

Mother of Black Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa—Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele): *Yo Aneng a Swere Thipa ka Bogaleng* (The One Who Held the Knife at Its Sharp End)

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ABSTRACT

This article asserts that Professor Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) deserves to be recognised as the “Mother of black Old Testament scholarship in South Africa.” She ought to be celebrated for pioneering the bosadi approach, an African and black womanist hermeneutic that stands as distinctly her own. Through her approach, Masenya challenges dominant Euro-Western paradigms that have long shaped biblical interpretation and theological study in (South) Africa as well as the patriarchal tendencies inherent in the Bible, biblical scholarship and African cultures. She intentionally centres the experiences, voices and knowledge systems of African women within theological scholarship. Her contributions have profoundly impacted the field of Old Testament studies, particularly in the areas of biblical hermeneutics, women's experiences and gender hermeneutics. Given her significant involvement and groundbreaking work, Masenya’s recognition in this manner is both warranted and necessary.

KEYWORDS: Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele), *Bosadi* approach, Old Testament Scholarship

A INTRODUCTION

It is a challenging task to honour fully a scholar of the stature of *mama/mme* Professor Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele). I intend to build on the case that I have made elsewhere that Professor Masenya should be recognised as the “Mother of Black Old Testament scholarship in South Africa.”¹ My use of

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¹ This claim is one which I have briefly made elsewhere, see Hulisani Ramantswana, “Past the Glorious Age: Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa—Are We Moving

the category “black” in this context aligns with its use and spirit within Black Theology. Therefore, I deliberately base this terminology on the following points: First, there was a period when African-black people were largely absent from the narrative of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa. For instance, Jurie le Roux’s *A Story of Two Ways: Thirty Years of Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa* (1993)² tells the story of South African Old Testament scholars between 1957 and 1987, but in it, indigenous African people—who, under colonial-apartheid, racial profiling were considered black—hardly feature. Second, the term “black” provides a different perspective through which to view and recount the past. It enables us to see ourselves within the story and narrate it from our own viewpoint. Third, drawing from the insights of Black Theology, the category “black” functions as a marker for the marginalised and oppressed who have struggled and continue to struggle for life amid life-denying realities—realities that persist even in the so-called post-colonial and post-apartheid contexts. Fourth, the use of “black” empowers us to acknowledge our humanity and beauty, countering the myth of white superiority in biblical scholarship.

Since her academic career began in 1982, Professor Masenya has navigated a challenging landscape that demanded resilience and courage. The saying, *Mosadi o swara thipa ka bogaleng* (“a woman holds the knife at its sharp end”), resonates deeply in this context, as she has had to “hold the knife at its sharp end,” embodying the role of a fearless woman and a mother preparing the way for future generations. On the one hand, the saying is empowering, as it instils within women a spirit of fearlessness and boldness in the face of struggle, oppression, pain and abuse. On the other hand, it highlights the reality that women often bear the brunt of these struggles, a fact that is usually ignored but must be challenged and rejected. Why do women have to suffer? This essay aims to highlight three key areas in which Masenya has exemplified what it means to hold the knife at its sharp end—hermeneutically, epistemologically, and contextually. However, before proceeding to these, I will begin by outlining Masenya’s journey in Old Testament scholarship more broadly.

B TRAVERSING ON THE SHARP END/ CUTTING EDGE THROUGH OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

Masenya’s journey in Old Testament scholarship began with her undergraduate studies in Biblical Studies at the then University of the North.³ Her professional

Anywhere Close to Blackening Old Testament Scholarship?,” *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 119/3 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.7833/119-3-1769>.

² Jurie Hendrik Le Roux, *A Story of Two Ways: Thirty Years of Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993), <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/60030>.

³ During the era of apartheid in South Africa, the University of the North was one of the universities designated for black students in the country. At that time, higher

academic journey began in 1982, when she was appointed as a junior lecturer in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Limpopo. She later moved to Setotolwane College of Education, where she held lecturing positions until May 1991.

The transition into Old Testament studies was marked by her enrolment for a Master of Arts degree at UNISA, during which she completed a thesis entitled, “In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context.” Building on this foundation, she pursued doctoral studies and, in 1996, earned her PhD with a dissertation titled “Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective.” Her academic standing as a biblical scholar was further solidified with her appointment as a lecturer at the University of the North in 1991. In 1995, she joined the Department of Old Testament at the University of South Africa as a lecturer, becoming the first black (female) faculty member in the department. While this was a significant milestone in her career, it also marked the beginning of navigating the predominantly Euro-Western academic environment, presenting the complex experience of being both an insider and an outsider as well as feeling like a foreigner within a traditionally white, male-dominated field.

Reflecting on her journey in Old Testament scholarship, Professor Masenya has shared in several articles the challenges she faced in the field. The initial struggles in the field were fourfold—cultural domination, racial domination, gender disparity and contextual irrelevance. She states in this regard:

I struggled hard to fit in, to be what I was not! One therefore had to learn the dynamics of fitting into the outsider dominant white (read: Afrikaner) culture, while also remaining faithful to African culture. The insider/outsider dynamics became even more visible as I enrolled for Biblical Studies at a historically black university. None of my lecturers shared my racial and gender identities. The (theological) offerings which were consumed had basically nothing to do with the African context that South Africa was or is supposed to be.⁴

Masenya’s experience in Old Testament scholarship was marked by a profound struggle to reconcile her identity with the expectations of the dominant academic environment. She wrestled with fitting in and meeting requirements that were often at odds with her cultural heritage and self-understanding. Despite the pressure to assimilate into the outsider culture, Masenya also attempted to remain committed to her African identity and roots, striving to uphold her

education institutions were racially segregated, with universities for black students on one side and universities exclusively for white students on the other.

⁴ Madipoane Masenya, “For Ever Trapped? An African Voice on Insider/Outsider Dynamics within South African Old Testament Gender-Sensitive Frameworks,” *Old Testament Essays* 27/1 (2014): 189–204, <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC152825>.

heritage in an environment that did not always value or understand it. Thus, Masenya was not just walking on a tightrope; she was grasping a knife at its cutting edge and, unfortunately, in so doing, injury was unavoidable, in this case, an injury as a way of fighting back.⁵

Masenya’s experience exemplifies the operational mechanisms of colonial systems, which routinely pressured those in colonised or subaltern regions to adopt the standards, norms and practices of the colonisers. Such conformity was enforced through various means, including coercion and subtle forms of co-option, leaving little room for the affirmation of indigenous identities or alternative perspectives.

At the time Masenya entered the guild of biblical scholarship in South Africa—particularly Old Testament studies—it was overwhelmingly dominated by white men, reinforcing both patriarchal and Euro-Western paradigms.⁶ The dominance of these perspectives meant that the tools and methods used for interpretation were shaped by Euro-Western hermeneutics, often marginalising or ignoring African voices and experiences.⁷ It is these hermeneutical practices that Masenya describes as strange.⁸

⁵ See Lerato Mokoena, “Bosadi Theology of Masenya Madipoane (Ngwan'a Mphahlele),” in *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa* (vol. 3 of Circle Jubilee; ed. Nelly Mwale et al.; Bamberg: University of Bamberg, 2024), 85–96, <https://fis.uni-bamberg.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/3bff8015-7342-461a-ab0a-f9f5c1b1cca9/content>.

⁶ See how Deist painted a picture of the state of Old Testament scholarship in 1992; Ferdinand Deist, “South African Old Testament Studies and the Future,” *Old Testament Essays* 5 (1992): 311–331.

⁷ Masenya in her reflection on Old Testament Studies in South Africa, argues: “The colonial enterprise... did much harm to African peoples in terms of identity. As one might expect, the education received by African students from Western/Western-oriented producers and professors also had the capacity to alienate these students from their cultural heritage. Old Testament studies in South Africa were no exception to this state of affairs. This has been the case because of the rooted-ness of South African Old Testament scholarship in the West rather than in Africa. The main question addressed in this article is: Given the extent of the harm done by colonial and apartheid education to African-South African students, is it a wise exercise to continue offering to these students a theology which continues to alienate them from their real selves?”; Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), “Teaching Western-Oriented Old Testament Studies to African Students: An Exercise in Wisdom or in Folly?,” *Old Testament Essays* 17/3 (2004): 455–469, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC85638>.

⁸ Madipoane J. Masenya, “Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours Is a Necessity! Reading Vashti in Esther 1 as African Women in South Africa,” in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Van der Stichele and Todd Penner, vol. 9 of Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 179–194.

Entering into this fray should not be considered accidental or incidental. Those who have been trained in the Euro-Western schooling system from basic education level to college and university are products of the Euro-Western systems, whether they love them or hate them. This reality means that the insider/outsider dynamic is not unique to Masenya but is a broader issue affecting all who have been educated within this system. It raises critical questions about the possibility of dismantling structures that have simultaneously shaped and constrained our intellectual formation. Can the so-called Master's House ever be dismantled if those seeking to do so have themselves been raised within its walls and, unwittingly, have helped to build the house? Given these circumstances, the question arises whether the project of constructing a truly African-centred Old Testament scholarship has even begun or remains an elusive goal.

While Masenya felt, in many ways, trapped within the prevailing academic environment, her enduring contribution is her effort to establish a hermeneutical framework that, in post-colonial terms, goes "beyond" Euro-Western colonial paradigms or, in decolonial terms, locates itself "outside" the confines of Euro-Western paradigms. Her pursuit, as will become clear in this discussion, led her to develop a hermeneutical lens that reflects her own cultural experiences and the lived realities of African women, seeking to articulate meaning from within rather than through imposed external frameworks. In doing so, Masenya not only challenged the dominance of Euro-Western methodologies but also opened space for the affirmation and validation of indigenous perspectives, inviting others to reconsider the boundaries and the terms of biblical interpretation. Therefore, it is essential also to understand Masenya's own hermeneutical shift.

C MASENYA'S HERMENEUTICAL DISOBEDIENCE: THE BIRTH OF THE *BOSADI* APPROACH

The origins of the *bosadi* approach can be traced to Masenya's PhD thesis, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: *A Bosadi* (Womanhood) Perspective" (1996).⁹ In this work, Masenya introduced and developed the *bosadi* approach, which she applied and expanded in her subsequent writings. In 2004, Masenya published her thesis under the title, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa*.¹⁰ Notably, the term "*bosadi*" was omitted from the book's title and I have often wondered why the hermeneutical lens of "*bosadi*" was dropped, considering that it is the

⁹ Madipoane Joyce Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective" (D.Litt. en Phil. thesis, University of South Africa, 1996),

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/304284565/abstract/EC95492154F947BEPQ/1>.

¹⁰ Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

approach that made the work distinctive. In my view, the publisher, by dropping the hermeneutical lens, diluted and toned down the work, reducing it to just another contextual reading from the African context, as though it lacked a robust methodology. From the engagement with Prof Masenya, my initial instincts were confirmed, as she indicated that the publisher demanded that "*bosadi*" be removed from the title to enhance the book's accessibility and reach. However, this editorial decision reflects a broader tendency in academic publishing to tone down, dilute or silence voices from the margins to cater to Euro-Western audiences, often at the expense of authentic representation for those in the scholar's own social location. The implication is that Masenya's primary interlocutors are presumed to be those in the Euro-West, rather than those who share her social and cultural location.

Despite these pressures to conform and dilute her approach for broader acceptance, Masenya persisted in articulating and defending the *bosadi* approach. Her steadfast commitment ensured that this distinctive hermeneutical framework continued to be developed and championed, resisting attempts to silence or marginalise perspectives from the African context. Thus, Masenya affirmed the significance of the *bosadi* approach and its relevance for interpreting biblical texts through the lens of African womanhood, providing a vital contribution to both local and global scholarship.

1 From Black Feminist Theology to *Bosadi* Approach

Before undertaking her PhD thesis, Masenya operated within the hermeneutical frame of "feminism." While this label initially sufficed, Masenya soon recognised its limitations and pressed for what she called "Black Feminist Theology."¹¹ For Masenya, this shift was essential to centre the lived experiences of black women. As Masenya argued, while black women share aspects of suffering with their white counterparts, it is, however, the black women who more fully understand the intricate interplay between sex, race and class oppression.

Black Feminist Theology, as Masenya envisioned it, involved several key elements. First, it called for counter-readings of biblical texts that have historically been used to oppress women. Second, it sought to interpret the Bible

¹¹ Joyce Masenya, "A Feminist Perspective on Theology with Particular Reference to Black Feminist Theology," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 49 (1994): 64–74, <https://doi.org/10.7833/49-0-1621>; Joyce Masenya, "The Bible and Women: Black Feminist Hermeneutics," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 54 (1995): 189–201, <https://doi.org/10.7833/54-0-1480>; Joyce Masenya, "Freedom in Bondage: Black Feminist Hermeneutics," Collection, Black Theology Project, May 1994, South Africa, *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 8/ 1 (1994), <https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/btmay9410152296008001may19947>.

theologically in ways that resist patriarchal structures. Third, it drew on the experiences of both biblical and contemporary women living in patriarchal societies. Despite these critical dimensions, Masenya realised that "Black Feminist Theology" would not ultimately define her scholarly trajectory. Instead, she determined that her work would be characterised by a hermeneutic of disobedience—an approach that challenges the established norms and methodologies inherited from dominant paradigms. It should be noted, however, that Masenya was not necessarily the first to argue for Black Feminist Theology. Rev Roxanne Jordaan, in 1987, argued for the emergence of a Black Feminist Theology in South Africa, which is aimed at centring the struggles of black women. Jordaan also made the point that, in the development of Black Theology, the feminist aspect was sidelined, which, for her, implied a lack of wholeness in Black Theology.¹² She then argues:

Any form of liberation which does not address itself to the emancipation of the whole person should be seriously challenged for misrepresenting the concept of liberation. For no person can be free when part of that which gives you your humanity is in chains. A part of the wholeness of black womanness is also caught up in Black Theology, a and more specifically, Black Feminist Theology.

(When the women marched to Pretoria in 1956 most of them were Christians.) There needs to be some theological reflection on the doldrums of society in which black women find themselves. Therefore Black Feminist Theology has to be an integral part of Black Theology.¹³

In her PhD thesis, Masenya introduced and adopted what she termed the "*bosadi* approach." She made a clear distinction between *bosadi* and the frameworks of feminism and womanism. She states:

Though it has points of resemblance with both feminism ... and womanism, it is neither of the two. My agenda is different from that of the preceding philosophies. It has a different context, a South African context opposed to the African-American and Euro-American contexts of womanism and feminism, respectively. As an approach committed to the African-ness of an African woman in South Africa, it has more in common with its African-American counterpart.¹⁴

¹² Roxanne Jordaan, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Theology in South Africa," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 1 (1987): 42–46.

¹³ Jordaan, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Theology," 44.

¹⁴ Masenya, "Proverbs 31," 20.

Thus, Masenya's *bosadi* approach diverges from both feminism and womanism in two distinct ways—philosophical and contextual.¹⁵

In terms of philosophical divergence, the *bosadi* approach draws on concepts and frameworks unique to the African context, specifically the concept of *bosadi*, rooted in the Sepedi language and translated as "womanhood."¹⁶ This philosophical foundation allows Masenya to articulate issues of womanhood on her own terms, rather than adopting the frameworks established by feminism or womanism. The word *bosadi*, as Masenya explains, is interlinked with the term *mosadi*, meaning "woman." For Masenya, the concept of *bosadi* serves as a foundational platform that enables her to address the issues faced by women, regardless of their age or status. This understanding of *bosadi* is deeply interwoven with the notion of *mosadi*, which itself embodies a range of dynamics within various African cultures. In languages such as Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, and Tshivenda, the term *mosadi* (used in Tswana-Sotho-Pedi) or *musadzi* (in Tshivenda) follows a linguistic structure where the prefixes "mo-" (singular) and "ba-" (plural) are used for *mosadi* (with the plural being *basadi*) and "mu-" (singular) and "vha-" (plural) are used for *musadzi* and *vhasadzi*, respectively. These prefixes are shorthand for *motho* or *muthu*, which mean "human being" or "person," with their plurals being *batho* or *vhathu*. This linguistic structure underscores that the identity of a woman, as captured by *mosadi* or *musadzi*, is fundamentally linked to the concept of personhood in these cultures. A *mosadi* fulfills a variety of roles that are not always directly translatable into English. For instance, she can be referred to as *mma* or *mme* (a mother), *mmame* (or *mmamane*, meaning a young mother), *mmemogolo* or *mmemuhulu* (an older mother), *koko*, *nkhono*, or *makhulu* (grandmother), *kgaetseli* or *khaladzi* (sister) and *rakgadi* or *makhadzi* (a sister in a special role in relation to her brother(s) and their families). In defining a *mosadi*, as informed by her context, Masenya states:

A *mosadi* (woman) is a female African-South African woman who though, conscious of the corporeal mentality of Africans and also respecting it, can stand on her own, affirming her full humanity as being created in God's image. As an independent person, she may choose to be involved with a male partner in a marriage relationship, though that does not entail that she loses her humanness and independence to her male partner. If she does

¹⁵ For more on this, see Kjersti Wee and Marta Høyland Lavik, "Beyond Feminist and Womanist Hermeneutics: Some Critical Remarks on the Bosadi Approach of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)," *Old Testament Essays* 38/2 (2025): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2025/v38n2a6>.

¹⁶ Masenya, "Proverbs 31," 156.

not choose to be in a marriage relationship, she must be at liberty to remain single.¹⁷

Thus, Masenya argues for a nuanced, holistic understanding of the concept of *bosadi*, acknowledging that it has both positive and negative attributes in African cultures.¹⁸ Importantly, the *bosadi* approach is not a simplistic or uncritical adoption of a linguistic concept from Sepedi culture. Instead, it is a deliberate and thoughtful engagement with cultural concepts, recognising the value in reviving and embracing positive aspects of African traditions.

Among the positive aspects, Masenya highlights that *mosadi* as *motho* (person) contributes to the wholeness of the concept of *ubuntu/botho/vhuthu*. *Ubuntu* embodies collective human effort and mutual care and Masenya stresses that women play a significant role in realising this ideal. The *bosadi* approach also elevates the importance of family, acknowledging the diverse roles that women fulfil within familial and social structures.¹⁹ In so doing, *bosadi* affirms the centrality of women in the nurturing and sustaining of community values.

While African cultures possess many positive attributes, Masenya calls for critical examination and rejection of the oppressive elements that arise from patriarchal norms and the marginalisation of *basadi* (women).²⁰ She points out that in South Africa, these existing oppressive tendencies were further compounded and perpetuated by colonial and apartheid systems, which imposed additional layers of racism, sexism and classism. Thus, the *bosadi* approach does not pretend to be a neutral or value-free interpretive framework. Instead, it is intended to critically engage and dismantle oppressive structures present in African cultures, society and even those embedded within biblical texts.

According to West, Masenya's *bosadi* approach represents a "(re-)turn to culture intersected with the dominant race and/ as class analysis of Black Theology," reflecting one of the concerns that was central to early Black Theologians.²¹ For West, the distinctive contribution of Masenya lies in her ability to intertwine considerations of culture and gender, centring the struggles of women as she engages with the Bible. In this way, the *Bosadi* approach foregrounds the experiences and agency of women in theological and cultural discourses.

¹⁷ Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *Old Testament Essays* 10/3 (1997): 442, https://doi.org/10.10520/AJA10109919_728.

¹⁸ Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves," 442.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 442–43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 443–44.

²¹ Gerald West, "Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele)'s Cultural (Re-)Turn within South African Biblical Studies: Intersecting 'Culture' and 'Racial Capitalism,'" *Old Testament Essays* 38/2 (2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2025/v38n2a1>.

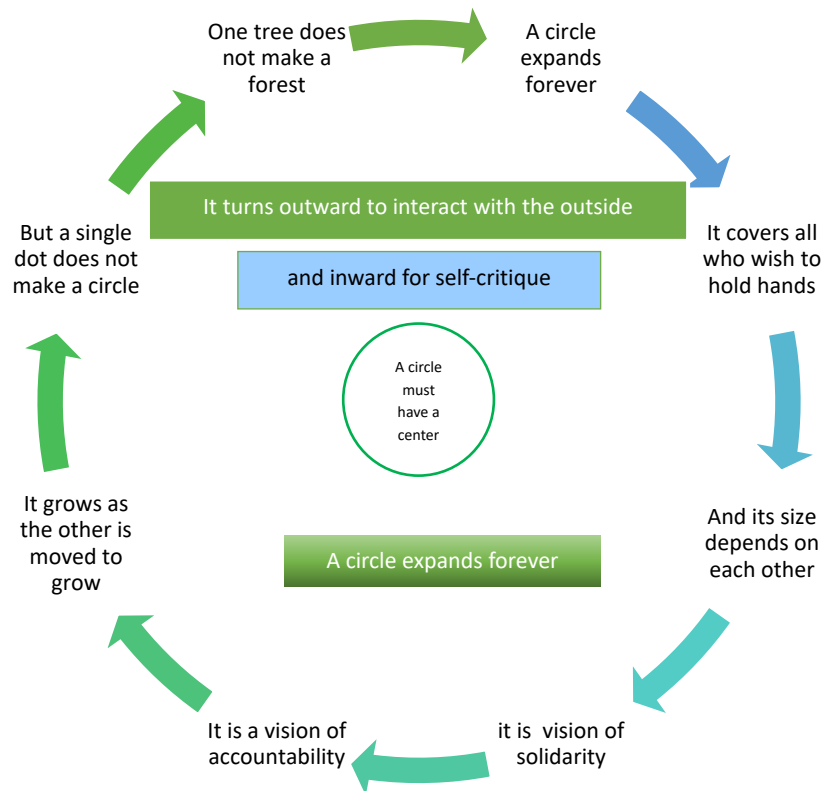
The *bosadi* approach diverges from feminism and womanism because of the different contexts that inform them. Feminism and womanism are informed by Euro-American and African-American contexts, respectively. Masenya's approach is firmly grounded in the South African context. This contextual distinction makes the *bosadi* approach uniquely suited to address the lived realities and experiences of African women in South Africa, setting it apart from other hermeneutical frameworks that are shaped by different cultural and social backgrounds.

The bosadi approach, in my view, is a hermeneutic of disobedience. It was born in the context of trying to play by the rules of the game, but then realising that those rules do not fit the African context. This is a hermeneutic of refusal to play by the hermeneutical rules framed in the Euro-Western context. This, however, does not imply the rejection or denial of other approaches or a presumptuous idea that there is nothing to learn from others. Instead, it is premised on the fact that hermeneutical approaches emerge from particular contexts and are not value-free.

In centring women's issues in biblical scholarship and theology in the African context, Masenya is not a lone voice. Rain is but many drops of water. Thus, Masenya found a home in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.²² She is a voice among many other women's voices. These women speak from their own social locations, theologise from their own experiences and call for action rather than theologise for the sake of theologising. Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes the Circle, as adapted in the illustration below:²³

²² Madipoane J. Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences : Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *Old Testament Essays* 18/3 (2005): 741–751, <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC85724>.

²³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye. "The Story of a Circle" (Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians), *The Ecumenical Review* 53/1 (2001): 97.



D MASENYA’S EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION: CENTRING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Masenya’s impact extends beyond her developing a hermeneutical approach, which shaped her academic journey. Her contribution is also epistemological, as she has played a pivotal role in centring African knowledge systems. Through careful reading of Masenya’s body of work over the years, one comes to appreciate the recurring presence of African proverbs and stories in her writings. These elements infuse the readers with doses of African knowledge, reaffirming the value and richness of African epistemologies.

While the concept of *bosadi* suggests that the sole concern of the approach is women's issues or gender issues, Masenya exemplifies an African woman’s determination to preserve the rich heritage of her ancestors and to pass it on to the next generation. In many African cultures, including the Bapedi culture to which Masenya is rooted, storytelling is an essential part of family and community life. As Lebaka notes, among the Bapedi, the elderly are regarded as a reservoir of indigenous knowledge and parents and grandparents transmit knowledge through music, oral literature, myths, art and rites.²⁴ Therefore, by

²⁴ Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka, “Adverse Impact of the Flow of African Storytelling between Older and Younger Generations as a Result of the Movement of People from Rural to Urban Areas: The Case of Bapedi Story Telling Tradition,” *DIALOGO* 9/1 (2022): 95–10, <https://doi.org/10.51917/dialogo.2022.9.1.7>.

opting to ground her approach philosophically in an African concept and by drawing on African indigenous knowledge to inform her reading of biblical texts, Masenya was in fact grasping the colonial knife by its sharp end through the refusal to let go and let die the rich heritage of our ancestors. Her stance, among others, inspired me to embrace the decolonial turn. Echoing the words of Lucky Dube's song, I embraced the call to "go back to my roots." Under Masenya's mentorship and through collaboration, I learned to love my culture and heritage afresh, leading me to opt hermeneutically for a *vhufa* approach as a lens for my reading of the Bible.²⁵ I became, figuratively, "my mother's son."

A central call that black Old Testament scholars should draw from Masenya's writings is that we ignore our own indigenous knowledge systems to our own peril. This is because colonialism and apartheid sought to erase our indigenous institutions, languages and cultures. However, Masenya's commitment to centring Africa and embracing African culture has led some to characterise the *bosadi* approach as a form of "African inculturation hermeneutics" or as comparative in its application,²⁶ while others have accused her of idolising culture.²⁷ In responding to these criticisms, Masenya argues that *bosadi* cannot be reduced to a comparative approach enthused with women's concerns; rather, it is an approach that reads the Bible critically and also critiques African culture.²⁸

It is important to recognise that engaging with both the Bible and African culture in a critical manner is not sufficient without considering epistemic location. What is required is a decisive shift in the geography of reason—a reconnection with African knowledge systems that have historically been marginalised. For us as black scholars, this shift is not just a scholarly preference, but a pressing obligation, especially in light of the "epistemic colonisation" or "colonisation of the mind" that the colonial apparatus imposed upon African people both past and present.²⁹ Colonisation persists even today, despite claims of a post-colonial era. In Mignolo's terms, Eurocentric epistemology is carefully hidden in scholarly disciplines, politics, economics and various other structures

²⁵ Hulisani Ramantswana, "Beware of the (Westernised) African Eyes: Rereading Psalm 82 through the *Vhufa* Approach," *Scriptura* 116 (2017): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.7833/115-0-1205>.

²⁶ Gloria Kehilwe Plaatje, "Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible: A Case of Luke 2:36-38," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube. Atalanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001): 114.

²⁷ Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube. Atalanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001): 159.

²⁸ Masenya, "An African Methodology," 745.

²⁹ For more on the colonisation of the mind, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

for self-serving interests.³⁰ Recently, the colonisation of the mind continues through neurotechnology, that is, the use of AI, data and digital technologies for mind-reading, mind-tampering and mind-manipulation to perpetuate Eurocentric epistemology.³¹

As decolonial scholars highlight, overcoming the pervasive influence of Euro-Western paradigms is impossible if not done from the position of colonial difference. This means we must move beyond just giving small doses or minimal inclusion of African heritage here and there in our academic work. Instead, there is a need for a full and unapologetic embrace of our rich African heritage if we are to liberate ourselves from the continuing dominance of Euro-Western frameworks. The immediate task before us, then, is to approach our scholarly engagement as though we are *re tsenwi*—those who are possessed by the ancestral spirit—or, in IsiZulu, as though we have *amandlozi*, which will be to honour our ancestors by ensuring that the heritage they entrusted to us continues to live through our work. In Masenya’s terms, we do not engage the Bible to retell ancient stories, but to rewrite and generate new stories that hold meaning and relevance for our own contexts and communities.

E MASENYA AND CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES: GOING BEYOND WOMEN’ S STRUGGLES TO CHALLENGE SOUTH AFRICA’S MALE-DOMINATED OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

The *bosadi* approach, as noted earlier, has as its primary concern the struggles of the South African women, particularly black women.³² In her publications, Masenya has addressed a wide range of issues affecting women and society, such as sexism, race, patriarchy, culture, gender violence, liberation in the context of colonialism and apartheid, HIV/AIDS, loss of life, ecology/environment, marginalisation, etcetera. Mokoena rightly notes:

Her[Masenya’s] work has encouraged black women’s resistance by challenging prevailing approaches to oppression in theology and civil

³⁰ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 29/7–8 (2009): 159–181.

³¹ Danielle Coleman, “Digital Colonialism: The 21st Century Scramble for Africa through the Extraction and Control of User Data and the Limitations of Data Protection Laws,” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 24/2 (2019): 417–439, <https://doi.org/10.36643/mjrl.24.2.digital>; Alexander Sieber, “Digital Barbarism: The New Colonization of the Mind,” *Critical Arts* 35/5–6 (2021): 252–260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2021.1986560>; Toussaint Nothias, “An Intellectual History of Digital Colonialism,” *J Commun* 75/5 (2025): 385–397, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaf003>.

³² For more on this, see in this issue, Palesa Nqambaza, “*Mosadi Ke Motho*: Masenya’s Contribution to Indigenous Gender Theorisation,” *Old Testament Essays* 38/2 (2025): 1–20; Wee and Lavik, “Beyond Feminist and Womanist Hermeneutics.”

society. Chief among the many responses from *Bosadi* theology is generating a black consciousness in black women and MEN. *Bosadi* adopted, even without knowing at times, a heuristic healing approach that condemned patriarchy as a social disease that threatened both black men and women.³³

Masenya's approach does not simply address women's struggles in society; it also pushes for contextual relevance in Old Testament Studies in South Africa. Masenya demonstrated remarkable courage when she challenged the male-dominated Department of Old Testament at UNISA as well as the broader Old Testament Society of South Africa to be contextually relevant. Early in her career, she is said to have remarked, "White South Africans can, almost by definition, not produce African scholarship."³⁴ This assertion, voiced by the young Masenya, then prompted a special focus on African biblical scholarship in the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa (BOTSA)* in 2002.

In her article in *BOTSA*, Masenya reiterates her position on whether white South African scholarship could authentically be considered African, based on her socio-political analysis of the South African context.³⁵ She argues that white South Africans, by and large, were complicit in and comfortable with the systems of colonialism, apartheid and Euro-Western culture, including in their hermeneutical practices. Additionally, their scholarship did not take into account the struggles of the indigenous people of South Africa and the scholarly practices reflected a tendency towards Europeanisation or Westernisation of African students, thereby producing "contextually empty" students whose theology had nothing to do with their context. Over the years, Masenya continued to reflect on the hermeneutical practices of Old Testament scholars in South Africa.

In 2012, much like a mother guiding her child, Masenya brought me into this ongoing conversation.³⁶ Together, we explored whether there was anything truly new under the sun of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa. In our analysis, we acknowledge that some scholars do engage meaningfully with their contexts in scholarship, but we conclude that the call initially made by Deist to move away from Eurocentric approaches is yet to be satisfactorily answered. We argue that there is a continued reliance on Euro-Western paradigms in South

³³ Mokoena, "Bosadi Theology of Masenya," 87.

³⁴ The statement is quoted by Willem Boshoff in Willem Boshoff, "Can 'White' South African Old Testament Scholarship Be African?," *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (2002): 1.

³⁵ Madipoane Masenya, "Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?," *BOTSA* 12 (2002): 3–8.

³⁶ Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun?" African Qoheleth's Review of *OTE* 1994-2010," *Old Testament Essays* 25/3 (2012): 598–637.

African scholarship, which ultimately "impoverishes the South African grassroots communities who are supposed to benefit from such academia." Those of us who also experienced foreignness, inferiorisation, exclusion and marginalisation in biblical scholarship in South Africa also share Masenya's sentiments that white male-dominated scholarship in our context served to entrench Euro-Western hermeneutical paradigms and frameworks in our South African context, such that their theological and hermeneutical work often remained detached from the lived realities of African contexts.

Blazing her own hermeneutical trail, Professor Madipoane Masenya has never hesitated to tell her story—a personal journey inextricably linked to the struggles of black South Africans, especially black women. She navigated a challenging and unfamiliar hermeneutical landscape. In choosing to "grab the knife by the sharp end," she fought tenaciously, much like a lioness preparing the field for her cubs. Through her experiences, many see reflections of their own stories; through her efforts, she laid the groundwork for future African Old Testament scholarship.

F CONCLUSION

When the story of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa—and more broadly, Africa—is recounted, it would be incomplete without the inclusion of Professor Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s name. Her story or rather, herstory, encompasses far more than her personal journey; she stands as a true pioneer and foundational figure. With her innovative thinking, she has forged her own intellectual path, demonstrating comfort and confidence in her identity. Moreover, she has served as a nurturer, one under whose guidance many have flourished, both within South Africa and throughout the African continent.

While the assertion that Old Testament scholarship has often remained foreign to African peoples in South Africa may still contain some truth, it is no longer the sole reality. Through her scholarship, Professor Masenya has played a pivotal role in reshaping the field, ensuring that African voices and experiences are increasingly centred in academic discourse. Her contributions have challenged the perception of estrangement and actively sought contextual relevance.

Professor Masenya's academic legacy is visible in the generation of scholars she has mentored. Unlike Rachel, who mourned for her children and refused to be comforted, Masenya can take solace in the fact that her scholarly "children" are very much alive—both in South Africa and across the African continent. These scholars, emboldened by her example, are unafraid to question and resist Euro-Western paradigms that have long dominated the field. Their dedication and commitment to Africa and her people reflect the spirit she instilled.

In the tradition of Steve Biko, Masenya has taught her students and colleagues to recognise the beauty and richness inherent in Black identity and African knowledge systems. Her influence continues to inspire a sense of pride and a commitment to the intellectual wealth found within our African knowledge systems.

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