Using African Proverbial Folklore to Understand the Holistic Poverty Eradication Framework in the Book of Proverbs

Lechion Peter Kimilike (Unisa)

ABSTRACT

Sample comments of dominant biblical studies of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs indicate a deep-seated and wide-spread conviction that the book has a conservative status quo framework. Such suggestions sometimes go so far as to give the impression of divine sanction of structural poverty in society. This is done through the spiritualization of the reality of poverty. Nevertheless, this article argues that the Old Testament Book of Proverbs when approached from an African perspective has a transformative framework. A close look at poverty proverbs in terms of the interpreter’s African presuppositions and cultural expectations rereads some transforming possibilities which underlie poverty texts in the Book of Proverbs.

A THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTIFYING NEED AND SETTING PRIORITIES IN AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

A survey of a number of cross-cultural studies reveals the existence of similarities between the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and some traditional African proverbs. Such similarities have been argued to favor a popular social location of proverbs in ancient Israel and traditional Africa (Naré 1986; Masenya 2004). In my point of view the existence of similar proverbs, in particular, has far reaching theological consequences with regard to the question of the social location of the Book of Proverbs (Kimilike 2002). Firstly, it gives a further confirmation of the popular social performance context of the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs (Golka 1993). Secondly, the popular line of thought opens a chance for methodological extension in the study of the Book of Proverbs. Social anthropological approaches, contextual exegesis, historical and rhetorical criticism are used hand in hand for a holistic interpretation of the Book of Proverbs, in particular, from an African perspective. The two-fold preceding aspects suggest a commencement of a new era:
It is probably not too much to say that the use of this new material [i.e., comparative proverbs from contemporary traditional societies] marks the beginning of a new era in Proverbs study comparable with that which began with the publication of *Amenope* more than seventy years ago. (Whybray 1995:33)

And then, certainly, from African biblical scholars’ perspective:

[A]t least one more effective instrument in their hands, in the contemporary fight for inculturation and contextualization of the biblical message in our local milieu: it is the *proverbial sapiential genre*, in light of the revealed word, that should act as the leaven on the African Traditional Religious Life. For, it must be emphasised, it is by a thorough understanding of the African Traditional Religious Life (including the good, the bad and the ugly therein), that any talk of an evolution therefrom [sic] of an African Christian *Theology*, or African *Spirituality* can be deemed authentic. African proverbial wisdom in one fell swoop presents the African soul to those who search for the same. (Owan 1997:152-153)

Therefore, in my view, the big ‘challenge’ captures the sense of the great effort involved in studying Proverbs using the two above mentioned thoughts. The main question: What and how can African countries and communities prioritise in their needs, especially, in Christian contexts? It is similar to the enormous step I took when I selected the poverty theme for my doctoral research. The thesis seeks to render a popular interpretation of the poverty proverbs with practical transforming implications for living at the grass-roots in Africa. Thus, it aims to show an African unique perspective on issues of poverty in the Book of Proverbs that can achieve a better balance between interests of the dominant individualised Westernised ideas and concepts of poverty and the African communal needs and transformational priorities.

On the one hand, the great extent of poverty in contemporary Africa both at micro and macro level is a matter of much concern. In order to be relevant to the concern the transformational study on poverty proverbs emphasizes the need on the empowerment of the agency of the poor themselves in the challenge of poverty in Africa. In the latter sense it concerns revisiting the local liberating agency of ordinary, poor people in Africa in order to emancipate them.

On the other hand, the proverbs of the Book of Proverbs ‘[…] made an essential contribution to the social and political life of Israel, and thus constitute an important element in its thought’ (Whybray 1995:149). Thus the great effort also refers to re-examination and re-reading of dominant biblical interpretations about poverty in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs in a dynamic transforming way. Such a transforming re-interpretation can enable
the Book of Proverbs to become an empowering resource for the faith community in Africa.

Combining the two preceding aspects moves my doctoral thesis – *An African Perspective on Poverty Proverbs in the Book of Proverbs: An analysis on transformational possibilities* (Kimilike 2006) – a step further beyond mere cross-cultural comparison. The thesis uses the similarities of African proverbial cultural contexts to situate, identify and analyse the vestiges of poverty texts in the Book of Proverbs. It aims, therefore, to highlight afresh the latter’s transformative meaning in the time of ancient Israel. In a way, the contextual interpretive process uses the African proverbial context also to bridge the cultural gap between ancient Israel and contemporary African world views by giving more light to similar holistic lines of approach to the challenge of poverty (cf. Ukpong 1996:189-210). The focus of my contextual approach, therefore, seeks to derive a way that the African world view on poverty proverbs can enable Bible readers to understand Old Testament proverbs on poverty in an attempt toward the empowerment of the poor in African Christian contexts. But what is the current situation in the historical lines of research on poverty in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs?

### B A SILENCED TRANSFORMING VOICE OF ORDINARY PEOPLE?

A critical analysis of the conception of poverty in existing biblical studies is an important step in order to identify the dilemma that the doctoral thesis analysing the transformational possibilities aimed to investigate. What did the proverbs on the poor mean in ancient Israel? The answer to this question leads to an analysis of the current situation in the field of biblical studies with regard to the subject of poverty in the Book of Proverbs. From a contextual approach the following questions might be helpful to make sense of the initial general question: Do biblical interpretations of poverty support and maintain the status quo or promote creativity and the transformation of society? Do biblical interpretations of poverty help the poor to develop a mature self-assertiveness, which will enable them to be analytical, creative, free, and active, and thus become responsible in society?

It is very clear that the ‘greatest challenge facing [Old Testament] scholars at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to describe the social setting of wisdom over the years’ (Crenshaw 2000:227). Notably, studies of the Book of Proverbs have mainly departed, albeit in varying degrees, from the presupposition that the book is a product of the elite rather than the ancient Israelite folk. There are a number of far-reaching implications on the understanding of poverty from such an elitist based social location of the proverbs: Firstly, there has been an exaggeration on the international influence on the formation of Wisdom literature in ancient Israel. This aspect in biblical
studies denies ancient Israelites originality by positing inferiority on their civilization. That is, treating Israeliite wisdom as a carbon copy (cf Grizzard 2000:195), or a theological reinterpretation (cf Whybray 1990:7; Murphy 1998:288) or a reformulation of Ancient Near Eastern powerful neighbors’ older social justice wisdom et cetera (cf Malchow 1982:120). This point of view that favors the advancement of intellectual interests of the people in upper social classes is based on the fallacy of Western thought that intelligent persons always produce brilliant works, and that the poor are incapable of intelligence.

Secondly, dominant voices of biblical studies have maintained a dualistic tension between the sacred and secular polarity in the interpretation of the Book of Proverbs (cf Clifford 1999:252). The preceding aspect that has been reinforced by the Western compartmentalisation of life leads to the spiritualization of poverty.

As their wealth accumulated, rich Christians increasingly tended to interpret the biblical sayings on poverty metaphorically. The poor were the “poor in spirit”, the ones who recognized their utter dependence upon God. In this sense, then, the rich could also be poor – they could arrogate all biblical promises to themselves. (Bosch 1991:435)

In other words the above spiritualized interpretation of poverty appeals to the ruling class and the elite mentality without recognizing the existential part of the reality of poverty among ordinary people.

Thirdly, the definition of poverty in studies of the Book of Proverbs represents the perspective of the affluent and literate minority who are credited with the production of the referred proverbial material on poverty. In such an elitist definition the nouns ‘prosperity’ and ‘poverty’ have been suggested to legitimate the social status or ‘static order’. The rich and poor in Proverbs 22:2, for instance, indicate that they are ‘[…] both part of social reality, the existing order of things which is ultimately grounded in Yahweh’ (Wittenberg 1986:57; cf also Murphy 1998:165).

Fourthly, the issue of social justice in considering poverty eradication programs is mostly excluded in the existing studies of the Book of Proverbs. Some scholars suggest the excluding of social justice in their studies, some scholars suggest is because the poverty situation revealed in the Book of Proverbs is a mere collection of utopia and ironic materialistic adorations (cf Fox 1996:238). This aspect de-personalises the poor, making them insignificant in the social order without any contribution (cf Pleins 1987:72) or are given a future expected social equality in heaven (cf Waltke 2005:441).

From my contextual point of view the list of suspected conservative implications in the understanding of poverty proverbs in the predominant
biblical studies in the Book of Proverbs is not exhaustive. The main reason behind the posited conservatism is the scholars’ unconscious subjectivism of the Westernized secularising affluent influences (cf Luow 1995:43-44). As a result of the preceding subjectivism a hopeless situation is created for the poor and all of humanity. Hence, the great effort from an African biblical perspective is about the search of an alternative popular poverty eradication framework that is viable and sustainable. Such a popular transformational strategy has to stand against the great odds of individualism, materialist consumerism, insensitivity, exclusivity, moral and ethical relativity from the dominant biblical point of view. One such approach is to revisit and identify the ideals of traditional African culture that can give fresh insights of hope inherent the proverbs on the poor in the Book of Proverbs.

C TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Poverty has a multifaceted nature that requires, first and foremost, a holistic consideration of all its external and internal dynamics. Locating the latter interactive and inseparable dynamics leads to the identification and recognition of local resources for poverty transformation in both the material and spiritual realms. Such local resources include financial resources, socio-cultural interrelationships, indigenous educational systems of knowledge and skills, and work ethics and practices (cf Kobia 2003:171). In order to do justice to what seem as different types of poverty in the Old Testament including the Book of Proverbs the holistic approach uses cumulative rather than deductive logic:

[T]he average modern-educated reader seems to have the view that the dynamics of the whole can be understood from the properties of the parts. Indigenous peoples [particularly in Africa], however, know that the properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. For them, all aspects of life and universe are interconnected and interdependent (Mosha 2000:14).

The quoted consideration is aimed at the practical expansion of local assets and capabilities of grassroots people in order to empower them in the challenging of poverty. In the existential challenge of poverty, therefore, it is important to critically analyse the potentiality of the socio-economic conceptual framework underpinning the world view of the African society.

Firstly, the critical analysis attempts to give the basic definition of poverty in terms of the holistic nature of the society. In Africa, poverty has a communal perspective. Thus, the following aspects of poverty are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Poverty refers to lack of subsistence sustainability of basic needs for oneself and family, inability to ensure the family’s belongingness in the community, having no offspring, family and friends, farm land deprivation, physical weakness and failure to qualify for membership in some socio-cultural institutions (cf Onyejekwe 2001:580-583).
Secondly, the local resources are shown in the way they dynamically enable the grassroots people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives and livelihood. The African modes of production and distribution of services and material goods are mostly undertaken by intimate communities of people sharing a mass of social bonds and functions. They are community-based activities in which inseparable strong kinship, political and religious aspects are involved in restricting and directing all stages of economic activity (cf Mosha 2000:145-146). The existence of such internal economics of affection make life secure enough for everybody in African societies. Thus, despite the existence of poverty, Africa is rarely known to have established specialized institutions to care for the disabled, destitute, orphans, widows and the aged (cf Magesa 1998:241-247).

Thirdly, the critical approach identifies practical examples of African value system co-opting modernity, such as, *Ujamaa* in Tanzania. The *Ujamaa* ideology is undergirded by the fact that viable and sustainable social, political and economic transformative programs in Tanzania, perhaps in Africa as a whole had and still have to:

[… be determined by our own needs as we see them, and in the direction that we feel to be appropriate for us at any particular time. We shall draw sustenance from universal human ideas and from the practical experiences of other peoples; but we start from the full acceptance of our African-ness and a belief that in our own past there is very much which is useful for our time. (Nyerere 1967:316)

The basic sense of African identity is to maintain dynamic social cohesion, stability and peace in society. Tranquillity in society is an essential thing to meaningful political freedom achievements, social and economic change. There are various ways, however, to communicate such empowering ideals of the African vision of good life.

One of the most common tools used in expressing and inculcating transformative ideals in grassroots people is African proverbs. Therefore it is also important to analyze critically the liberating potential of African proverbs for the poor using the holistic socio-economic framework which underlies the world view of African peoples. Through the analysis of the preceding African world view a three-fold transformative perspective that revolves around the message of the proverb can be perceived with implications for the challenge of poverty.

Firstly, the scope, meaning and significance of the proverbial message are societal or communal rather than individualistic in nature. Proverbs bear a corporate sense that includes the virtues of filial piety, cooperation, hospitality, belongingness, sharing, caring, good wishes, mutual responsibility and
friendship (cf Magesa 1998:55). It is the corporate personality behind the proverbs that inspires affective changes between members as they relate to each other in society:

> Whoever despises the ancestors and elders and rejects the community laws and statutes established by them, chooses death instead of life. And such death will not affect one person alone, but the entire community. As the saying from Burundi goes: “If one family member eats dog meat, all members are dishonoured” (Umuryâmbwá aba umwé agatukisha umuryango). (Bujo 1997:198)

Thus proverbs on poverty use the communal virtues to influence the course of people’s lives with a high degree of family and community solidarity and participation. The extent and impact of the effectiveness of such collective influence in caring and providing for the poor among them is shown in the lack of formal institutions to cater for the same in African societies.

Secondly, the transforming power of the proverbial message is upheld in its truth reflecting the religious beliefs, morals and ethical values of the community. As such the proverbial experiential teaching and learning creates room for the liberating possibility that is life centered or people oriented. Within such a framework, poverty is understood not to be an absolute state because the human values of respect, knowledge, experiences, visions, friendship and family relationships cannot be impoverished. The preceding inherent human rights virtues are the strongest resources towards the eradication of poverty.

Poverty also challenges passive idleness by stimulating creativity in mobilizing and empowering the inalienable human resources toward the search for good life. It is important to note that the African proverbs on poverty are based on daily life and experiences permeated also by religion due to the African holistic world view. The latter aspect gives a positive dimension of poverty in terms of justice and mercy that encourages people to explore possibilities even in seemingly frustrating conditions.

Thirdly, a transforming proverbial message is vital to the holistic health and stability of the society. In a contextualized development process the use of proverbs helps to identify and focus the strengths of the grassroots people for use in their contemporary poverty situation to initiate shared visions and collective actions for a better future (cf Chindongo 1997:126-133). Therefore, the vital and crucial role played by the transformative proverbial message in the preceding sense has a possibility to destabilises without arousing conflict of the conservative status quo phenomenon fast engulfing Africa. In contemporary Africa the minority elites foster (a basically Westernised) individualistic and materialistic culture that aggravates the situation of poverty.
It is therefore clear, from the African perspective on poverty proverbs that transformation is within the power of the grassroots people. They can change the dehumanising paradigm by effectively evolving the dynamic African value system in adapting modernity with qualitative transforming outcomes. Thus, it is even much more important that African Christians can use the liberating cultural potentialities to effectively contextualize the Book of Proverbs in Africa. The use of proverbs in a contextualisation of the Bible will stimulate and facilitate effective participation of the African majority stakeholders in the poverty eradication strategies.

D AN EMPOWERING AND TRANSFORMATIVE UNDERSTANDING

After searching for a possible alternative transformational model from the African proverbial context it is time for a fresh turn against the mammoth challenge of poverty in the Book of Proverbs. In respect to the latter task Habel’s exegetical questions can be helpful:

Do these texts reflect an attempt to control and maintain the existing social order with social justice ideals that uphold the status quo? Or do these texts reflect the pains and hopes of those who are suffering injustices? Are any of the biblical texts actually the work of the oppressed, a group who normally would not have the resources to record their experiences? (1995:283)

Similar opinions can be gleaned from his discussion of the contribution of feminist scholarship, on the identification of the poor and oppressed, and on the ‘victims or agents of resistance’ (cf Habel 1995:283–287). In response to the above contextual questions, three basic issues demand analysis of proverbs’ potential to contribute towards a transformative understanding of every proverbial text on the poor. The three basic concerns are not mutually exclusive:

- A study of the possible historical period in which the author of the proverb speaks has to be done. As such the contextual approach locates the historical period of the proverbial authors. It achieves this aspect by considering the challenge of poverty in ancient Israel as comparable to traditional Africa. Such an approach enables the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs to be considered at an oral stage, which is, perhaps even before the pre-monarchical milieu. As a result the emphasis of the proverbs on the poor is on themes like justice, solidarity, struggle, peace, freedom, unity, education and vigilance (cf Mosala 1989:120).

- An investigation of the cultural context and purpose of a proverb has to be done. This aspect enables the cross-cultural equivalence in applying the means of networks of social support systems rooted in extended family and community comparable structures between traditional Africa and ancient Israel societies. Social responsibility and communal obligations,
for instance, have far reaching consequences beyond the nuclear family. The emphasis of this aspect is on the dynamic holistic view of reality that strongly influences ordinary people in daily life activities that produce the proverbs on poverty (cf Magesa 2004:3).

• An analysis of the immediate and extended literary context of the proverb is necessary. This aspect helps the interpreter to do justice to the canonical form of the Scripture for which the proverb on the poor is a part.

The above critical considerations are important because the Book of Proverbs like other books of the Old Testament is suggested to be an editorial, ideological collection. In this case, as can be expected, the ruling-class domination agenda has easily captivated some biblical studies. The latter take the royal courts, hypothetical schools and general international influence of the Book of Proverbs as a point of departure. The official approach, however, has a two-fold significance to a contextual approach. On the one hand, the approach makes a critical assertion of the impression of the existence of a range of fragile social, political, economic and religious conditions and the perspectives of the privileged minority of ancient Israel as exhibited by the proverbs on poverty.

On the other hand, vestigial elements of popular values of ancient Israelite traditions that sought to redress the injustice in almost all aspects of social, economic, political and religious life are identified in the text. The significant contribution of the latter can be highlighted only when the proverbial text is allowed to be consciously considered from an alternative perspective of the ordinary people’s daily life. In the preceding process the popular authorship of similar poverty proverbs from African societies plays a key role to unlock relevant details of the corresponding transformative vestigial elements of popular values of ancient Israelite traditions. Hopes and inspirations of the grassroots people in ancient Israel are recognized and given fresh light at every stage of the proverb’s interpretation process: translation, word study, literary analysis, structural analysis et cetera.

The meaning of good life is one of the pertinent issues underlying the challenge of poverty from a popular setting of the Book of Proverbs. Among ordinary people good life is more than material prosperity or wealth. Good life first and foremost concerns a holistic realm of divine-human encounter in the ordinary human life. Profound religious beliefs constructively and intrinsically inform other public domains of life for effective and sustainable strategy to the challenge of poverty (cf Pr 14:31, 17:5, 22:2, 29:13). The belief in God as Creator, for instance, enhances the social, political and economic values and welfare which community holds on life that also reflects a concept of human equality. Such a divine aspect is a social criticism aimed to destabilize any
form of totalitarianism tendencies in the handling of the common wealth in society. At the same time the divine aspect of common humanity brings in the concern of a common responsibility or action in the recovery of communal ideals of egalitarian, solidarity and mutual assistance in society. In other words it can be spelled out in even clearer terms:

The Old Testament is essentially a story of a small band of people – a people who obviously knew much suffering through conquest by surrounding tribes. Through the power of remarkable spiritual determination to forge cohesion and carve a distinctive identity, they succeeded in liberating themselves. They experienced this power as the children of Yahweh, their only God, who was there almost exclusively for them and was personalized as such. They experienced God primarily through the lens of communal identity, so that whatever did not serve this goal was either eliminated from the story or made subservient to it. (Magesa 2004:3)

And then, from the African perspective:

The arrangement of the African community’s goods indicates an interest in the common humanity of all human beings and in solidarity and reciprocity. Each person has essential needs for living life. Any individual variations – physical, mental or any others – do not and are not allowed to affect this belief, even if they are recognised and appreciated by others for the way in which they contribute to the solidarity of the community. Thus, any inequalities of human qualities are compensated for by such “mutual supplementation.” This is one of the hinges for the existence of society. (Magesa 1998:245)

Both the above quotations point to another significant practical idea that contributes immensely towards good life, that of human relationships (cf Pr 13:7, 13:18, 19:7, 21:13). God made human beings to live in community. For good life to be possible peace, tranquillity and cohesion should prevail in community. The latter are fundamental elements of human development that make right dynamic interrelationships to be central in the day-to-day encounter with other human beings. How can one deal successfully and fairly with family, friends, business partners, civil leaders, the young, the elderly, the stranger, the fool et cetera? Using the African proverbial input it is possible to appreciate the role that social capital plays in the preceding concerns of life in society among ordinary people in the challenge of poverty. Human relationships have a permanence framework based on collective socio-cultural values of love and trust. These two assets for ordinary grassroots people contributes to responsible corporate life that forms a firm supportive social network system to secure the economic (cf Pr 13:23, 22:16, 23:10-1, 28:8) and political (cf Pr 22:7, 28:3, 28:15, 29:14) life and livelihood of everyone in
society. All the aspects discussed above, are relevant issues that have to determine the way a in which transformational perspective of the Book of Proverbs can be introduced into existing contexts, particularly, in Africa Christian contexts.

E LEAVE NO POOR KINSFOLK BEHIND!

Based on ordinary people’s experiences with the poverty proverbs in the Book of Proverbs an attempt has to be made to respond to central issues of sub-Saharan African Christians’ challenge of translating faith into reality. Foremost their Africanness self-perception, communality, collectivity and human unity resources have to be identified, recognized and co-opted into modernity. I submit that the mobilization of such local resources is a key factor in sustainable poverty eradication programmes. The transformational approach takes a broader spectrum of stakeholders’ participation both in the quality and quantity of holistic economic change.

On another level the foregoing transforming perspective of the Book of Proverbs demands a fresh look into the conceptual framework used to interpret a biblical text on poverty. It is important for the interpretive task to facilitate the uncovering of ordinary people’s transforming agency. The latter has to be identified in their past experiences, acknowledge it, enhance its value, interpret and apply in biblical interpretation. In this aspect the African context becomes a compatible subject of interpretation of the Christian biblical message with a transforming goal of the existential social, economic, political and religious life of the people.

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Lechion Peter Kimilike, Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, 0003 Unisa, South Africa / Makumira University College, P. O. Box 55, Usa River, Tanzania. E-mail: kipeter@hotmail.com