

# **The First Generation of African Old Testament Scholars The Geographical Hermeneutics of their Academic Training**

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Nearly two decades ago, in an article commenting on the future of African biblical studies, Samuel Abogunrin (Nigeria) argued that the training of African biblical scholars in western academic contexts has severe negative consequences:

Most of the African Biblicists are trained in the West and even those few ones trained on the continent are trained under Western influence. Unfortunately, most of these scholars on their return to Africa have always seen themselves as ambassadors of Cambridge, Oxford, Tübingen school etc. [...] Africa is always at the receiving end instead of being original.<sup>1</sup>

Similar points of view have increasingly been expressed by other scholars: for example Justin S. Ukpong (Nigeria), who has noticed as a problem that African biblical scholars trained in the West are trained to read the Bible through an interpretive grid which reflects western culture:

One outcome of this has been a visible gap between this academic reading of the Bible and the needs of ordinary African Christians. Another outcome has been the fact that in many ways African social and cultural concerns are not reflected in such reading.<sup>2</sup>

These concerns of Abogunrin and Ukpong need further attention, as they point out essential hermeneutical and epistemological problems of African biblical studies. This article, which is built on the research I did for a book analysing Old Testament doctoral dissertations written by African scholars in the period 1967 to 2000,<sup>3</sup> is not an attempt at solving these problems. Rather, it will try to describe some of the geographical hermeneutics referred in more general terms by Abogunrin and Ukpong.

## **Material and context**

In my research on African Old Testament studies, I have been able to identify 87 doctoral dissertations in Old Testament studies, written by sub-Saharan African researchers in the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first African researcher to complete his Old Testament doctoral studies did so in 1967, and for pragmatic reasons I have, for the time being,

delimited my analysis to the period between 1967 and 2000. This period, which roughly can be said to cover the first generation of African Old Testament scholars, is characterised by a remarkable growth in the number of academic institutions in Africa. First, as far as church-related institutions are concerned, the total number had in 2000 passed one thousand, or perhaps even one and a half thousand, depending on the counting criteria.<sup>4</sup> This number reflects the almost explosive church growth sub-Saharan Africa experienced throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and the subsequent search for a strengthening of the churches through a relevant training of leaders. The great majority of these church-related institutions is of the Bible school type. Nevertheless, a growing number, Roman Catholic as well as mainstream protestant and Evangelical, manage to keep a more academic level. Secondly, as far as state universities are concerned, a similar growth can be observed. Africa had in 1960, at the dawn of independence, only six universities, whereas the number four decades later had passed 150; incidentally, at present Nigeria alone has more than forty universities. The growth in number of state universities reflects a parallel to that of the church-related institutions, a training of leaders as part of the more general nation building.

The distribution of structural possibilities for Old Testament studies varies considerably within these various kinds of institutions. The church-related theological institutions are for obvious reasons open towards biblical studies, and a few of them have developed postgraduate programmes that encourage research related to the Old Testament. Within state universities, however, there are great variations, and these variations tend to reflect former colonial connections. Although there are some exceptions, one could say that francophone Africa, generally speaking, follows the French tradition of not having departments of religious studies or theology in state universities, whereas anglophone Africa follows the more open tradition of British universities of including departments of religious studies, and, in some cases, even faculties of theology in state universities.

What is then the relationship between this general picture of the structural possibilities for Old Testament studies in Africa, and the material of 87 researchers completing their doctoral studies in the period 1967 to 2000? In an attempt to clarify the relationship I will split up the material in various categories and present it in the form of three tables and some remarks. However, before I do so I would like to say that I clearly acknowledge that the small size of the dissertation material prevents us from drawing detailed statistical conclusions. It is, for

example, just accidental that both Tanzanian and Kenyan researchers produced four dissertations in the period 1967 to 2000. And, likewise, it is also accidental that four dissertations were completed in German universities and four in South African universities too. However, it is not accidental that Nigeria has a high number, 34, all written in English, whereas another West African country, Burkina Faso, has a very small number, only one, written in French. And, likewise, it is not accidental that as many as 23 dissertations are completed in Italian universities, whereas only one is completed in a Swedish university. I will therefore argue that it is possible, to a certain extent, to draw some conclusions from the following tables.

### **Researcher and institution, respectively**

The first two tables split up the material according to chronological and geographical categories. Table I focuses on the researcher: from a chronological perspective (horizontal axis), the decade in which the dissertation is completed (1970s = 1971–1980, etc.) is given (here, the dissertation language is also noticed), and from a geographical perspective (vertical axis) his or her nationality is given.

*Table I*

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total	English	French
Burkina Faso			1		1		1
Burundi			1		1		1
Cameroon	1		3		4		4
Cent Afr Rep				1	1		1
Chad			1	1	2	1	1
DR Congo		1	2	5	8		8
Eritrea		1		1	2	2	
Gabon			1		1		1
Ghana			3	1	4	4	
Ivory Coast				1	1		1
Kenya			1	3	4	4	
Madagascar			1	2	3		3
Malawi				3	3	3	
Namibia				1	1	1	
Nigeria	1	8	10	15	34	34	
Rwanda	1			2	3		3
Sierra Leone				1	1	1	
Tanzania		1	1	2	4	4	
Togo		1			1		1
Uganda			1		1	1	
Zambia				1	1	1	
Zimbabwe		1	1	2	4	4	
Unknown			1	1	2		2
Total	3	13	28	43	87	60	27

Table II focuses on the degree-giving institution: from a chronological perspective (horizontal axis), the decade in which the dissertation is completed is given (here, too, the dissertation language is noticed), and from a geographical perspective (vertical axis), its geographical location is given.

*Table II*

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total	English	French
Belgium			2	3	5	1	4
Cameroon				1	1		1
France	1		6	2	9		9
Germany			1	3	4	3	1
Italy	2	8	7	6	23	14	9
Ivory Coast				1	1		1
Kenya				1	1	1	
Netherlands				1	1		1
Nigeria			4	6	10	10	
South Africa				4	4	4	
Sweden		1			1	1	
Switzerland				1	1		1
UK		1	4	1	6	6	
USA		3	4	13	20	20	
Total	3	13	28	43	87	60	27

Let me make a few remarks to some major chronological and geographical tendencies of these two tables. First, from a chronological perspective, one notices a successive and rapid growth in the number of dissertations; three in the 1960s, 13 in the 1970s, 28 in the 1980s, and 43 in the 1990s. I have elsewhere argued that the 1960s and 70s can be characterised as the “background” of an independent Old Testament studies in Africa, and that its “breakthrough” came in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>5</sup> The 1960s and 70s, on the one hand, deserve the label “background”, because the various attempts at establishing Old Testament studies in Africa in this period were quite sporadic. The 1980s and 90s, on the other hand, deserve the label “breakthrough”, because this period more systematically developed infrastructural and hermeneutical contexts for an Africanisation of Old Testament studies. The rapid growth in the number of doctoral dissertations reflects the development of this infrastructural context. An increasing number of institutions established graduate and post-graduate programs in Old Testament studies—in the latter case mostly Master’s programs, but a few state universities in Nigeria established programs for doctoral studies, too, the first ones already in the early 1980s—and this created a strong need for senior scholars holding a Doctor’s degree.

Secondly, from a geographical perspective, it should be noticed that there is a dominance of Nigerians as far as the nationality of the authors are concerned (cf. Table I). Not less than 34 of the 87 dissertations are written by Nigerians, that is more than 40%! This significant dominance is reflected throughout the material; from a chronological perspective it is attested from the 1970s through the 1990s, and from the perspective of degree-giving institutions (cf. Table II), it is reflected in the fact that Nigerian universities throughout the 1990s (together with pontifical universities in Rome) became the second largest producer of dissertations.

The Nigerian dominance has a rather complex background. Of course it reflects the fact that Nigeria has a large population with a strong Christian presence. According to D.B. Barrett, 51 million Nigerians belonged to a Christian church at the turn of the century, of a total number of inhabitants of approximately 111 million.<sup>6</sup> However, this does not fully explain the case. Other countries, too, have a strong Christian presence without such an accumulation of Old Testament dissertations. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, had according to the same statistics a population of approximately 51 million at the turn of the century, of which no less than 49 million belong to a Christian church. This is more or less the same as in Nigeria, but here the number of Old Testament dissertations is considerably lower. It should therefore be acknowledged, I think, that the Nigerian dominance in the dissertation material more specifically reflects the university political differences between anglophone and francophone Africa that was noticed above. Whereas there, generally speaking, are few, if any, structural possibilities in state universities in francophone Africa for Old Testament studies, the opposite is the case in anglophone Africa, and then not least in Nigeria. A number of Nigerian state universities offer programs in biblical studies; a few of them have even developed postgraduate programs up to a doctorate level.

Thirdly, it should be noticed that there is a dominance of Italian and American universities as far as the geographical location of non-African degree-giving institutions are concerned (cf. Table II); institutions in Italy and USA have in fact produced approximately half of the dissertations, 43 of 87. One should here observe that the number of dissertations completed in Italy more or less is the same throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s (8, 7, 6, respectively), whereas the number completed in USA shows a significant increase in the 1990s (3, 4, 13, respectively).

And fourthly, it should be noticed that more than two thirds of the dissertations, 60 of 87, are written in English, and that the remaining 27

are all written in French. It can be argued that this unbalance between English and French to some extent is affected by the fact that all the Nigerian dissertations are written in English; it should at least be acknowledged that although researchers from twelve countries write in English, there are still researchers from ten countries who write in French. Nevertheless, the English dominance is not surprising; it probably reflects the fact that English in the latter half of the twentieth century became the major academic *lingua franca*.

### Researcher and institution, related

Whereas Tables I and II focus on the geography and chronology of author and degree-giving institution, respectively, Table III focuses on the relationship between the two: the vertical axis gives the nationality of the author and the horizontal axis gives the geographical location of degree-giving institution.

Table III

	Belgium	Cameroon	France	Germany	Italy	Ivory Coast	Kenya	Netherlands	Nigeria	South Africa	Sweden	Switzerland	United	United States	Total
Burkina Faso					1										1
Burundi			1												1
Cameroon			4												4
Cent Afr Rep								1							1
Chad					1									1	2
Dem Rep Congo	4			1	3										8
Eritrea														2	2
Gabon			1												1
Ghana				1	1									2	4
Ivory Coast						1									1
Kenya							1							3	4
Madagascar			3												3
Malawi										2			1		3
Namibia										1					1
Nigeria	1			2	11				10				3	7	34
Rwanda		1			1							1			3
Sierra Leone														1	1
Tanzania					2					1				1	4
Togo					1										1
Uganda													1		1
Zambia										1					1
Zimbabwe													1	3	4
Unknown					2										2
Total	5	1	9	4	23	1	1	1	10	4	1	1	6	20	87

Let me make a few remarks to this table, too. First, since most of the dissertations are written in a western context, it should be noticed that the relationship between the nationality of the researcher and the geographical location of the degree-giving institution in most cases follows old and well established connections. Research is very much a question of funding, and funding agencies for this kind of research are often located in political or ecclesiastical structures.

As for the political level, one notices, on the one hand, that structures from the colonial past are still reflected, as various forms of political and economic agreements on culture, education and research cooperation tend to bind former colonisers and colonies together. In the present dissertation material this explains, to some extent, why students from Cameroon and Madagascar tend to do their research in France, or why doctoral students from The Democratic Republic of the Congo tend to do their research in Belgium. On the other hand, however, one also notices that neo-colonial developments are reflected in the material. The American dominance in the 1990s is one obvious example, and the sudden influence of post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s could probably be said to be another.

As for the ecclesiastical level, a corresponding pattern can be observed. This explains, for example, why two out of four researchers from Tanzania, both being Lutherans, did their research in Lutheran institutions in Scandinavia and USA, whereas the two others, both being Roman Catholics, did their research in pontifical institutions in Rome. The major non-African producers of dissertations are Italian and American institutions, and a few words should be said about them. It probably comes as no surprise that the 23 Italian dissertations all are related to pontifical institutions in Rome. Still, it should be noticed that only two of them come from the Biblical Institute, the most prestigious pontifical institution with regard to biblical studies, whereas no less than 14 come from the Urbanian University, with its particular focus on contextual theology. Also many of the 20 American dissertations reflect various ecclesiastical structures. Approximately half of them come from typical evangelical institutions, some come from other denominational institutions, and a few come from non-denominational state institutions.

Secondly, one must assume that the dissertation material, at least to some extent, reflects the research strategies and the thematic, hermeneutical and methodological preferences of the degree-giving institutions. It is, of course, not difficult to point out examples of how

individual African Old Testament scholars have been influenced by the methodological and thematic preferences of their dissertation promoters. However, let me instead try to illustrate this question by two brief institutional cases.

One case, a Roman Catholic one, is the Pontifical Urban University, Rome (Italy). Urbaniana was established back in the 17th century to train young men from “mission countries” for the priesthood, and throughout its history it has been an important exponent for Catholic missiology. Even today a majority of its students come from Africa, Asia and South America, and missiology as well as contextual theology are major characteristics of Urbaniana. In my material Urbaniana is represented with no less than 14 dissertations, and this makes it by far the most important contributor of dissertations. The question to be raised is then to what extent Urbaniana’s context of missiology and contextual theology is reflected in the dissertation material. Let me point out a couple of examples. One is a clear thematic tendency. A majority of the present Urbaniana dissertations explicitly relate their Old Testament research to contemporary or traditional African concerns, and several of them focus on topics that are central in Catholic theology, such as priesthood and sacrifice. Another example is a clear hermeneutical tendency. The Urbaniana dissertations let typical Catholic inculturation hermeneutical perspectives play a central role in the presentation and legitimising of their research. So is the case, of course, in dissertations where the relationship between Africa and the Old Testament is a central motive, but so may also be the case in dissertations where the African perspective only surfaces in prefaces and appendices.

Another institutional case, an evangelical one this time, is Trinity International University, Deerfield (USA). Trinity is an important exponent for American evangelical theology, with a strong focus on “the authority of God’s inerrant Word”. In my material it is represented with as many as five dissertations, a number that makes Trinity the second largest contributor, next to Urbaniana. It should then be asked to what extent the evangelical context of Trinity is reflected in its dissertations. Let me point out a couple of examples here too. One is a clear tendency as far as methodology is concerned. It is, for example, a major methodological concern of a dissertation on the book of Isaiah, to reject historical-critical methodology as inadequate to analyse the prophecy of Isaiah. And in this approach one recognises, I think, not only an echo of the current methodological shift of paradigm within biblical studies, from historical to rhetorical and literary approaches, but even more, and this is where the institutional context is reflected, more traditional and



dogmatically based methodological concerns. Another example is a clear tendency as far as hermeneutics is concerned. A dissertation on the concept of the “poor” in the Psalms eagerly argues that the Psalms employ this concept as a spiritual metaphor only, and that it does not refer to material want. And here one recognises, I think, certain systematic-theological concerns that are prevalent in evangelical circles.

These two sets of examples should not be used to argue that Urbaniana and Trinity dissertations are more biased than other dissertations in my material. On the whole they reflect, together with the rest of the material, quite traditional approaches within the wide spectre of Old Testament studies. What these two sets do exemplify, though, is that any dissertation reflects at least some of the research strategies and the thematic, hermeneutical and methodological preferences of the degree-giving institutions. And this, of course, is of particular importance to keep in mind in a situation where most African Old Testament dissertations are still written in western institutions.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that the funding and institutional location of the doctoral research often follow old and well established political and ecclesiastical structures may have positive consequences. Many research projects grow out of long-standing networks between western and African partner institutions, and as such they are not isolated cases of research training but parts of more extensive plans for staff building and institution development. However, it may have negative consequences too. Such old and well established structures tend to have a conserving function on various types of imbalance between the two partners. In most cases the western partner is in control of economy as well as (western) academic networks, and it often continues to regard the African partner as a “daughter” rather than a “sister”.

For various reasons, the first generation of African Old Testament scholars went through a doctoral training in western institutional contexts, where the discussion partners were mainly western scholars. Although this situation can be regretted, it is nevertheless understandable. However, it would be unfortunate, if the second generation of African Old Testament scholars too, that is those doing their academic training today, would also have to do their research in contexts – African or western – where the discussion partners for all practical purposes are still western scholars. Not only would the second generation then be

prevented from relating their research to the interpretive experiences of the first generation, but it would also continue the quite general tendency of marginalising African Old Testament studies within the more global guild of biblical studies. There is, accordingly, a need for an Old Testament studies in Africa that in addition to being sensitive to African experiences and concerns, is also conscious about the geographical hermeneutics of *all* Old Testament interpretation.

### **Bibliographical survey of the dissertations**

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## Notes

1. S.O. Abogunrin, "Biblical research in Africa: The task ahead", *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 1/I (1986) 13.
2. J.S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African eyes", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995) 4.
3. Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967–2000*. New York: Peter Lang 2002 (Bible and Theology in Africa; 3). Cf. also *idem*, *Tropical Africa and the Old Testament: A Select and Annotated Bibliography*. Oslo: University of Oslo 1996 (Faculty of Theology: Bibliography Series; 6); and *idem*, *Yahweh in Africa: Essays on Africa and the Old Testament*. New York: Peter Lang 2000 (Bible and Theology in Africa; 1).
4. Documentation of this material proves to be quite difficult. Still, a systematic collection of information about theological colleges and seminaries in Africa has been undertaken by the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), cf. P. Bowers & J. Hill (comp.), *ACTEA Directory of Theological Schools in Africa* (2. ed. 1985). According to Bowers (personal communication, 2004.09.11), a third edition of the ACTEA directory has been repeatedly delayed. Still, ACTEA has, at present, approximately 1500 African theological institutions in its database. Whilst waiting for a new version of the *ACTEA Directory*, cf. P. Bowers, "New light on theological education in Africa", *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990) 57–63; and C.M. Pauw, "Theological education in Africa", *Old Testament Essays* 7 (1994) 13–24.
5. Cf. K. Holter, "Old Testament scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa north of the Limpopo river", G.O. West & M.W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa*. Leiden: Brill (2000) 54–71.
6. The figures of population and Christian presence in Nigeria and The Democratic Republic of the Congo are taken from D.B. Barrett & al. (eds.), *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*. Vol. 1, 2. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001) 211, 549.

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