I need to be responsible to the contexts and the challenges that are there. But the first world still educates a lot of us. And given the context that has changed, the fact that a lot of Christianity is shifting to Two Thirds World, the first world has to ask itself how relevant are their problems.

If christianity has moved to other places, should we just continue doing theology and hermeneutics through Western perspectives, or should we also begin to listen to other perspectives that are coming, where the Bible has gone to Tabernacle.

Besides the fact that Christianity is moving to Two Thirds World, we are also having a phenomenon of migration and diaspora, large communities. (I don't know here in Germany – here they control. But in most countries, in most places there is a lot of movement). Wherever we are, we are increasingly a diverse world.

We may ignore our neighbours and still insist on our standards.

I see in Europe a lot of debates about whether the Turkish women should wear their headscarves or in France you should have so many Black people or whether there should only be 30% in the football team.

I think Europe is beginning to have a conversation, although the way they are having it is still to increase their standards.

What it does tell us is that our problems begin to respond to the realities on the ground, to reflect our diversities.

to reflect our diversities and begin to produce knowledge not in just one way but in diverse other ways.



**BO:** *How do you bring all this into your practice? Could you share some of your teaching experience?*

---

**MD:** Of course I try to generate a lot of innovations, other ways of reading: divination, story telling, reading with originary readers, which for me becomes a deliberate, subversive way of reading, of avoiding to depend on Western scholars. because if we are going to wait for all the African scholars to be there before we begin to read, it is going to take a long time.

So instead of just hearing Western scholars who tend to fill our libraries I ask my students to take a text to the communities and to read with 4 or 5 people and to write their essays on how the people on the ground interpret this text. So in that way it helps us to find out how the Bible is being read. And it also help us to avoid doing a scholarship that is so classy that it is totally unrelated to the community, that just you have to read it in the library and discuss it with other students and professors.

So reading with originary readers is one of the ways that I ask my students to do that in assignment, and to collect data, they can choose or I can give them passages that they can find them just find people to read the Bible in community.

Reading the Bible and interpretation is only perceived as being the job of the professor, the highly learned who are able to read. But others who are reading the Bible are also reading it. We have to deconstruct the idea that we have to fix on one way of reading the Bible.

Then, another thing that I am doing is to read the Bible with the HIV/ Aids concern, I've done a lot of work on that, reading the Bible in the context of the epidemy. Once again it is a refusal of reading the Bible in the context of ancient times, but just placing the Bible in other contexts, other concerns.

It is to deal with issues that affect my community, instead of asking questions that have long been asked over and over, questions that completely divorce me from my concerns.

I have done that work not only in the scholarship but also had to do it with the communities. We did a project which was called "Africa Praying", we're trying to do exegetical ways of reading the passages that was not aimed at scholars but aimed at the community.

I still continue to do that in class as well. so my classroom and my community engagement have been ways of trying to bring my scholarship to have an impact on the communities.

Also we are talking about gender issues and the need to read the texts in ways that it doesn't continue to patriarchalize.

**BO:** *One last question: What challenges would you pose to us, as students in Germany?*

---

**MD:** I think it is a very good idea that you are having this movement and that you are about to connect with other people, who are from outside.

One of the things that is very important now is to open yourselves to hearing other people and to allow yourself to tell your own story.

sometimes we don't even want to tell our own stories.

Maybe it will come up as a story of privilege. But ok, you need to tell it as well, you need to be in a position to acknowledge that.

First thing is: I would encourage you not to limit yourselves to reading only European or German scholars. So when you start reading a passage, for example when you are reading John 4, the Samaritan woman, find out how a German man reads that passage, how a German woman reads the same passage, how an African woman, how an Asian, how an American reads that passage.

Just allow yourself to see any point of reading as an international conference, if I may use that term, where you allow yourself to hear every other voice, where you bring other voices on the table, to have that conversation.

We can have the conversation even if we don't see each other face to face.

We need to allow ourselves to ask what what is it that I am reading. Because it is very easy to just read from one place. But if you allow yourself: I am going to hear what a Latin American person, man or woman, says to that passage, I am going to hear it from a Black person, I am going to hear it from an Asian person, I am going to hear it from a physically challenged person.

We are having a conversation, that makes you even own up to say: how then am I reading that text and why am I reading that.

The major message that I would give to your group is to open yourselves to worldwide conversation, to open yourselves to worldwide history of modern times, because we are already constituted in that history. We're not outside, we're already inside.

So acknowledging it and seeing who we are, then we begin to say: which other coalitions can I make.

Without even reading all those other visions and dialoguing with them, you cannot begin to make coalitions, because you don't know what are the other concerns, and how these concerns inform their reading.

**BO:** *Thank you very much for this conversation!*