

## **THE CHARACTER OF TABITHA IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

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### **Introduction**

When reading the ancient Israel narratives exposed in the Bible, one could arguably assert that women have been always putting up a low profile, or rather, forced to do so by the Law. In Genesis 18: 6, the great forefather of the Israelites, Abraham, after having received three visitors, is seen running to Sarah his wife, ordering her to “quick, three measures of bran flour! Knead it and make bread.” Sarah the woman, is not conversing directly with the good visitors, but Abraham the man is. It could also be concluded that women were at most, reduced to running daily house chores. In the New Testament, we are however learning of a disciple, Tabitha, a woman, who rather swims against the tide of what was, and is expected of women. This paper will critically analyse Tabitha, extracting lessons that could be learnt from her. It will also expose how women are being seen in ancient Israel and how she is diverting from this perception.

### **Definition of Terms**

The Oxford Dictionary defines alms as money, food, clothes or anything, that is given to the poor for their sustenance and well-being. Luke 6: 12-16 portrays a disciple as a follower of Jesus Christ, and in 10: 1-12, this disciple is to be also a dedicated follower of Jesus’ teachings, following his instructions to cure the sick and proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand for the people.

### **The name Tabitha**

In Acts 9: 36, the name Tabitha is translated to English, Dorcas. However, Tabitha is an Aramaic name which is related to the Hebrew word, zebi (zebiah) meaning a gazelle, the same as the translation - Dorcas, in Greek, Dorkas, which also means a gazelle<sup>1</sup>. It is noted that the word “gazelle” is used by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term in Deuteronomy 12: 15, 2 Samuel : 18, and in the Songs of Songs 2: 9, 8: 14,<sup>2</sup> for instance, in the metaphor of the beloved in Songs of Songs 2: 9, “my lover is like a

gazelle or a young stag.”

This metaphor of a gazelle in the Song of Songs 2: 9 is used to adore, probably the beauty and stature of the beloved who is gazing through the windows and peering through the lattices. One could relate this idea to Tabitha who was adored by the widows who were under her gaze-like care as put in Acts 9: 36-43.

### **Who is Tabitha and Who are the Widows?**

The short story of Tabitha is told in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts) 9: 36-43. In these few verses, Tabitha is said to be a woman disciple who lived in Joppa. It is also said, she was completely occupied with doing good deeds and alms giving, that is, giving to the less fortunate, the widows. Johnson asserts that her good works, notably, alms giving, articulated piety in Judaism.<sup>3</sup> It was during these days of her good deeds that she fell sick and eventually died. After washing her corpse, the other disciples call Peter who was nearby. He had just healed a man named Aeneas in Lydda. Peter was shown to the upper room where the corpse was being kept, and where the widows cried out to him, showing him the tunics and cloaks that Tabitha was making them while she breathed. Johnson also thinks that the widows’ weeping and showing of the clothes to Peter, was an indirect plea that their good sponsor be restored to life and to them.<sup>4</sup> The story goes on to say that Peter commanded the corpse to rise up, and it did. With Tabitha raised to life, word spread all over Joppa, and converts increased in number.

### **Women in the Ancient Israelite Community**

To better understand the gravity of Tabitha’s novelty actions, it is worth- noting, in depth, how women were perceived in ancient Israel, and what they were expected of in the Early Church. Genesis 1: 23 portrays Eve, a woman, as a helper rather than the initiator of a “work.” Paul, in his first letter to Timothy 2: 11-12, takes up Genesis 3: 1-7, verses which narrate the fall of Adam and Eve, and puts the heavy blame on the woman who was weak to resist the snake’s temptation, and unfortunately coaxed Adam into sin too. Thus, Paul forbade women to speak or teach in public, and his argument was based on the fact that man was created prior to the

woman, and that she was primarily responsible for original sin.<sup>5</sup> He therefore, expected women to be submissive to the domineering man, and not to interrupt his speeches, even with whispers, but to respectfully listen in a modest manner.<sup>6</sup> Like Roger Gryson, Ross Saunders shares the same views when he acknowledges that a woman's primary and most important place was the household, managing its budget and rearing children, shunning away from anything that would tarnish the husband's name, bearing in mind that her behaviour is a direct reflection of the dominant husband.<sup>7</sup> Women in ancient Israel were, therefore, expected to comply to these expectations and obey the rules in an expeditious manner. It is unusual that in Acts 9: 36-43, we have a woman, and not a man, who is a sponsor of a group of widows, providing for them in care and alms giving.

### **Tabitha's Good Deeds**

As mentioned before, Tabitha took up the responsibility of caring for a group of widows. This generous deed was usual in the Early Church, as well as in the Old Testament. 2 Kings 4: 1-7 narrates a story about a helpless widow who cried out to the prophet Elisha for help to settle her deceased husband's debt before her two children could be taken into servitude.

Prior to this, Elijah the prophet had also come across a widow whom he commanded to bring him food, as she replied in 1 Kings 17: 12, "as the LORD, your God, lives, I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar, and a little oil in my jug...myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die." Stories of widows are not the most pleasant ones, as widows are depicted as relying on the mercy of somebody, usually a male figure. The service of widows in the Early Church became an established project as evidenced in Acts 6: 1-6. However, this passage shows that there were abuses and negligence in this project. The result was the appointment of seven reputable man to jointly take up the task of caring for a group of Greek-speaking widows.

Tabitha, on the other hand, is said to have undertaken this task all by herself. Saunders would arguably assert that Tabitha was rather a forerunner of a group of women (not man, as in Acts 6: 1-6) who took care of the widows and orphans.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence to the reasons behind her good deeds, but undoubtedly, Peter would have raised her to life for the sake of

the widows whom she took care of.<sup>9</sup> The impetus behind Tabitha's good work is questionable since this work was usually undertaken by men. Generally, Jewish women were not allowed to go into business which earned them money, and if they undertook works like washing or any housework, the wages were handed to a male sponsor, a husband, or a big brother (Saunders 19). Putting aside critical analysis, Tabitha remains the woman who was raised from death because of her noble good deeds and care for a group of widows.

### **Lessons that could be Learnt from Tabitha**

Looking at the character of Tabitha in Acts, one could easily pick out her generous acts towards the widows, and arguably conclude that we learn "to give" to those who are less fortunate, and it is true. We ought to give to the poor in any way possible, using our gifts, just like Tabitha used her gift of making tunics and cloaks for the poor widows. However, anybody could give. Just like any other good person could give, one could spare a one dollar note to give to a street urchin who extends a palm at the red robot, or help an old lady carry her bag to the bus station, or donate clothes to a village ravaged into shambles after a Cyclone *Idai* massacre. Tabitha went an extra mile in her generosity, and we could learn even more from her. She gave when it was not expected of her to give. She gave when the laws and norms did not tolerate somebody of her sex to give. One could easily give because the street urchin is already begging - when the condition is already suitable, but Tabitha gave when the condition was not favourable. As echoed in the paragraph on women in ancient Israel, the management of finance and the organisation of all charity activities in this patriarchal society were always entrusted to men, and not women.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Saunders asserts that Tabitha was stepping outside the role of women by taking up a task commissioned to men, that is, to look after widows, as put in Acts 6: 1-6.<sup>11</sup> As anybody could be a disciple, just like Tabitha was, she however went further to demonstrate with acts, a dedicated disciple of Christ and his teachings. Marginalisation, therefore, must not demolish a disciple's vigour to proclaim Christ message. Many exegetes conclude that Luke's interest in women, the poor and the marginalised people shows his universalism.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Tabitha the gazelle, though her story is shortly mentioned in Acts, is one of the role models of women disciples to the Gospel. She led by example. With her charitable deeds, she proclaimed the Gospel of Christ by taking up a challenging task of caring for a group of widows under the scrutiny of men. I would suggest that she had a source of help from a man or men, who may have chosen to be anonymous, or were simply not included deliberately in her story. However, it will remain blurry as to whether she was, on her own, financially stable that she could care for a group of widows, or she had background sponsors, possibly male.

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- <sup>1</sup> Johnson T, Luke. *The Acts of the Apostles: Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol 5. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992. P. 177
  - <sup>2</sup> Johnson T, Luke. *The Acts of the Apostles: Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol 5. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992
  - <sup>3</sup> Johnson T, Luke. *The Acts of the Apostles: Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol 5. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992
  - <sup>4</sup> Johnson T, Luke. *The Acts of the Apostles: Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol 5. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992. P. 178
  - <sup>5</sup> Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1980. P. 6
  - <sup>6</sup> Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1980. P. 6
  - <sup>7</sup> Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Alexandria: E.J Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1996. P. 18
  - <sup>8</sup> Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Alexandria: E.J Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1996. P. 106
  - <sup>9</sup> Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Alexandria: E.J Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1996
  - <sup>10</sup> Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Alexandria: E.J Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1996. P. 105
  - <sup>11</sup> Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Alexandria: E.J Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1996. 106
  - <sup>12</sup> Seim K, Turid. *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts*. Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1994. P. 2

**CRITICAL REVIEW OF MUSA W. DUBE'S ARTICLE ON MUSA W. DUBE,  
'TALITHA CUM HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION'**

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In recent years various reading strategies of the bible have been proposed.<sup>1</sup> African women and their male counterparts have also gone in pursuit of a biblical approach that is authentic in their own contexts. Musa Dube outlines the ideas of some of the big names in this project. Although each of the scholars she examines has her own individual approach she attempts to show how they share the same vision, which she calls talitha cum. This article will explain how, inspired by Kimpa Vita, Dube and colleagues envision an African biblical hermeneutic. Their vision, which largely hinges on existing inculturation and liberationist methodologies will be appraised and criticised. In the final analysis, while commending the efforts of these African women biblical scholars, caution will be urged in areas of oversight.

Dube attributes the legacy of postcolonial African biblical interpretation to Kimpa Vita a woman who lived and operated in Congo 'within the colonial ideology and practice of domination of other cultures, lands, people and minds.'<sup>2</sup> She says in that context Vita, a complex character, challenged the colonial church and government. Vita did so by crisscrossing between her culture and the colonial religion and culture enabling her to confront them from within 're-writing and re-telling the Christian script in a colonial space' (p. 31). According to Dube, Vita was deemed a threat by the colonial structures and killed in 1706 but her spirit continues to live among African Biblical scholars.

Dube says Vita is the inspiration behind talitha cum, African biblical feminism. She defines talitha cum as 'the art of living in the resurrection space: the art of continually rising against the powers of death, namely patriarchy and colonialism' (p. 34). Talitha cum, explains Dube, is drawn from the Markan story in Mark 5:21-43. She says the women in this story, the woman with haemorrhage and Jairus' daughter, 'embody the liberatory energy and vision that empowers African women to live in the resurrection power from the ever unending death dealing oppressive forces that invade the continent and their lives' (p. 37). Put simply, talitha cum, is the struggle against international oppression, gender oppression and other social evils

which must give way to healing (p. 36).

Dube demonstrates *talitha cum* hermeneutics by examining the works of Mercy A. Oduyoye, Masenya Madipaone, Teresa Okure and her own works. As she put it, these women ‘stand in the legacy of Kimpa Vita’s resurrection – the power to resist and rise from death-dealing powers of oppression, suppression and exploitation; the art of insisting on life and quality of life’ (p. 42). She begins by examining the work of Oduyoye whom she praises for ‘her acknowledgement of the coexistence of multiple scriptures and her use of them’ (p. 37). Thus, Oduyoye is described as envisioning a gender inclusive Christology in which African stories and African women stories in particular are recognised besides the Hebrew and Christian stories. Oduyoye advocates for a Christology that ‘crosses boundaries of texts, cultures, gender and colonising Christian perspectives’ (p. 39).

Dube’s second model, Masenya Madipoane, writes in the context of ‘the historically exclusive, exploitative and oppressive context of apartheid South Africa’ (p. 39). She investigates what ideal womanhood entails for ‘an African-South African woman bible reader’ (p. 39). Madipoane’s *bosadi* hermeneutics attempts to bring the cultural text and the biblical text into conversation in order to produce an expanded canon which goes beyond the bible; a canon that ‘resists the colonial missionary dismissal of African cultures’ (p. 39). In other words, her concern is more with the community than the mere text.

Dube, citing herself as model, reiterates her postcolonial approach to biblical interpretation. Her agenda is to ‘decolonise the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions, as well as seeking ways of re-reading texts in ways that are liberating’ (p. 40). Her ultimate goal is reconstructing the biblical text so as to give voice to marginalised African peoples, especially women. She hopes that by deconstructing the text it will be exposed as simply one important cultural text among many others in the world (p. 40). Dube’s approach extends to issues of HIV/AIDS. She isolates social injustice as the major driving force of HIV/AIDS (p. 41). In the face of this crisis, she says the highest vocation for biblical scholars is to become prophets of life. Her methodology inspired scholars such as Boyung Lee. Lee applies *talitha cum* to the account of the Exodus. She

challenges the traditional account as a story of liberation. Interpreting the story from the perspective of the Canaanites, she argues that the biblical text is not an account of liberation but a ‘reverence for centralised power,’ a narrative which perpetuates dominance through Israel’s appropriation of the land of Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

Dube also discusses Teresa Okure’s hermeneutics of life; that is, a way of reading the bible that takes into account the life situations of the readers. For Okure, ‘the story of the bible is about life and life holds the key to comprehending it’ (p. 41). Okure insists that the interpretation of the bible must promote life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Consequently, for her, any interpretation that lacks the ‘capacity to promote and support qualitative life’ is suspect and inauthentic (pp. 41-42).

From the foregoing, it is evident that talitha cum largely depends on inculturation and post-colonialism for its ideas. In fact, in analysing the trends in African Biblical hermeneutics, Justin Ukpong notes that the current trend which back dates to the 1990’s is dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies.<sup>4</sup> The concern of such methodologies is to take the African readers of the bible and their context seriously. Inculturation, for instance, is roughly the ‘recognition that faith must become culture, if it is to be fully received and lived.’<sup>5</sup> That is, faith must be relevant to African peoples.

Such an approach has some obvious advantages.<sup>6</sup> However, there can also be serious challenges. Let us take for instance, Kimpa Vita’s spirit of inculturation inspired the founding of African Instituted Churches (AICs). Dube noted that the AICs not only helped to resist colonising tendencies inside and outside churches, but also empowered women as founders, leaders, prophets, and faith healers (pp. 33-34). In her view, inculturation as presented in this case gave a voice to African women making it possible for them to speak for the issues which oppress them both inside the colonial government and church perspectives. Indeed, others agree that the inculturating spirit in the AICs ‘encouraged women to re-read the Bible in liberating ways and act in various capacities as providers, counsellors, healers, and prophetesses to a range of sufferers and supplicants.’<sup>7</sup> However, this view runs the risk of glorifying the past and replacing the oppressive aspects of the Bible with oppressive aspects of African culture. Thus, this



view ignores the fact that inculturation as practiced in the AICs has also contributed to the subjugation of women especially through the practice of polygamy.<sup>8</sup>

Talitha cum also rests on the assumption that the bible promotes colonial and imperialist tendencies.<sup>9</sup> This approach, to some extent, seeks to go beyond the Western feminist approach which tends to focus on sexist and misogynistic elements of the bible.<sup>10</sup> The method insists that there is a close connection between colonialism and the Bible. While Western feminists see the sexist themes in the bible, African biblical scholars pursue what is culturally and politically liberating in scripture. For example, in interpreting Mark 5:21-43, Western feminists may focus on the role of female characters, their relationship to Jesus, and their characterisation in the light of gender issues.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, African biblical scholars might notice Jesus' stand against colonialism in this text or view the female characters metaphors for women in the formerly colonised countries that experience serious disease, such as HIV/AIDS.

Such a reading of the bible has the credit of bringing to light social issues of injustice. Regarding postcolonialism in general Davies says, 'by placing the colonial "other" at the centre of academic discourse, it has brought to the fore often neglected aspects of well-known texts and transformed our understanding of long familiar passages.'<sup>12</sup> In his review of Dube's postcolonial works, Togarasei praises 'her social engagement ... an attempt to take the Bible back to grass-roots level.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, issues to do with HIV/AIDS are tackled from the biblical perspective. Again the colonial legacy of social, racial, and gender inequalities that permeate African societies is challenged. Ukpong also hails such an approach as one that seeks to articulate the people's experience of their life in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

However, this methodology is prone to the same criticisms often levelled against other reader based methodologies of interpreting the bible. Davies, without necessarily agreeing, notes that

Postcolonial criticism has also enraged the discipline, for it has challenged the dominant interpretation of Western Scholars and destabilised received readings of the text. Not surprisingly, it has been viewed by some as a threat to the traditional interpretation of Scripture, for its adherence have subverted the comfortable academic

certainties of the past and questioned mainstream conclusions and the conventional patterns of biblical scholarship.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, there is an ongoing debate whether postcolonial biblical interpretation is justified in significantly departing from the traditional methods of biblical interpretation which are based on historical and literary analysis. The concern from the opposing side is

whether such an approach undermines the world of the biblical texts. Put simply, the question is: How far does talitha cum respect the objective reading methods which advocate neutral, non-ideological, non-political or disinterested reading? This is probably a question that need more attention. The postcolonial approach is also prone to the criticism of essentialising culture or presenting it as a fixed and static reality. This was exactly the criticism of Vivek Chibber. In his book *Postcolonial Theory and the Scepter of Capital*, Chibber criticises the postcolonial theory for unwittingly reviving cultural essentialism and seeking to return non-Western peoples to orientalism.<sup>16</sup> He feels that the experiential gap between the West and the rest of the world is over-exaggerated.

In spite of the concern raised above, postcolonialism remains attractive as ‘the reading of the text offered by marginalised interpreters living in (or originating from) formerly colonised regions of the world.’<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that there is need for a model of biblical interpretation that counters the colonial misinterpretation of the bible that resulted in the economic exploitation and cultural subjugation of African people. Sugirtharajah, the foremost advocate of this approach, says ‘colonialism dominates and determines the interest of the biblical texts, and we could reasonably describe the bible as a colonial document, though confessional and faith language often overlays and ignores the interconnecting postcolonial questions.’<sup>18</sup> Thus, there were some biased interpretation of both the bible and African cultures during the period of colonial dominance. Therefore, interpreting the biblical text from the context of an African who is socially and culturally dominated can be a positive thing. The vision to liberate the biblical text from its history of ideological abuse by the coloniser is hard to criticise.

In conclusion, talitha cum is overall a good project in as far as it seeks to give a voice to the Africans who were formerly marginalised both in the church and in the political and cultural space. The colonial

heritage shaped biblical perspectives and a new unique and relevant African woman's perspective is justified. Therefore, the task undertaken by Oduyoye, Madipoane, Dube and Okure and others to actively seek the marginalised African voices in the past and in the present and amplify is difficult to fault. Nevertheless, there is the risk of glorifying the African past and essentialising the African cultural experience. There is also a danger of neglecting the context of the biblical text and focusing entirely on social and political issues. Perhaps the success of the approach lies in balance and not reductionistic tendencies.

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<sup>1</sup> These include Feminist, Narrative and Liberationist readings of the bible.

<sup>2</sup> Musa W. Dube, 'Talitha Cum Hermeneutics of Liberation: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible', in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, ed. by Musa W. Dube, Andrew W. Mbuvi, Dora R. Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), pp. 29-44 (p. 29). Further references to this work are provided in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Boyung Lee, 'When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy', *Religious Education*, 102 (1997), 44-61, (p. 46).

<sup>4</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions', in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. by Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 11-28 (p. 12).

<sup>5</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999), xi.

<sup>6</sup> In postcolonial biblical studies there are extensive arguments in favour of recognising African culture in the light of the colonial legacy against that culture.

<sup>7</sup> Bolaji Boteye, 'Local Relevance and Global Appeal: Nigerian Female Religious Leaders in London: Case Study/Prophetess Lizzy Adedamola a.k.a. Alhaja Jesu, Founder of Gospeol Light Evangelical Ministry', in *Religion on the Move! New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalising World*, ed. by Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 445-460 (p.451). See also Ayegboyin Deji and S. A. Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1997), pp. 39-40.

<sup>8</sup> S. A. Adewale, *The African Church Inc. 1901-1986: A Synthesis of Religion and Culture*, (Ibadan Olusheyi Press Limited, 1988), p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Western biblical feminists such as Reneta Weems, Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have already argued that the bible is inherently patriarchal and misogynistic.

<sup>11</sup> Musa W. Dube, 'Talitha Cum! A Postcolonial Feminist & HIV/AIDS Reading of Mark 5:21- 43', in *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, ed. by Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 123-138 (p. 126).

<sup>12</sup> Eryl W. Davies, *Biblical Criticism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 104.

- <sup>13</sup> Lovemore Togarasei, 'Musa W. Dube and the Study of the Bible in Africa', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 34 (2008), 55-74, (p. 67).
- <sup>14</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, 'Reading the Bible in a Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings', in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 200), pp. 29-39 (p. 21).
- <sup>15</sup> Davies, p. 104.
- <sup>16</sup> Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Scepter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013)
- <sup>17</sup> Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies & the Book of Revelation* (Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 37.
- <sup>18</sup> As quoted in Wood, p. 37