

African Biblical Hermeneutics: An Excursus on Covenant in Yoruba Context

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ABSTRACT

People in the early times have handled the Bible intently; their keen interaction with the Scripture has spurred the quest to answer certain questions that seem entangling in their pursuit for understanding; this is the beginning of biblical interpretation! Hermeneutics began from the time men sought what biblical texts mean. Although the scripture is the inspired word of God; the truth remains that God used men to pen it down; moving through the trend of man and his environ. History has it that the African world sometimes referred to as 'Sudan' was illuminated by the Good News through the Western world. This inherent suggests a considerable dependence of the Africans on Western knowledge, understanding, and methods of interpreting biblical texts. The world of Biblical scholarship has advanced a lot in recent times; in view of researches discoveries and advancements. Thus, the research presents a lucid discourse on biblical studies and the vehement need for African Biblical studies.

Keywords: Africa, Biblical Studies, Culture, Hermeneutics, Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Biblical Studies is important in exploring the Holy Bible with variety experiences and understanding through its pages. For centuries, the understanding of God's word which stems from its interpretation is explicitly considered. Africans are human beings who seem unable to explain life without reference to what is religious and spiritual. An African person finds his or her being and its meaning in community. Africans perceive reality in holistic terms.²⁵ The research observes that several methodologies have been brought in to play, which in a way or the other do not seem apt to the African context.²⁶ Although the efficacy of the methodologies to the African context does not invalidate their potency and usefulness; vacuum for methodologies that speaks to the African mind and addresses the African situation erupts.

Statement of Problem

This part of the research is cardinal to the discourse here because it spells the issue at hand. 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.²⁷

²⁵ John S. Pobee, "Church and State in Ghana 1949-1966," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society; Studies on Religion in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 121 – 44.

²⁶ The African context contains enormous potentials that can enhance the understanding and interpretation of biblical texts. Meanwhile, from the perspective of biblical interpretation, there is no superior context or culture; and the African biblical hermeneutic approach is a possible route to the development of an authentic African Christian theology. This inherent observation and understanding is what has brought "African Biblical Hermeneutics."

²⁷ See Gordon M. Hyde, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington D.C: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974). I.H Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977). G. R. Osborn, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991). W.

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.

Biblical Hermeneutics: An Understanding

Hermeneutics is a broad discipline; however, it is used in regard to biblical stance in this research. Terry defined ‘hermeneutics as the science of interpretation of a given text’;²⁸ a method of scrutiny and pursuit of objectivity. Also, Thiselton 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.”²⁹ 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 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.³⁰ In other words, the aim of

R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An integrated Approach*, 3rd edition (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

²⁸ M.S Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A treatise on the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 11.

²⁹ A.C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999),

³⁰ Kelebogile Thomas Resane “*Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Biblical Texts African Approaches*” in *Pharos Journal of Theology* online Volume 99 [http://: www.pharosjot.com](http://www.pharosjot.com), 2018. (Accessed on 12th April, 2019).

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 in 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.”³¹ The research observes that McKim holds the authorial intention as integral to biblical hermeneutics. Therefore, a proper biblical hermeneutic provides the philosophical underpinnings which undergird the exegetical task.³² 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.

In this discourse, 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 (3) groups: (i) The world behind the text (ii) The world within the text (iii) The world beyond the text.

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

³¹ Donald K. McKim, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutic: Major Trends to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids; Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 112.

³² Jerry Vines and David Allen, *Hermeneutics, Exegesis and Proclamation* in *Criswell Theological Review* 1.2 (1987) 309.

Criticism³³ 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.³⁴ Source critics try to identify these materials, and sometimes attempt to reconstruct them. A source critic asks the questions about the sources with which the biblical text was written? Which materials did the authors consulted?³⁵

But form criticism seeks to classify different materials found in the Bible according to literary genre or type (form) and to draw conclusions relevant to interpretation based on these classifications. A form critic asks the question; what genre of material were available to the evangelists (authors), and how were they used in the earliest church³⁶ 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.³⁷ Redaction critics ask; what theological and sociological

³³ Higher criticism is an approach to the Bible that treats it exclusively as a flawed human book. Scholars who use this approach apply the canon of reason to the investigation of the biblical text, using a number of distinguishable but interrelated methods. For detailed information on these criticisms, check I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on principles and Methods*.

³⁴ For instance, the authors of the four Gospels also appear to have possessed some written materials about Jesus that they drew upon when writing their books: Luke 1:1. Source criticism is applied to the Gospels and Acts. What sources were available to the evangelists when they wrote their gospels

³⁵ For more information on source criticism, check M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

³⁶ Critics in this group discerns different types of materials like; parables, miracle stories, speeches, hymns, creeds and proverbs. They also identify the *Sitz im Leben* (‘setting in life’) that each of these types of literature would have served in the biblical text. T. Ryler, “Form Criticism of the Old Testament” in M. Black & H. H. Rowley, eds., *Peake’s Bible Commentary*, Johannesburg: Thomas Nelson, 1967), 91-95.

³⁷ The former looks at how various units are arranged within a particular book; the order or placement of individual units, the sequence of material, the overall organization of the book, while the latter observes the alterations that the Gospel author probably made in his source material – additions, omissions, and other changes that reveal the author’s priorities and preferences.

purposes lay behind the evangelists' selection and expression of Jesus' material in the gospels?³⁸

Unlike redaction, 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?³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ A historical critic asks, how much do the gospels tell us about Jesus and about the churches for which they were written?

³⁸ Originally, redaction criticism was restricted to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but it has been applied to other areas of scripture. Norman Perrin in his book "What is Redaction Criticism?" states, "The prime requisite of redaction criticism is the ability to trace the form and content of material used by the author concerned or in some way to determine the nature and extent of his activity in collecting and creating, as well as in arranging, editing, and composing". N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

³⁹ Their goal is to reconstruct what the original manuscripts probably said by comparing and dating them, noting also "variant readings" when one or more of the copies that have been made over the years say something different. See E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). B. M. Metzger, *The text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*. 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. It

⁴⁰ Historical criticism refers to the ways in which historians might use the Bible to learn about history. Historians (whether they are Christians or not) view Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, and other figures of the Bible, and they understand Judaism and Christianity as important significant developments in human history.

The world within the text

The meaning of what the text meant in the ‘world within the text’ uses exegesis.⁴¹ This exercise requires knowledge of the biblical languages;⁴² the Jewish, Semitic and Greco-Roman backgrounds.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵ 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

⁴¹ Exegesis entails ‘exposition’ and ‘explanation’ a careful systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. F. E. Gaebelen, & J. D. Douglas, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979.

⁴² Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. C. F. Pfeiffer & H. F. Vos, *The Waycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970).

⁴³ M. V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001). A. P. Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002). J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). W. D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003).

⁴⁴ Gaebelen and Douglas, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*.

⁴⁵ W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An integrated Approach*, 3rd edition (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 228.

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;⁴⁶ because there is no individual interpreter who is completely detached from his or her environment, experience and culture.⁴⁷

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.

African Biblical Hermeneutical: Any Need?

The need for African biblical interpretation 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 in his speech at the World Council of Churches, Nairobi Assembly and Africa;

⁴⁶ See S. O. Abogunrin et al, eds., *Biblical Healing in African Context*, Biblical Studies Series No. 3, Ibadan: The Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2004, for a number of articles on the interpretations of some biblical texts from the African perspective.

⁴⁷ Donald Keeseey, "Reader-Response Criticism: Audience as Context," in *Contexts for Criticism* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 129-137.

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?"⁴⁸

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

⁴⁸ Kato's statement here is an extract from the report he gave from the WCC meeting he attended. The World Council of Churches Nairobi Assembly and Africa *Perception* Vol. 3 No. 1 March Published by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (A E.A.M.), Nairobi, Kenya: Kesho Press, 1976.

understand the truth that Jesus Christ died for them. Therefore, the research notes that he 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 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.'⁴⁹ This implies that, 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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ How long will this vibrant African

⁴⁹ Z. Nthamburi, & D. Waruta, Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches. In: Hannah W. Kinoti & John M. Waliggo (eds.), *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton, 1997), 29-43.

⁵⁰ Mugambi, "*African Church Leadership: Between Christ, Cultures and Conflicts*, 202.

⁵¹ Mugambi, 202.

Christianity last?⁵² The research argues that this explicitly incur the need of African biblical hermeneutics.

Engaging African Biblical Hermeneutics

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.

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.⁵³ Obviously, Africans already had a cultural way of dealing with the problem of enemies and evil ones long before the dawn of Christianity.⁵⁴ With the arrival of Christian missionaries all these

⁵² Meanwhile, Oliver warned that Christianity in Africa risks expanding at the circumference while disintegrating at the centre. He was referring to the rapid numerical growth which was not matched by a corresponding growth in theological and institutional development. Oliver, Roland, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longman, 1970).

⁵³ Adamo, D.T., 2016, 'African biblical studies: Illusions, realities and challenges', *In die Skriflig* 50(1), a1972. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.1972> (Accessed on 19th April, 2019).

⁵⁴ There are various techniques of making use of natural materials and potent powerful words that they put into defensive and offensive use dealing with evil ones. This has a clear root from the African religion with the explicit belief in a Supreme being who is the controller of the universe.

were forbidden and forsaken; other than prayer, the missionaries did not meet the need of the people unlike the African religion.

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 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.⁵⁵ In view of this, Sugirtharajah 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'⁵⁶ 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.

This brief historical background 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 will be received and perceived,

⁵⁵ Among African Christians, Psalms 5, 6, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 83 and 109 are classified as protective psalms which can be read and chanted, sung several times as the 'African so-called incantations.' This does not form any religious interpolation in any ways instead; it helps integrate the African Christianity in the biblical truth. In fact, this quest resulted into the establishment of several African Indigenous Churches of which several African converts feel at home; one who is feels like a stranger might not successfully express him/her in the place of worship. Therefore, it is better to recite these Psalms than going to native priests for medicine and charms.

⁵⁶ R.S. Sugirtharajah, '*Vernacular resurrections: An introduction*' in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Vernacular hermeneutics* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999), 11.

because such people have not been idle before time. 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸
- 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

⁵⁷ Jonathan A. Draper, “*African Contextual Hermeneutics: Readers, Reading Communities and their Options between Texts and Context*” in Religion and Theology, Brill.com/rt, 2015, 19.

⁵⁸ Adamoh’s proposition here is rooted in Brown’s opinion. In the real sense, this assertion doesn’t have to do with ‘black’ as a color 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 endeavor to create a hermeneutic that speaks to the needs of a historically marginalized people. Michael J. Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2004), 54.

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.⁵⁹

The tasks of African biblical hermeneutics outlined in Adamoh's outlook reveal African biblical hermeneutics as a way of making interpretation implicitly and explicitly relevant to the everyday life of the African people. In other words, the realization of African identity in biblical mirror is the core of this interpretation; because "no one has yet been able to invent such language to encapsulate God's completeness."⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ Therefore, it will be an understatement to say this method of interpretation is myopic, fetish, irrelevant, local or primitive.

Although, the African Christian converts sort to meet their needs through the scriptures just as it is done in African religion; the research argues that the bedrock on which this satisfaction is done now differs explicitly from the African religion; this in turn forms the framework of the African biblical interpretation. In Adamoh's opinion, African hermeneutics is the biblical interpretation that makes "African social-cultural context" a subject of interpretation.⁶² He

⁵⁹ Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutics, 31. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001, 53.

⁶⁰ George Mulrain, "Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 116-132.

⁶¹ Vincent Wimbush, "Scripture for Strangers: The Making of an Africanized Bible," in *Postcolonial Interventions* (ed. Tat-Siong Liew; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 162-177. David T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 51, 81.

⁶² David T. Adamo, "What is African Biblical Studies?" in, S. O. Abogurin, Gen. ed., *Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa*, Biblical Studies No. 4, Ibadan: The Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2005. David T. Adamo,

further argued that ‘African biblical hermeneutics’ can also be called ‘African cultural hermeneutics’, ‘African biblical transformational hermeneutics’ or ‘African Biblical Studies’.⁶³

The significance of African hermeneutics, just as Adamoh puts cannot be discarded since interpretation must be done within a specific context.⁶⁴ In addition to Adamoh’s opinion, Yorke explained this methodology as that which analyzes the biblical text from the perspective of African world-view and culture. It is the rereads the Christian Scripture from a premeditatedly Afro-centric perspective, with the aim of not only understanding the Bible and God in the African experience and culture, but also to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed.⁶⁵

Yorke further explained African hermeneutics as a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-view, culture, and life experience with the aim of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected.⁶⁶ He called this an “Afro-centric Hermeneutics” since all

“African Cultural Hermeneutics,” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, (ed. Rasia S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 60-90.

⁶³ David T. Adamo, “*The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutics*” in *OTE* 28/1 (2015), 31.

⁶⁴ The worldview, setting, concrete situation - culture of people in a specific community or setting is ‘context’. This provides an existential framework for communication. Oderinde Olatundun, *The Basics of Contextual Theology* (Ibadan: KOREM Prints, 2013), 29. There is always an indissoluble link between ‘text’ and ‘context.’ The interpreter must know and understand the worldview and culture (the context) of his audience in order to hook up with them; if not, the audience will be partially, if not totally lost. Thus, there is no text without its own peculiar context; likewise every community.

⁶⁵ Gosnell L. Yorke, “*Biblical Hermeneutics An Afro-centric Perspective*” in *Journal of Religion and Theology*, Vol. 2, No. 2 , 1995 145—158.

⁶⁶ Yorke, “*Biblical Hermeneutics An Afro-centric Perspective*.”

interpretations and theologies are contextual.⁶⁷ Resane, in his work on *'Afro-centric Hermeneutics and Exegesis'* presents three methodologies which influences African hermeneutics to some degree; libration, inculturation and contextualization.⁶⁸ It is important to note that the connective tissue of the African biblical hermeneutical methodologies discussed by Resane is the 'African context'. Thus, an African biblical hermeneutics devoid of 'the African context' is like a flower without its vase; it will be trampled on.

African biblical hermeneutics is rooted in African realities and is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. It gives the space to the ordinary African interpreters to partially constitute the kind of discipline African biblical scholarship is.⁶⁹ 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. To substantiate this, the research engages the concept of 'covenant'.

⁶⁷ In Yorke's discourse, the research observes that this term (which is also the title of his work) can be said to encapsulate what African hermeneutic connotes in Biblical studies. The term comprises of two simple words "Africa" shortened to 'Afro' and "centric" which means 'centered'; altogether, it means a method of interpretation centered on Africans. In view of this, referring to African hermeneutics as "Afro-centric" is congruent with the recent African scholarship development in recent biblical studies. Consequently, the research discovered that the term has gained a wide range of popularity among African scholars; used in published articles and books. An example of such is Resane *Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Biblical Texts African Approaches* in *Pharos Journal of Theology*. This assertion is congruent with Adamoh's explanation in the preceding section of this work.

⁶⁸ Resane *Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Biblical Texts African Approaches*, 4-6.

⁶⁹ Resane, 2.

Covenant: An Excursus

A lucid study of the scripture reveals that the concept of covenant permeates the Bible. Old Testament study reveals that covenant (appeared about 280 times) is a relevant biblical theme in the Ancient Near East (the community with which the Old Testament was written). The theme of covenant is quite central in the Old Testament.

Etymology

Schmidt interprets the origin and primary meaning as ‘fetter’, which leads to “‘binding ordinance,’ ‘sentence’ in a judicial sense.”⁷⁰ Mendenhall admits that “the etymology of the term is uncertain,” but asserts that most accept the “derivation from Akkadian *birītu*, ‘fetter,’ or a cognate root.”⁷¹ Weinfeld concludes from Ancient Near Eastern literature and the LXX equivalent term ‘*diaqhkh*’ that the Hebrew term covenant like those of Israel’s ancient neighbours means ‘bond’.⁷²

Thus, ‘*Berit*’ is the Hebrew theological term for ‘covenant’;⁷³ because the contextual usage of a word is more important in determining its

⁷⁰Nathanael Schmidt, “Covenant,” in *Encyclopaedia Biblica: A Critical Dictionary of the Literary Political and Religious History the Archaeology Geography and Natural History of the Bible*, ed. T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 928–29.

⁷¹ George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 715.

⁷² Moshe Weinfeld, “*Covenant Terminology in the Ancient Near East and its Influence on the West*,” *JAOS* 90 (1970), 190.

⁷³ Etymologically, *Berit* has several usage. Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: In Old Testament, Jewish and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 1–8. This several usage and root meaning has raised arguments among scholars. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968), 136

meaning than etymology.⁷⁴ “To cut” a covenant is from the root “*krt*”, which stresses the ceremony as *modus operandi* of the covenant.

This understanding is somewhat congruent to the African understanding of ‘covenant’ in fact they stress the theological meaning which implies “to cut” – “da”.⁷⁵ When the action is done, it is said; “*won da majemu*” – “they cut a covenant”. Often times, biblical covenant is always exhibit in the act of “cutting” or “breaking”; creating an legal bond and understanding between the parties. The understanding of an average Yoruba in Africa is that covenant is done between two or more people. In fact, covenant made in time past exists by transferring membership to offspring thereby maintaining the tenets of the treaty. This in turn aligns with the biblio-cultural understanding.

Covenant Process

Suzerainty and parity⁷⁶ are types of covenant exhibited in the Bible in view of God’s relation with the people (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic and Mosiac covenant) and the relation of Israel with other nations.⁷⁷ These types of covenant are inherent and embodied in African society whereby two or more people of the same status quo make covenant; while two parties of different status quo also make covenant. The latter is explicated from the fact that several kings

⁷⁴T.D. Alexander and Brain S. Rosners, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 420

⁷⁵ The research employs the Yoruba languages in this covenant excursus to explicate the African world view and understanding; this does not in any way deter the observations of the research with the fact that a language among many African languages is engaged here.

⁷⁶ The former has to with a bond between two unequal calibres while the latter has to do with two equal status making covenant. Although; the two types are difference in status quo; it is noteworthy that each party still has her own responsibility.

⁷⁷ Gabriel Oyedele Abe, *Berith: Old Testament Divine Covenant of Yahweh’s Faithfulness vis-à-vis Human Covenant Unfaithfulness* in *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*. Vol. 15 No 1, 2013:30. Accessed through <http://www.bjournal.co.uk/BJASS.ASPX> on 20th February, 2017.

(*Oba*) in African community cut covenant (treaties) with village heads (who are referred to as '*Baale*'). The *Oba* is the superior while the *Baale* is the inferior. The treaties entail stuffs like; payment of tribute (*Ishakole* – farm produce during harvest) and obedience to the *Oba*; while the *Oba* on the other hand give his word of promise (which sometimes entails protection, guidance, or god-father) to the *Baale*.

This covenantal process is explicitly different from slavery; it is simply an agreement between the two parties who willingly engage themselves in the act. It is important to note that these parties have memorandum of understanding (MOU); therefore, force is not a correct part of the biblical and African covenant process. This process unveils the biblical covenant enjoined in the African world. Furthermore, the research notes that the two parties; *Oba* (kings) and *Baale* (village heads) are representatives of their folks; therefore, the bond is binding on their people as well.

Common to the biblical covenant is the witnesses of the covenant, likewise in the African setting. The parties involved in the covenant are the primary witnesses of the covenant. That is why they often rehearse the exercise to their offspring if need be; but it is paramount in most occasions. Sometimes some things are used as the witnesses to the covenant bearing testimony to the validity of the bond; the biblical covenant has the Sabbath, circumcision, rainbow, the Law; while the Africans, especially in the real sense of their religion make their god as the prime witness as well as other things like; the earth, water, stone, even marriage between the offspring of the parties.

Whichever type of covenant, there is always something that binds the parties together. In the Bible, animal scarifies, meals or blood serves this purpose. Fensham believes that using “part of the sacred animal for a communal meal” made the covenant tangible.⁷⁸ This process is

⁷⁸ F. Charles Fensham, “Did a Treaty Between the Israelites and the Kenites Exist?” BASOR 175 (October 1964): 54.

not far-fetched from the African world where the parties come together with either an animal or meal prepared; the highest of which is the parties' blood.⁷⁹ Thus, the covenant binds people together mystically because in them is the union of one life with another by transfusion of blood. Bearing in mind the *modus operandi* and consensus which entails inherent stated and established consequences; the parties dance to the tune of covenant.

Beliefs and Philosophies

In view of the covenant etymology and processes, the research observes that Africans have several proverbs and sayings concerning this concept; the African expressions will be given first, then the literal meaning before the interpretation.

- *E ni ti yio ba dale ko ni dale* – “anyone who will be alive till night will not betray”.
- *da le bale ku, eni to ba dale a ba le lo* – “anyone who betrays will die with the earth, a traitor will surely die”.
- *E ni to ba dale koni dale* – “anyone who betrays will not be alive till night”.

These common sayings are reflective of the African understanding; bearing in mind the consequences of breaking a covenant. These proverbs explicate several relevant African philosophies in this sphere; it reveals an adequate understanding of what ‘covenant’ entails. Therefore, the research argues that addressing, exploring and interpretation the biblical concept of covenant (which is just an

⁷⁹ In Africa, cutting of covenant ‘*dida majemu*’ by two individuals or groups is a means of establishing and maintaining good human relationships. They believe that blood is life and the commingling of the blood of two persons is equivalent to the joining of their lives and personalities. They are thus indivisibly united. M. Y. Nabofa, "Blood Symbolism in African Religion." *Religious Studies*, Vol. 21, 1985, 389-405. This also accounts for why church or court marriage is popular among us today; with believe that the fear of breaking the oath and the punishment attached therein will scare the partners involved.

example, among others) in view of African worldview is not misnomer.

An analogous stance between the biblical and African worldview delineates covenant as a binding relationship of dedication, fellowship, commitment and responsibility two or more people. Therefore, a covenant was not just an agreement or a contract; it was a solemn bond established between two or more parties and involved a firm commitment to the relationship established by the covenant obligations.”⁸⁰ It is clear from the above that a covenant provides history with aim and purpose involving a person’s whole being for the duration of life that distinguished covenant to a contract.

It may be proposed that what are evident in many cultures of the world are the surviving traces of the ancient covenant practices of biblical times; these remnants of a by-gone epoch still speak the need for a contextualized message from God through cultural forms. The research observes; understanding the form and utility of biblical covenant has to do with a cultural understanding in dealing with the nature, utilization and relevance of covenant. With this close parallel, the research argues that biblical covenants can be better understood by Africans within its cultural context.

Biblical truth is supra culture but the biblical text is written through certain cultures which signify the importance of culture here; the engagement of the biblical text and African culture is thus fundamental to African hermeneutics. Gathogo and Kinyua posits that African biblical hermeneutics are typically African in character in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously borrow heavily from African religious heritage in their dialogue with the gospel of Christ.⁸¹ The opinion of Gathogo and Kinyua is not applicable to the gospel of

⁸⁰Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 165.

⁸¹J.M. Gathogo, & J.K. Kinyua, “*Afro-biblical Hermeneutics in Africa Today*” in *Churchman*, 124 (3), 2010). 251.

Christ in a narrow sense (along) but in a broad sense since that is the centre of the scripture.

Although the trait of African culture seems to be influenced by African religion; the fact remains that the norm and cultural values of Africa remains when it is dissect from African religion; therefore, the African culture is whole true and inherently free in respect to the worldview of an African. It is high time we set a dichotomy between African religion and African culture.

Mugambi, in the introductory part of his work acknowledges that “the question of the relationship between Christianity and culture is a perennial problem that has endured since the beginning of Christianity. It is a challenge for all churches and a specific challenge for church leadership in Africa.”⁸² As challenging as it is; the research argues that they cannot be alienated. In fact, this fray lingers much if Africans are shorn off biblical interpretation in the light of their culture; which inherently is their own ‘context.’ This understanding forms the bedrock for the next sub-section; do we need actually need African biblical hermeneutics?

CONCLUSION

The African socio-cultural logicity and reasonability cannot be discarded; then why the theological suspicion and marginalization? The research posits that African biblical hermeneutics is relevant and cardinal to the African comprehension of the Bible. Thus, the marginalization of African biblical hermeneutics as clamored by African scholars endangers and ensnares Africans’ adequate biblical

⁸² J.N.K. Mugambi, “*African Church Leadership: Between Christ, Cultures and Conflicts*” in “Ch. Stückelberger and J. N.K. Mugambi (ed.), *Responsible Leadership. Global and Contextual Ethical Perspectives*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007, 195. Also, Niebuhr’s work on the relationship between Christianity and culture is noteworthy; with the information on how Christianity has been appropriated for social change, especially in the African world; Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torch books, 1975).

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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