CHAPTER SEVEN

COLLABORATIVE AND INTERACTIVE HERMENEUTICS
IN AFRICA: GIVING DIALOGICAL PRIVILEGE
IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

One of the notable characteristics of scholarly readers in Africa is their sense of detachment from ordinary or popular readers. This is captured by Musa Dube’s statement after her return from her biblical studies in Durham (United Kingdom) and Vanderbilt (USA) Universities:

I had read many illuminating theories of excellent biblical scholars. But the journey was one that took me further from home. I was by and large in dialogue with Western reading communities, who constitute the majority of the academy…Meanwhile, I knew little or nothing about biblical readers whom I heard interpreting the bible loudly as I walked down the streets of my home. I had taken no pains to learn the techniques of reading employed by biblical readers, whom I heard during the night, burning their midnight oil, reading the bible poetically, dramatically and loudly (Dube 1998:1).

The definition of the African scholarly reader as detached from the popular context of African self-description implies that her/his active interaction and dialogue with ordinary readers is necessary if s/he wants to be involved in effective interpretation and literary reflection in his or her own context.

B. Goba underlines the gap that exists between black hermeneuts and ordinary people in his Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and Africa by pointing out that many of the interpretations developed in Africa by black biblical scholars are unrelated and inaccessible to the needs and experiences of the majority of Africa’s peoples:

There is a gap between the black elite and the ordinary black man. We have allowed our acquired intellectualism to separate us from the ordinary people (Goba 1973:94).
Such a definition of the task facing African hermeneuts clearly highlights the roles of different kinds of readers in the process and points to the need for deep analysis and reflection on these roles and their interplay. African biblical scholars are putting forward a fundamental approach which locates the process of biblical interpretation in a genuine dialogue between the African scholarly reader (with historical critical tools) and the ordinary reader (without critical tools). Therefore, biblical scholars in Africa need to provide the conditions under which a dialogue can genuinely take place. This implies that a hermeneutic is needed that can provide the conditions for such a dialogue to take place.

If we are to respond to the demands of the African biblical scholar for a hermeneutical relationship between ordinary and scholarly readers, then we need a reading process that allows for cultural diversity in its construction. Also, there is the need for a reading approach that addresses the question of dominance between ordinary readers and scholarly readers. It is therefore necessary to adopt a hermeneutical theory which firstly, is reader-orientated and is willing to open up reading spaces for a diversity of voices to participate actively. Secondly, there is the need for a hermeneutical theory which deals with the issue of power relations between scholarly readers and ordinary readers.

To meet these criteria I have chosen the hermeneutical theory of Habermas which attempts to address the issues with respect to ordinary readers reading in conjunction with scholarly readers. Habermas’ hermeneutical theory is the most appropriate one for this purpose because its aim is to ensure that there is no distortion in the communicative action by the interpreter; thus implying that there is the need for effective communication between the voices that undertake the interpretative action. If we apply this to the African context it means that there is the need for effective dialogue between ordinary readers and scholarly readers in order to arrive at a representative and meaningful interpretation. Second, Habermas’ hermeneutical theory aims at what he calls a ‘dominance-free’ dialogue between the discourse partners. Considering the gap that exists between scholarly readers and ordinary readers, the need exists for a reading process that at least minimises the dominance of scholarly readers over ordinary readers, even if it cannot be entirely eliminated.

My proposal here is that of a hermeneutic characterised by genuine team or group-work, where members regard themselves as partners and