



From Gadamer to African Hermeneutics: Contextualizing Understanding as 'fusion of Horizons'

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Abstract

The concept of understanding in the interpretative process constitutes a foundational issue in hermeneutics. It is that which gives the basis for a biblical text to bring about the transformation that must occur among any group of people reading the text. However, an important relationship in the process of interpretation- contextualization and 'fusion of horizon'— seem not to have been discussed in detail. This paper explores the relationship between the 'fusion of horizon' as proposed by Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics and contextualization in African biblical hermeneutics. The paper argues that understanding, which is the ultimate aim of hermeneutics, could be articulated as 'fusion of horizon' in African biblical hermeneutics. Through content analysis, the paper discusses how the theological message of a text could be understood through a dialogical engagement of the various components of interpretation and how this relates to the philosophical theory of Gadamer. It establishes that the art of contextualizing a biblical text for it to speak to the present life situation of the African involves the fusion of the horizons of the subject matter of the various poles in interpretation. The study underscores that contextualizing understanding requires creativity in the engagement of the various contexts with the text in a harmonious dialogue so that it will allow for a scientific analysis of the perspectives of the contexts to arrive at an informed understanding.

Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Contextualization, interpretation, Horizon, Understanding.*

Introduction

The concept of understanding and contextualization is a widely explored subject in the field of biblical hermeneutics. The art of understanding has come under fundamental theoretical assessment and universal development because neither scripturally nor rationally founded agreement could any longer constitute the dogmatic guideline of

textual understanding.¹ Speech is the act of executing the giving possibilities residing in a system of signs.² Speech is made of signs, and these signs come together to compose language which forms the backdrop to any process of understanding whether oral or written text.

In the work of Gadamer, scholars like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Spinoza, Chladenius gave a prehistory of hermeneutics. These scholars gave varied understanding of hermeneutics and interpretation. Schleiermacher defined understanding and its role in hermeneutics. Understanding in the view of Schleiermacher is a special task only when in natural life, this joint meaning of the meant where both intend a common subject matter, is disturbed.³ This suggests that understanding cannot occur in abstract terms but always there is something that must be agreed upon to bring about understanding.

Chladenius opined that hermeneutics involves the art of interpretation in the sense of being directed entirely towards the subject matter which is directly linked to understanding. He expressed the view that to understand an author perfectly is different from understanding speech or writing because these writings and speeches may carry things that the author did not intend to say. So in his view the real task of hermeneutics is to understand the meaning of the books themselves. Paul Ricoeur in his submission rejects the assumption that to understand a text is to understand the intention of the author, or, alternatively, to grasp the text's meaning as it was grasped by the first hearers or readers who shared the author's cultural situation.⁴ In his view, understanding envelopes the whole process of interpretation.

Ossom-Batsa's work expatiates on the role of contextualization in African hermeneutics. He indicates that context forms the basis of African hermeneutics because this helps the African Christian to identify with the message of the Bible in his/her context and tries to find answers to the various social, cultural, economic, and political questions confronting him/her from the Bible.⁵ Padilla argues that the word of God was given to bring the life of God's people into conformity with the will of God, in view of this in the process of understanding the meaning of a text is shaped by various social forces, patterns and ideals of culture and a particular historical situation. This, therefore, links hermeneutics strongly to the historical context.⁶

Lucas D. Introna has also discussed three important concepts of hermeneutics which are meaning, understanding and interpretation as pertinent in the process of achieving

¹Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Translation revised second edition by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London-New York: Continuum, 2004), PDF e-book, 215.

²J. Severino Croato, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll-New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 14.

³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 180-1.

⁴Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* edited by Lweis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), PDF e-book, 13.

⁵George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective," *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91-104.

⁶C. Rene Padilla, "The Interpreted Word: Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics," *Themelios* 7, no. 1 (1981): 18-23, 18.

hermeneutic understanding.⁷ He explains that according to Gadamer there is no 'one right interpretation'. Interpretation involves the continual mediation of the past and present. For literary interpretation in particular, Gadamer holds that interpretation of the text cannot in principle be limited merely to what the author intended or his own time understood. The text is not an expression of the subjectivity of the author. Rather, the text only comes into real existence in the dialogue of the interpreter with the text, and the situation of the interpreter is an important condition of the understanding of the text.⁸

However, in the above listed works there has been no detailed discussion of the relationship between context and horizons in the process of understanding in African hermeneutics. The works analyzed each of them separately in their own respect. This paper seeks to explore in detail the relationship between the fusion of horizon as proposed by Gadamer and contextualization in African hermeneutics. It looks at how understanding which is the main objective of hermeneutics, could be articulated as 'fusion of horizon' in African hermeneutics. The paper establishes that horizon presents the perspectives from which one examines a text and because there are different horizons presented by the text and the interpreter as well as the historical situation, there is the need to fuse these horizons in order to understand the text. In African hermeneutics, the focus of understanding revolves around the context from which the text is interpreted and the one interpreting it, therefore to make an interpretation African, it must speak to the context of the African. This can be achieved through a merging of the subject matter of the text and the African context to respond to the questions of the African.

The paper is organized into four sections; the next section is a background to the hermeneutics of Gadamer. It examines his philosophical foundation, hermeneutical position and his theory of fusion of horizon. The third section looks at the import of African hermeneutics. It examines its historical foundations and contemporary presuppositions. The fourth section focuses on fusion of horizon and contextualization. It examines the relationship between the two and how they aid in understanding in contemporary African Christianity and the last section is a conclusion.

Gadamer's Philosophical Foundation and Hermeneutical Position

Hans-Georg Gadamer is known to be one of the famous German philosophers who made major contributions to the development of modern hermeneutics. As a student of Martin Heidegger, he continued his critical and dialogical approach to philosophical hermeneutics.⁹ He developed the ontological position of Heidegger.¹⁰ In his hermeneutics he developed the ontological reflexivity of language as a means of communicating the

⁷Lucas D. Introna, "Information: A Hermeneutic Perspective," *ECIS* (1993): 171-179.

⁸Introna, "Information", 4.

⁹Paul Regan, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concept of Reading, Understanding and Hermeneutics," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Practical Philosophy* 4, no.2 (2012):286.

¹⁰Bjorn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed. URL=<<http://Plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hermeneutics/>>.

meaning of what is written or said by others.¹¹ He argued that human beings exist in language and that it is through it that the world is open for us in the sense that we get to know the world through mastering a language.¹² Language, he says, presents pointers to the truth inherent in word meanings and reveals that something exists in a circle of ontological possibilities.

Gadamer opined that “the meaning of a text is in principle incomplete. The meaning of the text comes into being or is constituted by every act of interpretation or understanding by the different interpreters as they bring to bear their perspectives, points of view or context on the text.”¹³ The interpreters often have their initial understanding of the text before they examine the context in dialogue with the text; and anyone trying to understand a text is always projecting meaning. This implies that readers go into the text with some presuppositions. It in turn manifests in the projections they make as they try to interpret the text.¹⁴ Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. That is from the familiar to the foreign, all interpretations are derived from a basic level of understanding prejudgments.¹⁵ The assertion implies that the perspective of meaning and understanding is always informed by the context of the interpreter whose horizon may differ from one to the other. Indeed it contributes to the incomplete nature of meaning because of the variations that may occur before the interpreter dialogues adequately with the text examining its context and historical situations.

Commenting on the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole, he indicates that the principle leads to the hermeneutical circle. We understand the whole from the parts and the parts from the whole. This implies that “the anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole”.¹⁶ The task of hermeneutics therefore is to illuminate the phenomenon of understanding which comes by sharing in a common meaning. We establish that the goal of all attempts to reach an understanding is an agreement concerning the subject matter. For this reason Tracy submits that “The crucial matter in Gadamer's idea is that the subject matter, which becomes the common subject matter of both interpreter and text, in the process of understanding, is a subject matter whose claim of attention is one expressed in the form of a text.”¹⁷ This calls for a common context where this agreement can be reached. According to Gadamer, in understanding it is the inner

¹¹Regan, “Hans-Georg Gadamer's,” 289.

¹²Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.”

¹³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 146.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁵Regan, “Hans-Georg Gadamer's,” 289.

¹⁶Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.

¹⁷David Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the new Paradigm”, in *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, Hans Kung and David Tracy eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1989), 46.

essence which gives rise to expression, and the understanding of things too is an expression; therefore understanding is the expression of the inner essence.¹⁸ In his opinion "The possibility of understanding consists in the fact that the utterances presented to us as historical material are congenial to the reader".¹⁹

Gadamer brought a new dimension to hermeneutics by introducing the reader as part of the process of interpretation. This is as a result of the dynamics of the reader in the interpretative process which centers basically on context. The context of the contemporary reader and its dynamics calls for a dialogue with the text and the historical data in the bid to comprehend meaning.

His Theory of Understanding as 'Fusion of Horizons'

In the work of Gadamer, there are three characters that dialogue with the text: the author, the reader and the interpreter and each of these may approach the text from their different contextual world view and so might understand the text from their own context. But in order to have a clear understanding of a text, the contexts which in the work of Gadamer, he calls horizons of those dialoguing with the text, must be examined together to understand the message of the text.

Gadamer emphasized that the human being is within a tradition, and that the act of understanding is finite occurrence of that tradition, as a way of belonging to history. The historical distance between the text and the interpreter calls for an engagement in textual explication and interpretation through a dialogical relationship. This is what Gadamer calls 'fusion of horizons', which is possible since it involves dealing with the intra-historical context.²⁰ Understanding in the Gadamerian view is that:

*As we come, through the work of interpretation, to understand what at first appears alien, we participate in the production of a richer, more encompassing context of meaning- we gain a better and more profound understanding not only of the text but also of ourselves. In the fusion of horizons, the initial appearance of distance and alienness does itself emerge as a function of the limitation of our own initial point of departure.*²¹

Tracy affirms that there is no exegesis without presupposition.²² Every interpreter goes into a text with his/her own presuppositions which ultimately comes from the context or horizon from which the text is viewed. Similarly, Croato maintains that all interpreters condition their reading of a text by a kind of pre-understanding arising from their own life context. The interpreter in view of this enlarges the meaning of the text being interpreted.²³

¹⁸ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 208.

¹⁹ Ibid., 213.

²⁰ Croato, Biblical Hermeneutics, 3.

²¹ Ramberg and Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics".

²² Tracy, "Hermeneutical Reflections", 38-9.

²³ Croato, Biblical Hermeneutics, 1.

It indicates that the presuppositions are possibly going to influence the interpretation of the text which will in turn affect its understanding by the readers. Owing to the fact that the interpretation of a text supposes the existence of a particular practice or events, and their constitution originates from an experience that is interpreted. The experience definitely originates from a context that either the author or reader lived in which has the tendency of influencing the interpretation of the text.²⁴ From a similar background, Tate in looking at the various worlds surrounding the text argued for an integrated approach which looks at studying a text using methods that combines the various worlds of the text.²⁵ By inference it means that by this approach the world behind the text which looks at the horizon of the author, the world of the text, which presents the horizon of the interpreter, and the world in front of the text, which represents the horizon of the reader, must be engaged in dialogue to present a better understanding of the text.

Historical Foundations of African Hermeneutics

The development of African hermeneutics has become paramount in addressing challenges that confront the increasing number of African Christians. According Ukpong, the rapid growth and widespread nature of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa can be attributed to the ability of the people to read the text in their own languages and from their own cultural perspective and worldview.²⁶ Thanks to the nineteenth century Christian missionaries. The primary task of biblical hermeneutics is to concretize the word of God for the people of God today. From an African point of view, traditional exegetical approaches have some lapses because they do not address the African people in their very context. Owing to the fact that they seemed abstract; unattached to the life and reading of ordinary people, highly academic, make use of Western and American context in teaching theology and pruning Africans to reading theology instead of doing theology.²⁷ An approach that makes use of the African worldview was developed to attempt in making theological findings relevant to the context in which they are practiced. In this case it renders the communication between the object of theology and its subject viable.

African Hermeneutics is an approach to the Bible which takes the African worldview into consideration. It emphasizes what the text means to Africans in their own context.²⁸ This approach is a blend between the historical data of the text, sociological concerns and contextual realities of the subject of exegesis. It has as its focus the entire world, including

²⁴Ibid., I.

²⁵Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd Edition (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 5-6.

²⁶Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation Hermeneutics", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* vol 91 no. (1995):3.

²⁷Mbengu D. Nyiawung, "Contextualizing Biblical Exegesis: What is the African Biblical Hermeneutic Approach?," *HTS Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013).

all human beings irrespective of sex, colour and status. The history of African biblical interpretation dates back to 1966 from the conference of the consultation of African theologians in Ibadan, Nigeria.²⁹ The discipline has followed three major trends with the current one focusing on the context of the audience; beginning with the comparative method, where the reader was the facilitator of the dialogue between the African context and the biblical text for the purpose of appropriation as Gerald West maintains. This method as well as inculturation constitutes the foundations of African biblical hermeneutics today. The developed interest in the discipline over the years has resulted in the publication of the Bible in Africa in 2000 and the African Bible Commentary in 2006. The interest of African biblical hermeneutics so far according to scholars has been that of contextualization, characterized by the awareness of the need to relate the results of biblical findings to issues of politics, economy, social justice and the environmental concerns of the African society.

Presuppositions of Contemporary African Hermeneutics

The work of Ossom-Batsa has articulated two basic presuppositions for African biblical hermeneutics in contemporary times. These are firstly the Bible being contextual. He elucidates that both the Old and New Testament writers composed their texts to the people of God to help them experience God concretely in their respective situations.³⁰ He maintains that as the Bible was written in a context which reflects the concrete life situation of a particular people in a particular geographical location over a period of time, African hermeneutics also originates from a careful social analysis. The second presupposition is that the Biblical message must be contextualized.³¹ He contends that the Bible cannot be regarded as pieces of information to be learnt, because it is God's self revelation to people of different generations. It should therefore be observed as a communication in which the word of God is mediated through human words and culture so as to transform lives.³² That is to say that African biblical hermeneutics should offer the African an opportunity not to hear a closed story from reading the Bible but be able to read his own life in dialogue with God.

Biblical scholars have so far concentrated on the three aspects of the text: the author, the text itself and its receptor or reader. The reader oriented approaches focuses on the reader or receptor of the text including contextual issues that surrounds the reader of the text. The reader brings on board a new horizon which includes the socio-cultural and

²⁸Nyiauwung, "Contextualizing Biblical Exegesis".

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation," 95.

³¹Ibid., 95.

³²Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation", 96.

economic situations of his time. Therefore his perspective of the text definitely varies from that of the author and text itself. To this Nyiawung posits that contextual issues are obligation on exegesis today.³³

West argues that while African hermeneutics tend to portray a bi-polar approach, referring to the comparative approach in which the biblical text and the African context interpret each other, it would be more accurate to describe it as tri-polar.³⁴ Because in his opinion, implicit in the bi-polar-like formulation are aspects of a third pole mediating between the poles of the African context and the biblical text which he calls appropriation. He maintains that what connects text to context is a form of dialogical appropriation that has a theological and praxological dimension. This ideo-theological third pole in his view takes various forms resulting in at least five different emphases in African hermeneutics: interpretation, inculturation, liberation, feminist and post-colonial approaches which are all forms of reader oriented approaches.³⁵ As Ukpong states “The focus of African interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within contemporary context”.³⁶ A similar emphasis can be perceived in the work of Alan J. Meenan who suggests “The Biblical text ever remains the one constant factor in the discipline of hermeneutics, yet the text does not exist in vacuum, it speaks to a particular audience within a specific cultural context”.³⁷

According to Meenan, the problem facing the church in Africa is a distinct lack of ability to hear the text, first in its original *Sitz im Leben*.³⁸ Many in Africa are searching for spiritual solutions for physical problems like economic hardships, political turmoil, social unrest and supernatural problems.³⁹ This is because as Ukpong observes through the reading of the Bible they encountered issues that were very similar to the things they encountered in their daily lives. As he indicated “They discovered a Jesus who drove out demons from people and confronted the power of Satan.”⁴⁰ “They also saw that the Jesus of the gospels was opposed to oppression having come specifically to set the downtrodden free (Luke 4:18).”⁴¹ African biblical scholars in the past have struggled in addressing this challenge because as they have been trained from Western biblical scholarship, their interpretation is from a perspective developed in the western culture and make efforts to apply the results to the African context.⁴² Ukpong argues for the fact that the African social and cultural realities are not reflected in such reading of the Bible.

³³Nyiawung, “Contextualizing Biblical Exegesis.”

³⁴Gerald O. West, “After the Missionaries: Historical and Hermeneutical Dimensions of African Appropriation of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 38, no. 1 (2012): 16.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 17-18.

³⁶Justin Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trends and Trajectories*, Gerald O. West and Dube Shomanah W. Musa eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 24.

³⁷Alan John Meenan, “Biblical Hermeneutics in an African Context”, *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 1 no. 2 (2014): 270.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Julius Gathogo and John Kennedy Kinyua, “Afro-Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa Today”, <http://church and society.org>: 261, [accessed 05 12 2014].

⁴⁰Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible”, 3.

African hermeneutical approach is therefore essential because of the awareness that scripture speaks to people differently depending on their context. What makes an interpretation African is its reflection of the experience of God's people in the African context as submitted by Ossom-Batsa.⁴³ Therefore the issue of context and contextualization plays a major role in the process of understanding biblical texts among Africans.

The Relationship between Context and Horizon to Understanding

From the hermeneutical view point, text and events or praxis are always mutually conditioned.⁴⁴ The Bible has come under different focuses, all of them oriented towards the exploration of meaning or its message.⁴⁵ The main objective of every interpretation is to lead to understanding which must transform the people of God in their concrete situation. It is obvious then that a change in the situation of the interpreter brings about a change in the understanding of the text, and this in turn has continuing effect or lasting impact in their situation. The context of a text or its horizon always gives the perspective from which one views the text, and there are several factors that come into play in every context. To understand a text, the reader connects the text and context in a creative form of dialogical appropriation that has the dimension of theology and praxis.⁴⁶ Therefore in relation to understanding, context or horizon as defined in hermeneutics is to lead the interpreter in her/his analysis of the text to address issues confronting the reader in the context. It implies that the contextual approach to scriptural interpretation involves a dialogue between the historical situation and scripture. The interpreter begins the process of interpretation by analyzing the situation of the people, listening to the questions raised within it and then come to the text asking what does God say through scripture concerning this particular problem?⁴⁷ By this approach the understanding gained from the text will be deduced from the situation as presented by the text and historical context in dialogue with the current situation of the reader.

The Role of Contextualization and Horizon in Understanding Biblical texts

Hermeneutic understanding is the understanding that comes into being by active interpretation based on lived experience not detached from contemplation always within a context and coloured by context. Introna posits that the process of understanding begins

⁴¹Ibid.,3.

⁴²Ibid.,4.

⁴³Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation," 933.

⁴⁴Croato, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2.

⁴⁵Ibid.,5.

⁴⁶Gerald West, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa", in Parrat John ed. *A reader in African theology*, Revised edition (London: SPCK,), 2.

⁴⁷Padilla, "Interpreted Word", 22.

from what one already knows or the tradition within which one finds himself. As one continues to open up to the text and continues to reevaluate ones understanding against the text, the meaning will be arrived at through the process of understanding.⁴⁸ In this process, language serves as a canon for establishing meaning. It is based on structure, which supposes differences, oppositions, and closed relationships within a given language.⁴⁹ However, language is contextual, because meaning assigned to words that constitutes language have contextual variations. David Tracy indicated that the language of every interpreter contains the history of the effects and traditions of that language.⁵⁰ Through these, traditions and prejudgments are formed by the history of the interpreter's culture which also constitutes the context. The presence of these effects of tradition in the interpreters pre-understanding of the text is made visible by reflecting on the use of the language. This underscores the significance of language in the process of understanding.

In elucidating Gadamer's phrase to 'fuse the horizon', Tracy stressed on the creative nature of the process of interpretation.⁵¹ He expressed the view that the meaning of the text lies in front of the text, what he calls the now common question, the now common subject matter of both the text and interpreter and not behind or even in the text itself.⁵² Therefore the interpreter must creatively mediate, translate and interpret its meaning in front of the text which is the horizon of the contemporary reader.⁵³ So to make the text understandable there must be a fusion of the horizon of meaning in front of the text with the horizon of the contemporary reader who seeks it out. By this creativity, there is interaction with the subject matter presented and expressed in the text so that the interpretation will lead to understanding the text. The understanding of the text must in effect lead to addressing the pertinent question that the reader seeks answers to and as this is contained in the subject matter of the text, fusing it with the meaning of the text will indeed enhance understanding. This justifies the claim that any authentic interpretation of the Christian message has to be actualized; the message must address the needs of the people dialoguing with the text.⁵⁴ Padilla maintains that it is out of textual understanding that theologies are formulated, therefore for it to be valid; it must reflect the horizon of the text and the historical situation. Because it will reflect the symbols and thought forms of the people which is part of their culture to which it is addressed and answers questions and concerns raised in the context.⁵⁵

I therefore agree with Tracy on the account that no interpreter enters the process of interpretation without prejudgments which emanates from the history of the traditions and

⁴⁸Introna, "Information," 4.

⁴⁹Croato, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 13.

⁵⁰David Tracy, "Theological Method" in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985): 35-60.

⁵¹Tracy, "Theological Method," 41.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 42.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁴Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation," 104.

⁵⁵Padilla, "Interpreted Word," 21.

the effects of the traditions forming the language. In interpreting a text, though the conceptual framework and the socio-cultural context constitutes the point of departure, the interpreter is further conditioned by certain factors that may be considered as personal or subjective which may give rise to biases in the interpreter's mind.⁵⁶ It is in this regard that the identification of the interpreter's specific context and analysis of the context of interpretation are very important steps in inculturation hermeneutics as one of the emphases of African biblical hermeneutics.

Again on the fact that there is also the actual experience of a text by an interpreter which bears certain permanence and excess of meaning that resists a definitive interpretation.⁵⁷ The actual experience of the text vexes, provokes and elicits claims to serious attention which provokes the preunderstanding of the text into a dual recognition. In such a situation Tracy maintains that the interpreter must interpret in order to understand. From this point of departure, we see different horizons being presented: the horizon of the text and what it seeks to provoke and elicit as well as the horizon of the interpreter with the history of traditions forming the prejudgments from the language. These horizons must be fused to address the now common question or subject matter. This affirms theory by Gadamer that there is the need for the fusion of horizons in order to ascertain the correct understanding in the light of the various contextual variations.

Arguing further, in understanding a text, the situation of the contemporary reader which is his context must coincide with the situation represented by the original text.⁵⁸ So the original biblical message must interact with the biblical message today to produce understanding. Padilla indicated that no interpreter is free to make a text say whatever they want regardless of their culture; he inevitably have to engage with the horizons of the text through literary context, grammar and history in the bid to understand the text.

Croato affirms that three major factors contribute to meaning or understanding in any given communication. They include the sender and in the case of biblical text the author who selects signs which includes words, sentences or literary genres in a given language to transmit a message. This message is addressed to a receiver or concrete interlocutor who is able to decode the message to decipher the meaning due to human language. The third factor is the context or horizon of understanding which is common to the author and the reader enabling them to coincide in the denotation of the message.⁵⁹ He claims that without this common milieu, language remains polysemous. This common milieu which includes linguistic, cultural, social, geographical and other environmental factors within human reality constitutes the bedrock of African hermeneutics. Therefore if understanding is to be achieved, it must be through the blending of the horizon of the author, text and the reader as

⁵⁶Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible", 5.

⁵⁷Tracy, "Theological method," 41.

⁵⁸Padilla, "Interpreted Word," 21.

⁵⁹Croato, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 14.

Gadamer proposed in his philosophy of hermeneutics. The concept rightly falls in line with the proposition of African hermeneutics which seeks to contextualize the biblical message through engaging the various contexts in a dialogue to make the text meaningful within the African context, taking into consideration the contextual milieu of Africa. It is this coinciding based on the common context is what Gadamer termed as fusion of horizon. To arrive at understanding there is the need to secure the potential polysemy of the text and this is done by creating a common ground where the various context or horizons coincides.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the effort to let scripture speak without any imposed interpretation is a biding hermeneutical task on all interpreters no matter their cultures. Without this the whole process is flawed and understanding impeded. Since there is the need to comprehend meaning from a text, the interpreter must creatively engage the various cognates of the interpretation process in a dialogue. This paper has attempted to show that the fusion of horizon as proposed by Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics is not alien to African Biblical hermeneutics. The art of contextualizing a biblical text for it to speak to the present life situation of the African involves the fusion of the horizon of the subject matter in front of the text, which contains the historical data and that of the contemporary reader, being mindful of his context and the questions he brings to the text. By establishing a common contextual milieu for them, understanding will be achieved.

The study also affirms that African biblical hermeneutics is equally philosophical. This is in view of the fact that it is the same philosophical position that the early philosophers used in establishing understanding of a text that is been used in the discipline. This affords the discipline the opportunity to critically contextualize texts to meet the need of the African.

In contextualizing understanding, there is the need for creativity. This creative act in the interpretive process helps to engage the various contexts of the text in a harmonious dialogue so that the perspective of each context can be examined scientifically to bring an informed understanding to the text. This affirms the fact that in both African hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics, the interpreter must be very creative in the understanding process so that the various components can be carefully analyzed in a dialogue to facilitate a proper understanding of the text.

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