

Original Paper

Examining African Hermeneutics and How African Biblical Scholars Have Adopted Western Tools in African Context

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1. Introduction

Over the years, biblical interpretation has been an ongoing matter with which several schools of interpretation have been developed in view of their own methods of interpretation (Hyde, 1974; Marshall, 1977; Osborne, 1991; Tate, 2008). One of these biblical interpretations is the African hermeneutical interpretation. The research observes that one of the recent frontiers of African Biblical hermeneutics among many others is Tuesday Adamo; several of his works are interacted and cited in the course of the research. The research acknowledges great progress and development in this sphere; yet, observes that these schools and modes of interpretations though not incongruent seem inattentive to the African worldview. This is because the worldviews and settings with which these methodologies are developed are in reality outlying Africa. How can this observed lacuna be bridged? Is the African world view ably embodied in the modern hermeneutical tools? What *modus operandi* is needed for biblical interpretation in the African setting? Is there any need for African biblical hermeneutics? These questions encapsulate the dilemma of this research and form the theoretical framework of this discourse.

2. Biblical Hermeneutics: An Understanding

Hermeneutics is a broad discipline; however, it is used in regards to biblical stance in this research. Terry (1974) defined “hermeneutics as the science of interpretation of a given text”; a method of scrutiny and pursuit of objectivity. Also, Thiselton (1999) posits; hermeneutics explores “how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in another context of life from our own”. In relation to this discourse, it means “hermeneutics is the science of interpretation of a

biblical text” or “how we read, understand, and handle biblical texts, which was written in another time and context of life (distant in all spheres) from our own”.

Resane (2018) defined biblical hermeneutics as the art or technique of interpreting the biblical text in order to understand its original context and then find its contemporary meaning. In other words, the aim of biblical hermeneutics is providing the exegete with the tools, techniques, methods or principles needed in order to adequately extract the actual meaning or intention of the original author to the original audience or recipient.

McKim (1986) his own opinion argues that “no definition of interpretation could be more fundamental than this: to interpret we must in every case reproduce the sense the scriptural writer intended for his own words. He posits that the first step in the interpretive process is to link only those ideas with the author’s language that he connected with them. The second step is to express these ideas understandably”. The research observes that Mckim holds the authorial intention as integral to biblical hermeneutics.

A proper biblical hermeneutic provides the philosophical underpinnings which undergird the exegetical task (Vines & Allen, 1987). The methods, principles and approaches used to discover these intentions in the Bible which are farfetched from us now, are referred to as biblical hermeneutics. This research sees the need to briefly explore tools used in biblical hermeneutics; because it is foundational to the main focus of this work. With the existence and innovation of several methodologies; the research categorizes them into three groups: (i) The world behind the text (ii) The world within the text (iii) The world beyond the text.

3. The World Behind the Text

This group comprises of the Historical Critical Methodologies, which includes: Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, Historical Criticism, and Tradition Criticism, all of which are Higher Criticism approaches to Biblical Studies. Source criticism attempts to move behind biblical texts to posit hypotheses regarding materials that the biblical authors might have used in composing their documents. Source critics try to identify these materials, and sometimes attempt to reconstruct them. Which materials did the authors consult? (Winfield, 1972). While form criticism seeks to classify different materials found in the Bible according to literary genre; to draw conclusions relevant to interpretation based on these classifications. A form critic asks; what genres of material were available to the evangelists (authors), and how were they used in the earliest church.

Redaction criticism though used mainly in Gospel studies, tries to determine the particular intentions of New Testament authors by analyzing how they arranged and edited their source materials. This methodology typically involves “composition” and “emendation” analysis. Redaction critics ask; what theological and sociological purposes lay behind the evangelists’ selection and expression of Jesus’ material in the gospels? (Perrin, 1969). Textual critics analyze the various manuscripts of the New Testament that have been preserved over the centuries; employing various techniques to determine

which are the most reliable. A text critic asks what variations exist in the manuscripts of the gospel texts, and which has the greatest claim to be correct? (Metzger, 1999) Historical critics use the Bible as a resource for understanding the lives and circumstances of biblical characters and for reconstructing the events that transpired concerning them. A historical critic asks, how much do the gospels tell us about Jesus and about the churches for which they were written?

4. The World within the Text

The meaning of what the text meant in the “world within the text” uses exegesis. This exercise requires knowledge of the biblical languages; the Jewish, Semitic and Greco-Roman backgrounds (Pelt, 2001; Ross, 2002). The biblical languages are farfetched from contemporary languages; therefore to understand the world within the text; a serious emphasis is laid on the texts itself which was made known through unfamiliar ancient languages. This methodology requires the use of tools like bible dictionaries, lexicons and commentaries; grammatical, literal, historical, synthesis and practical principle are taken into play.

5. The world Beyond the Text

This methodology is reader-centered; based on the presupposition once the text leaves the hands of the author; the author’s intention and entire matrix of originating circumstances lose any claim of being constitutive of meaning (Tate, 2008). It runs contrary to the position of formalist critics, who claim that a text itself has autonomy, and provides the objective standard of meaning. Therefore, this approach creates space for Bible readers to bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings; because this is a bit personal and peculiar to the interpreter; since cultural codes, patterns and social location differ.

In view of this, an African scholar raised in African environment will employ thoughts, patterns and experiences peculiar to African unlike western scholar. It is important to note that the two explorations by the African and Western scholars when faithfully done in their rightful hemisphere are viable. Nevertheless, this methodology does not mean the interpreter is bias (Abogunrin, 2004); because there is no individual interpreter who is completely detached from his or her environment, experience and culture (Kessey, 2003).

The research observes that the first methodology is the oldest and most dominant focusing on issues of history, historical authenticity, historical circumstances and writer’s intended meaning of the text. The second concentrates on the text in a way that suggest the authentic meaning is derived from it and not outside the text. While in the third, the readers bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings; this is where African biblical hermeneutics comes in.

6. African Biblical Hermeneutics: An Examination

In African indigenous society the belief in enemies as the main sources of all evil and occurrences is so strong; nothing happens naturally without a spirit force behind it. Incidents like barrenness, infant mortality, accidents and other evil occurrences are caused by enemies (Adamoh, 2016). Obviously, Africans already had a cultural way of dealing with the problem of enemies and evil ones long before the dawn of Christianity. With the arrival of Christian missionaries all these were forbidden and forsaken; other than prayer, the missionaries did not meet the need of the people unlike the African religion.

7. Background to the Discourse

The research observes several prejudice and presuppositions of scholars concerning African Biblical studies; categorizing this method of interpretation with several derogatory terms as local, fetish, magical, primitive, syncretic, and unchristian. But how true are these terms? Do they actually capture the truth of African biblical hermeneutics? The fact that missionaries from the west helped in the African evangelization and gospel movement does not imply absolute truncation of the African culture; does it? A cardinal stance of culture as simply the way of people sheds more light to African Biblical studies! Lack of clear dichotomy between the African culture and religion will put the understanding of this interpretational method in disarray.

How can Africans cope when the things given do not commensurate with the ones that are taken away? In short, the kind of Christianity introduced to Africans did not meet the needs. The subjugation and oppression given to African culture by western missionaries resulted to the African convert's inquisitive search of power and knowledge in the Bible which the missionary seems to have hidden. Later, they found out that there must be secret power in the Bible when they read of the miraculous healings and the imprecatory psalms.

Adamoh (2016) explained that this quest brought the imprecatory psalms (35 and 109) into lime light for protection against enemies, believing that it is as powerful as the natural potent words, charms and talisman. In view of this, Sugirtharajah (1999) argues that African Biblical Studies uses the mode of interpretation that 'seeks to acquire and celebrate their God-giving identity by delving into their indigenous resources and rejecting the superintending tendencies of Western intellectual tradition' In other words, the approach addresses biblical issues in a manner closer to the Africans; thus, referring to this method of interpretation as "local" appears abhorrent. More so, the research observes that the brief historical background analyzed here reveals an antecedent which was a result of negligence and misunderstanding on the part of the early western missionaries. It is important to note that the recipient's way of life is pertinent to how the message is received and perceived; because such people have not been idle before time.

8. African Biblical Hermeneutical: Any Need?

The need for African hermeneutics has remained a strong position of African scholars who are actually part of the African setting witnessing the inherent necessity for it. The research asserts that the need for this methodology can be understood in the long existing clamor made by several scholars in Africa. The research notes that African hermeneutics was implicitly clamored by Kato's speech (1976) at the World Council of Churches, Nairobi Assembly and Africa;

In Africa today, there are many problems, of course, facing man, and there are things that Africans need to look into, but as a Christian with a Christian perspective I would say that the number one thing for Africa today is the knowledge of Jesus Christ; to tell people that Jesus Christ died for them, that they must accept Him as their Savior, to teach them what the implications of becoming a Christian means, so challenging Christians to live their life in obedience to God's Word. This includes a rejection of racism, tribalism, immorality, drunkenness and all things that make a Christian appear as if he were a man of the world. I think that we need to teach Christians to live the life of separation today. To me, this is the number one thing, because Jesus tells us: "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but forfeits his soul"?

The research argues that a clear understanding of Kato's statement which implies reading through the lines of his report especially with the interpretation of this quoted declaration in the light of the whole account given reveals a cogent need for African biblical interpretation. Kato's comment here began with the recognition of problems within the African setting; he further stated that those who need to look into it are the Africans? Why not just any person from any locale? The research posits that Kato sees the feasible personage to address the vice as one who understands the African setting; not only in theory but in practical.

Kato carry on his report saying the number one thing for Africa today is the knowledge of Jesus Christ; "to tell people that Jesus Christ died for them". The research argues that Kato's statement here implies that the African knowledge of Jesus Christ is deficient if Africans do not understand the truth that Jesus Christ died for them. Therefore, the research notes that the question of how the Africans will come to terms with this biblical truth and solves several issues raised by Kato in his statements justifies the need for Africa biblical hermeneutics.

However, the research discovers that Kato's proposition is congruent with Nthamburi and Waruta (1997) statement who says "unless an African is enabled to understand Scripture in his/her own cultural patterns, the Scripture will not only lose its validity but its authoritative relevance as well". Thus, the African position on the validity and authority of the scripture depends on their scriptural knowledge and understanding embodied in their cultural context.

Some sociologists of religion have predicted that Africa will become increasingly "Christianized". As evidence of this trend, they have alluded to the dynamism of African Christianity, especially in tropical Africa. Most of these predictions were made by foreign observers using macro-statistical indicators and variables. African scholars have been much more cautious in their predictions, taking into consideration

their acquaintance with actual situations and contexts (Mugambi, 2007). The research observes that there is too little African theological literature written by Africans ourselves for consumption by Africans. How could a religion grow without its own theologians? Portuguese priests baptized thousands of African Christians in Angola during the 16th and 17th centuries. They must have boasted the number of converts that they had made. However, that early Angolan Christianity did not last, because it lacked internalization and theological originality (Mugambi, 202). Thus, this research argues that this explicitly incur the need of African biblical hermeneutics.

9. The Tasks of African Biblical Hermeneutics

Bible readings in Africa have suffered under the insistence of the Western academy that their readings are universally valid, whereas they were and are in fact the product of Western Enlightenment, deeply affected by literate print culture, capitalist assumptions and individualism (Draper, 2015). Thus, the task of African biblical hermeneutic(s) includes;

- i. The formulation of a biblical hermeneutic that is “liberational” and “transformational”.
- ii. To break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed.
- iii. To understand the Bible and God according to Scripture and African culture and tradition.
- iv. To interpret the Bible existentially.
- v. To blacken the Bible: Adamoh’s proposition here is rooted in Brown’s opinion. This assertion doesn’t have to do with ‘black’ as a colour but the idea of placing Africa as an ideological construct at the centre of biblical investigation that will serve as a useful tool for African scholars in our endeavour to create a hermeneutic that speaks to the needs of a historically marginalized people (Brown, 2004).
- vi. To reappraise the Bible in order to correct the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation.
- vii. To promote African culture, tradition and identity.

Adamoh further explained that African biblical hermeneutic(s) has the following methodological distinctiveness; communal reading and interpretation, Bible as power, Africa and Africans in the Bible, African comparative, African evaluative, using Africa to interpret the Bible and using the Bible to interpret Africa, the promotion of distinctive life interest and African identity (Adamoh, 2001). The tasks and objectives of African biblical hermeneutics is not a futile engagement since Africa and Africans are mentioned often times in the biblical literature (Wimbush, 2009; Adamoh, 2001). Therefore, it will be an understatement to say this method of interpretation is myopic, fetish, irrelevant, local or primitive.

Yorke (1995) sees African hermeneutics as a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-view and life experience with the aim of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected. He called it an “Afro-centric Hermeneutics” since all interpretations and theologies are contextual. African biblical

hermeneutics is rooted in African realities and is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. Often, African scholars have argued that the several biblical expressions are explicitly familiar to the proverbial and idiomatic lexis in Africa; in fact, they form significant part of the knowledge systems. In other words, African philosophies, ideas and worldview can be of help in scriptural interpretation and understanding (explicating the biblical truth) of the African people. In fact they address peculiar issues like; war and violence, African identity, miraculous, abundance of life, oppression, HIV/AIDS and poverty.

10. The Interaction African Scholars with Hermeneutical Tools

The interactions of African scholars in this sphere have spurred recent developments in African biblical hermeneutics with several propositions of methodologies with resulted from serious engagements with the biblical hermeneutics in general (as discussed in the succeeding part of this research. Therefore, this part of the research explores results of African scholars in their exercise of interaction with the varying existing hermeneutical methodologies).

(i) Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: Mother-tongue is a native language in which one is born and grows up (Quarshire, 2002). It is the scholarly engagement of the indigenous language translations of the Bible in order to understand what they say and mean to the readers (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2010). Africa is occupied with diverse of languages; the researcher notes that Nigeria as a country in Africa has three ethnic groups (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) with more than sixty dialects. Varied mother tongues of Africa have a lot to offer by way of biblical interpretation in African languages as viable material for interpretation, study Bibles and commentaries. This method takes serious cognizance of the fields of Biblical Studies, Bible Translation Studies, and Language Studies—Biblical Languages: Ancient Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek (formal exegesis) and African languages; coming out with a new translation of the text that fits into the culture.

(ii) Cultural Hermeneutics: this has to do with the incorporation of elements from African religious reality into the process of interpreting the biblical text (Manus, 2003). This methodology analyzes the interpretation that is carried out by churches usually referred to as African Indigenous Churches (AIC). It also takes seriously the African religio-cultural reality as a sufficient starting point for interpreting the Bible (Manus, iii-iv). This method recognizes the African reality as a real starting point in the Bible's interpretive process (Mbuvi). Ukpong's (1996) gave an example-analysis of the parable of the shrewd manager in Lk. 16.1 to convey how poor African readers would understand the parable in light of the oppressive debt on African economies unlike the western worldview.

(iii) Reconstruction Hermeneutics: here, reconstruction is about building better societies and Christian communities in Africa with respect to politics, economy, culture, ethics, aesthetics, spirituality, and ecumenism. Reconstruction theology highlights the need for a biblical paradigm of reconstituting society and thus focuses on postexilic biblical writings as models of reconstruction (Mbuvi, p. 164). These are compared to ongoing oppression by African leaders in post-independence Africa. Ultimately,

even with the recognition that this metaphor of reconstruction remains relevant in the African scene, this approach has not garnered much traction with African biblical scholars.

(iv) Liberation Hermeneutics: this methodology has a large following in South Africa; due to the intensified oppressive apartheid. Mosala (1989) maintains that black liberation struggle; which focuses on economically, politically, culturally and morally dispossessed is the *bona fide* entrance into a genuine African biblicalhermeneutics. This methodology just like the Black Liberation theology of James Cone in USA (Mbuvi, 2017); demands social justice that the oppressed are denied by the dominant political powers, which he characterizes as largely racist.

(v) Feminist/Womanist Theology: African feminist/womanist readings are a distinct category. The launch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CCAWT) in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amber Oduyoye was a major milestone in ABS that culminated in the publication of the volume *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Dube, 2001). Addressing the absence of representation of African women in theological studies (and Christian leadership in general), this publication put on the table issues of gender and sexuality in African theological reflection that heretofore had been totally sidelined. This work entails a critique and response to patriarchal dominance and colonial tendencies that have characterized biblical studies in the west, and the imposition of the same by European missionaries in Africa.

This methodology claims that African women have been marginalized by the male dominated biblical studies and by African cultural patriarchy (Mbuwayesango, 2001). Appeal to

Gal. 3.27-28 is the premise of fighting sexism in this type of biblical studies. Thus, African women biblical scholars consider themselves essentially “womanists” (focused on the plight of women of color in particular) rather than feminists in the classic sense. African scholars in this sphere looks critically at proverbs and argue that while the African woman may be a home manager, overall authority on affairs of the home remains with the male head of the family. This makes the application of the proverb a set up for failure when uncritically applied to the African woman’s reality (Mbuvi, p. 17); however, this method focuses on the gender and systemic nature of patriarchy.

11. Conclusion

With the African socio-cultural logicity and reasonability; the research posits that African biblical hermeneutics is relevant and cardinal to the African comprehension of the Bible. The marginalization of African biblical hermeneutics as clamored by African scholars endangers and ensnares Africans’ adequate biblical understanding; then what is the essence of the biblical truth when it cannot be comprehended by a continent among just seven continents of the universe? Although there have been variance between the Euro-centric and Afro-centric developing schools of interpretation, the research sees the need for diligence, commitment and dedication among African scholars (home and abroad) in coming up with stupendous contributions in biblical studies (African biblical interpretation especially) to override the long existing debacle of sentiment and segregation of voices to be heard in biblical

scholarship.

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