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TOWARDS SOUND EXEGESIS OF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS: THE PROBLEM OF MISINTERPRETATION AND METHODS IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICS

Gideon Y. Tambiyi, PhD

Department of Religion and Philosophy, University of Jos, Nigeria

tambiyig@unijos.edu.ng

ORCID: 0000-0001-5209-4916

Abstract

One aspect of biblical studies that has been demanding attention is the various misinterpretations and misinformation about the New Testament. This is because many people tend to ascribe meaning to the texts rather than depending on the intended meanings of the authors of the texts. As a result, this work intends to provide a well-informed platform for reading and interpreting the text of the New Testament amid numerous alternative interpretations. Using the historical and descriptive methods, this work argues that reading and interpretation of the Bible, which deals with deciphering the mind of the author for the original audience in a modern world, can be possible if the appropriate methodologies are applied. It is also argued that devoting time to understanding the spiritual meaning behind the encoded words forms the absolute basis for understanding the entire message. While there is a need for the retelling of biblical stories, making them contemporarily relevant becomes the absolute task of the reader and interpreter. This paper also discovers that there are several interpretations of the texts of the New Testament by incompetent hands who lack adequate qualifications, and there is a need for the Bible to be properly read and interpreted to see what it meant to the original readers and then what it means to us today in view of contemporary misinterpretations.

Keywords: New Testament, Interpretation, misinterpretations, African context, Texts, and Hermeneutics.

Introduction

Throughout the Bible, interpreting it has been a task undertaken by many people in the Old Testament. Moses has engaged in interpreting the Torah, and many rabbis have devoted themselves to giving the text meaning. The prophets also presented a fresh understanding of the Torah and the ecstatic environment in which they lived. Jesus came and reinterpreted the Torah, which initiated a new perspective on understanding God and his word. This forms the beginning of the church and grace. We see the apostles devoting their works to present thoughts about the Torah and the prophets, which found fulfilment in Jesus. Bible interpretation continued in the days of the church fathers through the medieval ages, where faith and reasoning began to penetrate the understanding of God. While there was a literal understanding of the passages, allegory crept into the church in the belief that one needs some spiritual insights, particularly when dealing with the narratives. This dichotomous understanding continued into the Reformation, but the Age of Enlightenment ushered in fresh thought and critical methodologies for understanding the Bible.

Biblical interpretation has indeed taken various shapes in Africa. A lot of misinterpretation abounds, which has metamorphosed into various heresies in the church and society. African biblical interpretation has become the most dominant aspect of African theological discourse, and because of this domination, many Africans have developed several readings and methodologies for African biblical hermeneutics. Most of these are radical, traditional, cultural, liberal, and reactionary to what is called Western biblical hermeneutics and to classical biblical hermeneutics.

Although everyone reads and interprets texts, not everyone is able to interpret the Bible. We assign significance to appearances, handshakes, greetings, touches, smiles, speeches, and even the way people walk. Not everyone can interpret things accurately, leading to misunderstandings about ourselves and our surroundings. We often misjudge things that we do not fully comprehend. Interpretation is like our everyday experiences. When the information is properly understood, we can determine if it is suitable for the Church or if it has been misrepresented. The information shapes the interpretation of the data. Information has two sides, representing either correctness or incorrectness.

As a result, this work uncovers that the reading and interpretation of the Bible play a vital role in encapsulating the past and making it relevant to the present. It has considered the history of biblical interpretation and the various critical methods employed for understanding the message of the Bible. Biblical interpretation helps bring the meaning of the biblical text, as intended by the original writer, to the original recipient and to the contemporary African.

The paper discusses the various emergent critical approaches to the interpretation of the Bible, considering the form-critical approach, source criticism, historical-critical approach, and textual criticism. It also laid emphasis on the traditional approaches to the interpretation of the Bible, such as the historical-grammatical method. Quite an emphasis was also laid on third-world methodologies and African hermeneutical methodologies, with a close look at context and language, and the qualifications for sound reading and interpreting of the Bible in Africa. The last section discusses issues of misinformation and misinterpretations within the African setting.

The Emergence of Critical Approaches

The Age of Enlightenment ushered in a fresh understanding of the Bible, and various methods were invented to ascertain the meaning of the biblical text. Biblical criticism surfaced with its various methods. Darrell Bock discusses the various methods for the study of the Gospels and the Bible text, such as historical criticism, textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, and narrative criticism.¹ A few of these critical methods shall be surveyed.

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

1. Form-Critical Approach

One of the methods adopted for the study of the Gospels was form criticism. It sprang from the weaknesses of source criticism.² K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann pioneered this.³ The inability to produce a documentary theory of Mark's origin led some form critics to suggest form criticism as a method. Source criticism has left a gap of 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus before any written document appeared. To Abogunrin, "Source criticism has proposed a four-document hypothesis as sources of the Synoptic documents but could not push the study beyond the written document, which form criticism attempts to fill the gap."⁴ Though form-critical studies have not been agreed upon among scholars, but its influence on the complexity of historical Jesus research could be evident. With this, Kee observes, "Form criticism has not found unanimous acceptance, but it has nevertheless affected a revolution in the study of the gospels."⁵

Form criticism has the following assumptions: that before the written Gospels, there was a period of oral tradition.⁶ During this period, narratives and sayings (except the passion narrative) circulated as self-contained units. The Gospels must be regarded as folk literature and can be classified according to literary forms. The community productions and the vital factors of these forms are found in the *Sitz im Leben*. The traditions have no chronological or geographical value, and the original form of the traditions may be recovered by studying the laws of the tradition.⁷

Bultmann's approach to the Gospel materials using form criticism was dominated by various influences, which disposed him to treat history as irrelevant. To him, the evangelists have written the Gospels from their standpoint of faith. This makes the Gospels, to him, become sources of early Christian theology rather than historical data for the life of Jesus. In *Jesus and the Word*, Bultmann concludes that "we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus."⁸ This led to his view of community creativity, in which he claims that the community created most of the materials,⁹ like Reimarus and Strauss. Like Dibelius, Bultmann classified the Gospels into various forms: apophthegms (Dibelius' paradigms), miracle stories (Dibelius' Novellen), sayings, legends, and myths. Most of his ideas are developed in *Theology of the New Testament* (2 Vols.), *The Gospel of John*, and *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. This method has affected the study of the Gospels. Bultmann's understanding of the Gospels has shaped New Testament studies even though many of his followers and students disagreed with his thought and reasoning.

2. Source Criticism

Source criticism centres on determining the sources that the Gospel writers used to compose their Gospels.¹⁰ Evangelically, there are basically some sources for the Gospels that we have today. These are written documents, which one expects to have come from the same sources; hence, they agree with the ancient and modern means of documentation. Robert G. Gromacki's work adds to the understanding of the Gospels as historical sources through his presentation of evangelical responses

² Source Criticism is a method of studying the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, which considers the literary sources that have been used by the writers of the Gospels.

³ For more analysis, see C. Brown, "Quest of Historical Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. H. Marshall eds., Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992).

⁴ S. O. Abogunrin, "In Search of the Original Jesus" An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Thursday July 16, 1998, Published, 2003), 16.

⁵ Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 20.

⁶ P. Foster, "Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research," *JSHJ* 10 (2012), 191-227.

⁷ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (4th ed.) (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990), 230.

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (Trans. Louise P. Smith and E. Huntress. New York: Scribner's, 1934), 8.

⁹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 217.

¹⁰ Danny McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction* (Rev. ed.) (Bukuru: Acts, 2005), 111-115; Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1995), 51-55.

to the source criticism of the Gospels. To this, Gromacki presents a good historical survey of the several views of liberals about the sources of the Gospels.¹¹

On source criticism, Danny McCain concludes that there is no real reason to reject the traditional belief that the individual writers wrote either out of their own personal experience (Matthew) or from the stories they personally heard the apostles repeat (Mark) or from personal research, which would have included interviews with apostles and other eyewitnesses and perhaps other short written accounts (Luke).¹²

The eyewitnesses and the circulation of oral tradition were a force to reckon with. The apostles also played major roles as sources for the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are believed to be sources. Meanwhile, there is a belief that Matthew and Luke shared materials that are foreign to Mark and John, designated as Q, derived from the German *Quelle*.¹³ This was developed in an attempt to state the various sources of the Gospels.¹⁴ There is another hypothesis, which is the four-document hypothesis, which B. S. Streeter developed. This revealed that there are other documents which Matthew used as “M” and Luke as “L,” which are not common to the other writers other than Mark and Q, making a four-source document for the Gospels.¹⁵ Witherington III has written so well about Q. He writes, “There are some forty-nine or fifty passages or 230 or so sayings that Matthew and Luke share and that are not found in Mark.”¹⁶ He listed the contents of the Q, which, to him, are grouped into two kinds: Jesus the sage and a focus on discipleship.¹⁷

3. The Historical Critical Approach

A common method known for the study of the Bible is historical criticism, which is the product of biblical criticism and was developed during the Age of Enlightenment. Abogunrin discusses the rise of biblical criticism during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To him, “The main focus of historical criticism is not the relationship between the Bible and the church tradition but between the Bible and Christ.”¹⁸ This method relates the biblical passage within its historical context in a critical manner. Craig Blomberg also discusses the critical methods for the study of the Gospels, particularly the place of historical criticism.¹⁹ And see modern arms of biblical studies, such as the Jesus Seminar, to develop their philosophy and ideology under the influence of historical criticism but using an advanced method called the “socio-scientific method and computer science.”²⁰

¹¹ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Bakers, 1974), 55-7.

¹² McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, 115.

¹³ On the origin of the term “Quelle” see C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 84.

¹⁴ For more analysis on Q, see J. S. Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” *HTR* 89 (1996), 307-44. W. H. Kelber, “Sayings Collection and Sayings Gospel: A Study in the Clustering Management of Knowledge,” *Language & Communication* 9 (1989), 213-224. J. D. Turner, “The Gnostic Sethians and Middle Platonism: Interpretations of the Timaeus and Parmenides,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006), 9-64. James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Sayings Gospel Q and Thomas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). G. N. Stanton, “On the Christology of Q” *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of Charles Francis Dig* (Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 41. Keener, Craig S. *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 61.

¹⁵ See McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, 113. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 52-53.

¹⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd Ed.) (Illinois: IVP, 1997), 29.

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The New Testament Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 33-36. An older work which reveals the content of Q is Kee, *Jesus in History*, 66-70. For an extensive discussion on the thematic interest of Q, Q as narrative material and its parenetic and eschatological material, and the value of Q, see Kee 71-103. On Q and the Gospel of Thomas in English and Greek, see Robinson, Hoffmann, and Kloppenborg, eds., *The Sayings Gospel Q and Thomas*, 2002.

¹⁸ Abogunrin, “In Search of the Original Jesus,” 8.

¹⁹ Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels*. Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 84.

²⁰ Witherington III, *Jesus Quest*, 43.

One sees that historical criticism has influenced evangelical scholarship. Evangelical scholarship has sometimes adopted historical criticism in the analysis of its contents. This is because there are some similarities between evangelical scholarship and the Jesus Seminar analogy, as stated by Robert L. Thomas.²¹ As a result, the editors of the book, *Jesus Crisis*, have this to say: “The Jesus Crisis should be a source of serious concern for the Christian church.”²² The church needs to be concerned about the influence of such a method on evangelical studies, particularly Jesus’ life being the centre of the church. Boring clearly states that historical criticism has considered various aspects of Jesus life, but all that remains are the sayings of Jesus.²³

Despite the value of the historical-critical method, Africans should note that the modern historical-critical method alone for the study of the Gospels is inadequate for the understanding of spiritual documents such as the Gospels. Many scholars do not agree with the historical-critical method of interpreting the scriptures. “They could not see how the critical approach can be compatible with the reverence which the biblical text demands.”²⁴

Higher criticism, with its historical-critical method, has helped establish an overall attitude toward the historicity of the Gospel materials and expanded the understanding of Jesus. Affirming this, Daniel Rops observes, “The use of historical method, in conjunction with the remarkable discoveries of archaeological research, of comparative semantics and textual criticism has, for more than half a century now, greatly enlarged the scope of the study of Jesus.”²⁵ Influence has been seen in the similar use of the historical-critical method for the understanding of Jesus and the Gospels. Of course, Africans must note this criticism as viable between the positions of the use of the historical-critical method in the West. Better methods, such as biblical and systematic theological methods, should be used in Africa for the understanding of the Gospels and Jesus.

4. Textual Criticism

Textual criticism is the science of sorting and collating existing manuscripts of very ancient documents by means of reconstructing them in search of the accurate version.²⁶ Bruce Metzger centres the whole art of textual criticism on recension, i.e., the selection of the most trustworthy evidence on which to base a text, and emendation, i.e., the elimination of errors in the best manuscripts.²⁷ Textual criticism is very important, for it helps us to go back to the original manuscripts of the Gospels, although with absolute carefulness. It should be stated that many of the critical scholars derailed and began to question the Gospels as having some mistakes because of these areas of study in biblical scholarship.

Traditional Approaches (historical-grammatical method)

The early church fathers have engaged the grammatical-historical approach to the texts of the Bible. This approach has survived from the early church to the Renaissance ages in church history. Mainline African scholars are devoting much interest to the grammatical-historical method of Bible interpretation, which centres on knowledge of the historical context and the ideas behind the biblical languages to understand the intention of the author.

²¹ Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 14-15.

²² Thomas and Farnell eds., *The Jesus Crisis*, 383.

²³ Boring, M. E. “The Historical-Critical Method’s ‘Criteria of Authenticity’: The Beatitudes in Q and Thomas as a Test Case” *Semeia* 44. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature (1988), 2.

²⁴ Abogunrin, “In Search,” 35.

²⁵ Daniel Rops, *Jesus and His Times* (New York: Image Books, 1960), 275.

²⁶ For a better understanding, see Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 73-75. There are many textual variants of the Gospels, and the two major ones are the longer reading of Mark’s ending (16:9-20) and John 7:53-8:11 cannot be found in the most ancient manuscripts of the Gospels.

²⁷ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament 2nd ed.* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 156.

Despite the many methodologies, the grammatical-historical interpretation is basic since it involves the understanding of the linguistic, historical, and spiritual contexts of the Bible books, passages, or verses. Understanding the language becomes a focus for this method. The grammatical and the literary context are given priority. According to K. Frehlich, “God did not use a language of His own or the language of angels (1 Cor. 13:1) but made human language of particular times and places the vehicle of biblical revelation.”²⁸ This is where the knowledge of Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew is significant to African biblical interpreters. This helps in seeking the accurate meanings of words and idioms or ideas behind the words. For example, Sam Oleka urged that, to discover the author’s intended meaning and his reader’s understanding of the intended meaning of words like “faith”, “believe”, “justify”, “works”, “law”, and “flesh” in Galatians 2:16, the contemporary African interpreter of the Bible must define them by etymology and by customary or traditional uses, as well as by examining related writings of Paul.²⁹ Evangelical scholarship has found this method interesting and effective over the years.

African Hermeneutics Methodologies

It becomes significant that African biblical interpretation begins to chart its course. An investigation into the science and art of Bible interpretation has observed the missing link of African biblical hermeneutics. This critical scholarship in Africa consequently made the theological significance a merely local religious reflection of the African people.³⁰ In a discourse on African hermeneutics, S. O. Abogunrin has it that,

To depend solely on the theories and rules of interpretation developed under conditions alien to African life will undoubtedly affect the growth of the Church to maturity. It also reduces our credibility as African theologians, diminishes our spirits, and distorts the universality of Jesus Christ to whom the scriptures bear witness.³¹

Also, Kä Mana stressed the importance of African hermeneutics involving the creation of a new African society. Affirming this, Mana observed, “Presenting a hermeneutics of resourcefulness as a fertile ground for the reading of the Bible today is giving hope once more to Africa and opening doors of hope for the building of a new society.” In addition, he stated that “in order to promote this hermeneutics which opens the way for a creative and inventive spirit in the light of the gospel, a real ministry of public education, centred on concrete projects for human advancement and the humanisation of society”³² should be re-evaluated.

These efforts to create a better African society and to maintain the standard of the Africans led to the quest for methodologies for African biblical interpretation. Regarding this, Abogunrin observed, “The quest for new ways of interpreting the Bible is perhaps the most important part of modern theological education in Africa.”³³ African hermeneutics are exciting and perhaps the most dominant aspects of African theological discourse, even though there are quite a few modern African biblical interpreters who still raise suspicious questions about African contextual theology.³⁴ To them, it is uncalled for,

²⁸ K. Frehlich, “Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move” *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry* (Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1981), 141-142.

²⁹ Sam Oleka, “Interpreting and Applying the Bible in an African Context” *Issues in African Christian Theology* (Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou eds., Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993), 71.

³⁰ On the theological response to such criticisms, see John Mbiti, “Cattle are Born with Ears, their Horns Grow Latter’ Towards an Application of Oral Theology” *African Theological Journal* (3:1, 1979), 15-25. Indeed, there are various responses to these challenges of theology in the African context. Despite the limited resources for theologizing, we still sneeze, and the Western theologians turn around to investigate the documents.

³¹ S. O. Abogunrin, “Situation Theology as a Recipe for African Theological Exploration” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* (vol. XV, no. 2, October 2000), 2-3.

³² Kä Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Envisioning the Future* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 102.

³³ Abogunrin, “Situation Theology”, 2-3.

³⁴ One of such works is Tersur A. Aben, *African Christian Theology: Illusion and Reality* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2008). An evaluation of the book would reveal that Aben could not escape Western influence. Let me say that the book is

adulterated, and syncretistic. However, these methodological questions stressed the Bible as its sole foundation. Parts of their bases rest on the scriptures and the culture of the African people.³⁵ To this, Mbiti concluded that visible theology must and should have a biblical basis.³⁶

There are interpretation methods that have been developed so far in Africa. As Third World biblical hermeneutics has employed various methodologies to its frontiers (“militant reading”, “guerrilla exegesis”, “cross-textual reading”, “dialogical imagination,” and “Calypso exegesis”),³⁷ so also African biblical hermeneutics. These are the African cultural hermeneutics, enculturation hermeneutics, indigenisation, Africanisation, deconstruction, decolonisation, deculturation, incarnation, accommodation, reconstruction, intercultural hermeneutics, African theology, savannah theology, relevance of the Gospel theology, liberation hermeneutics, contextual hermeneutics, Afrocentric hermeneutics, vernacular hermeneutics, comparative studies, evaluative studies, black reading, feminist hermeneutics,³⁸ and finding an African presence in the Bible.³⁹

Some of them are biased, employing some Western cultural influences in the translation of the words in the Bible. Most of these versions are translated by Westerners. In recent African scholarship, lots of these versions are never considered valid because of the de-Africanization of the Bible text. Africans are advocating for the name “Africa” to appear in the main biblical text, not in the footnotes.⁴⁰ This led some to advocate for an African Bible that will help Africans see the message

unwilling and incapable of providing a relevant scholarship for the African continent, for as one reads the book’s effort, it is only trying to revert African theology to Western theology rather than the real Biblical Theology. His educational background, in view of his acknowledgements of Prof. John Cooper of *Calvin Theological Seminary* as the backbone to the views that he holds about African Christian theology, Frederick J. Crossan and Thomas Flint, all the University of Notre Dame, and Prof. Alvin Plantinga. Serious African theologians will see Aben’s inability to contextualize belief systems and adhere strictly to ancient “Western indoctrination.” In light of his prefatory statements about African Christian theology, it should come as no surprise to find that some of the criticisms of African theology offered in his book *African Christian Theology: Illusion and Reality* show us not a scholarship in command of a better knowledge of African theology, but a scholarship that is unwilling, perhaps unable and incapable of raising the questions of the exact African Christian theology.

³⁵ Abogunrin, “Situation Theology”, 14.

³⁶ John Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis for the Present Trends in African Theology” *African Theology En Route* (K. Appiah Kubi and S. Torres eds., New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 88-90.

³⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Bible” *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah eds., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 14.

³⁸ Daniel Kasomo and Loreen Iminza Maseno, “A Critical Appraisal of African Feminist Theology” *International Journal of Current Research* Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2011), 154-162. Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). Mercy Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology in an African Perspective”. In: *Paths of African Theology*. (Ed. by Gibellini, R. London: SCM Press, 1994), 166-181. Mercy Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away?: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women* (Geneva: WCC 1990). Therasa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” In: *Searching the Scriptures*. (Ed. By Schussler Fiorenza, E. London: SCM Press, 1993), 76-85. U. King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994). Mary Daly, “In hearing and naming ourselves out of the depths, women are naming toward God,” https://www.academia.edu/86329759/Feminist_Theology (2026). Richard B. Sorensen, “Feminist Theology” Paper in Feminist Theology, Lindisfarne Community Theology School https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340594506_Feminist_Theology (2020), 1-21. A. Koestler et al, *The God That Failed* (Columbia University Press, 2001). A. Loades, “Feminist interpretation” *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, Seventh Printing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 81-94. J. Malpas and H. H. Gander, “Hermeneutics, Race and Gender.” *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (2014). [Online] available at: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315771854.ch40> Accessed 26 August 2017. M. A. Chheenah, *Hagar: The Princess, The Mother of the Arabs, and Ismael, the Father of the Twelve Princes* (Islamabad: ISRC, 2014).

³⁹ On these methodological frameworks see Tuesday Adamo, “The Search for Africannes in the Bible,” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* (vol. XV, No. 2, October 2000), 21. See J. Dogara Gwamna, *Perspectives in African Theology* (Jos: ACTS, 2014), 199-216. Robert W. Yarbrough, “New Testament Studies in Africa” *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century* (A. J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough eds. Nottingham: IVP, 2011), 272-5.

⁴⁰ The interpretation of the Bible devouring the name Africa has been questioned by African scholars such as Prof. Tuesday Adamo. He went ahead that words like *Kush*, *pun*, *nehesi*, *magan*, *mehuhha*, and *Ethiopia* are not properly translated. To him, the Cushite wife of Moses (Num. 12:1), the Cushite military man in David’s royal army (2 Sam. 18:21,

of the Bible for the African people.⁴¹ Despite the many translations in the indigenous languages, a need for an English African Bible would be of continental significance.

The most recent methodology is post-colonial hermeneutics, which was rooted in South Africa, dominantly by R. S. Sugirtharajah.⁴² Some of these methodologies have become threats to real African Christian theology, in which the Bible is its source and authority. These threats are in the form of false interpretations.

Pentecostalism has given rise to African Pentecostal theology, a field that explores the meeting point between African cosmology and biblical spirituality.⁴³ Such a spiritual quest has shaped the prayer life of ordinary believers to interpret Scripture and to expect God to act and come through for them daily. The Pentecostal hermeneutical methodology, which centres on viewing the text, passage, phrases, and words independently, emerged in response to the need for people to stand above the socio-economic challenges in the African context. This method has been making headway, concentrating on the spiritual message of the text, passage, verse, or words, and creating hope in the word of God for the Africans.

The Role of Context and Language in African Hermeneutics

For us to adequately accomplish these, the following needs to be considered, as Jonathan Preus calls them three partners in interpretation: our Christian traditions – the long history of Bible interpretation in the Church, our community of faith – the Church and fellow believers, and our culture – the people among whom we live, both believers and non-believers.⁴⁴ Regarding culture, he has given a very prominent antidote to biblical understanding. Culture needs to be highly considered because there is a close relationship between the Bible and human culture. The biblical writers were from different cultural backgrounds and wrote to different people in various distinctive cultural settings. The great African thinker John S. Mbiti was right when he observed,

The Gospel was revealed to the world in the context and language of culture and not in an empty vacuum. This revelation took place in a specific cultural place, Palestine, among a specific people, the Jews, at a specific movement, two thousand years ago. Since then, the

31), Ebed-Melech, the Cushite who delivered the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 38:7-13), Africa as place of refuge for the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:13-19), Simon of Cyrene, the compassionate African (Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26), the Ethiopian Eunuch, the African minister of finance (Acts 8:26-40) and the African prophets and teachers in Antioch (Acts 13:1) are de-Africanized. While the true sense of the words depicting the name Africa is expressed in the footnotes, Adamo argues that “there is a difference between the footnotes and the real biblical text.” See Adamo, “Search for Africanness”, 20-30, 40. Well, it is evident that the Westerners employed their individualistic thinking to the Bible text, and the Africans are thinking communally. In Africa, it is believed that “a wound for one is a wound for all” and Mbiti’s “I am because we are” is quite illustrative. This means that it is not only applicable to good times or when things are going fine with us but also to terrible times. On the effort made to reconcile this among the American society see Michael G. Cartwright, “Wrestling with Scriptures: Can Euro-American Christians and African American Christians Learn to Read Scriptures Together?” *The Gospel in Black and White* (Dennis L. Okholm ed., Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 71-116.

⁴¹ We already have a version titled “The African Bible.”

⁴² R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Scripture, Scholarship, Empire: Putting the Discipline in Its Place” *Expository Times* (vol. 117, no. 1, October 2005), 5f.

⁴³ Samson Tadelles Demo, “Spirit Hermeneutics for African Pentecostalism: A Hermeneutic for a Jubilar Mission” *Conspectus*, Volume 38 (October 2024), 40-56. Isaac Folorunso Oluwalusin, “Hermeneutical Approaches to Biblical Studies in African Context” *International Journal of Religions and Peacebuilding (INJOREP)* Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2025), 10-24. James K. A. Smith, “Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy.” *Pentecostal Manifestos Book 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). Wole Adegbile, “The Move of the Spirit in Africa: A Theological Reflection on the Growth of African Pentecostalism” *International Journal of Social Science and Technology* 5:1 (2020), 29-44. Joshua Robert Barron, “Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity.” *Conspectus* 33 (2022), 88-103. <https://doi.org/10.54725/conspectus.2022.1.6>. Lee Roy Martin, “Characteristics of Pentecostal Biblical Hermeneutics.” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 99 (2018), 1-9.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Preus, *Reading the Bible through Christ* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2001), 16-18.

Gospel has been proclaimed, propagated, and accepted within the cultural milieu of the people of the world.⁴⁵

Culture and language play vital roles in biblical interpretation and understanding. The cultural conditions of the Africans need to be envisaged in the process of biblical interpretation. As it was to the Jews in the Early Church, so we, in our numerous contexts and *Sitz im Leben*, should read, study, interpret, and comprehend the Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit. Interpretation and hermeneutics study the principles of interpretation. The Bible demands correct interpretation, which would deal with the problems of the Africans. Sam O. Oleka has it that “its correct interpretation would guarantee its being adequately understood and perhaps effectively adhered to within the Christian churches on the continent.”⁴⁶

The understanding of the Bible on the African continent depends solely on the sound exegesis of the text. One must put the guidelines into effect. R. C. Sproul gave reasons for interpretation to “establish guidelines and rules of interpretation.”⁴⁷ This is where Africans are strongly divided. We tend to suggest guidelines or methodologies that are threatening to the African existential situation. We bring out methods that conflict with the sound biblical message and are based on our biased, sentimental, and racial differences. Sound exegesis puts those differences aside and applies available principles that would make the Bible relevant to African Christians.

The Bible is based on objective and subjective grounds, i.e., the objective revelation of God and the subjective apprehension of man regarding that revelation.⁴⁸ It passes divine truth in objective propositional statements.

Sound African Biblical Interpretation

There are people in Africa who are anxious to interpret the Bible even without the basic qualifications. The author has seen fit to suggest some qualifications that would help Africans in terms of Bible interpretation. These qualities are suggested for anyone who wants to be a biblical interpreter since the Bible is not ordinary literature. These qualifications are divided into three: spiritual, academic, and practical qualifications, which are based on the grammatical-historical method of Bible interpretation.

1. Spiritual Qualifications

As the word “spiritual” implies, these qualities are confined only to Christians, i.e., those who have truly accepted Christ as their Lord and personal saviour and are living according to or in parallel to the teachings, practices, and beliefs of Christ. These are the basics of Bible interpretation. Unbelievers cannot have these qualities, and as a result, it means they would be rendering a faulty interpretation.

The African biblical interpreter must be a Christian. This means being born again (Jn. 3:3), i.e., knowing the author of the Bible, since it is the Word of God. It is quite certain that expositors of other religions, cults, and occultisms are initiated members; so also members of Christianity must be born of the Spirit. It is a Christian who has an “eternal ticket” that stands a better chance of interpreting the eternal document. Do not forget that one’s beliefs and practices affect one’s interpretation. That is why non-Christians can never adequately interpret the Bible as it was originally intended, since the Holy Spirit, who is the seal and deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30), is not living in them and is not controlling their lives.

⁴⁵ J. S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture” *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (Sept. 1977), 184.

⁴⁶ Sam Oleka, “Doing Theology in Africa: An Evangelical Perspective” (Unpublished Thesis, 1982), 71.

⁴⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scriptures* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1977).

⁴⁸ On the objective and subjective principles see Richard J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 93-94.

Without Africans being born of the Spirit, we can absolutely be sure that there will be no accurate interpretation of the biblical text.

The African biblical interpreter is expected to be a Spirit-controlled Christian. Being Spirit-controlled means allowing or totally surrendering to the Holy Spirit, who is God and the perfect interpreter, counsellor, teacher, and guardian of the biblical messages. Jesus made this plain when He was on earth: “All this I have spoken while I was with you. But the counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn 14:25-26). Also, he stated, “I have much to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; He will speak only what he hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come” (Jn 16:12-13). That is to say, the proper biblical message can never be got without the Holy Spirit. The African interpreter must be a spiritual person who is walking obediently in the footsteps of the Lord. He or she must be ready to keep in step with the Spirit to enable him to portray the original truth of the text.

There is a need for him or her to be a humble Christian. Humility is a characteristic of Christ. Anyone who wants to be an interpreter of the Bible must acknowledge that the task needs humility. The Scriptures have it that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Pet. 5:5; Prov. 3:34), and God’s strength is made perfect in weakness because of the grace of God that is available to the Christian (2 Cor. 12:9). This imprinted humility in the life of the Christians helps us see the messages of the Bible, a chance to interpret the eternal document. Do not forget that one’s beliefs and practices affect one’s interpretation. That is why non-Christians can never adequately interpret the Bible as it was originally intended, since the Holy Spirit, who is the seal and deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30), is not living in them and is not controlling their lives. Without Africans being born of the Spirit, we can absolutely be sure that there will be no accurate interpretation of the biblical text.

2. Academic Qualifications

In serious exegesis, the study of words is of great importance. Any reasonable exegesis of the Bible must focus on the study of words and how they are used in the ancient world and understood in the modern world. Similarly, Robert H. Stein observed, “...an incorrect understanding of the meaning of an important word in a sentence will inevitably lead to an incorrect understanding of the sentence.” Fee and Stuart have it that “...the proper understanding of many passages depends on a careful analysis of words.”⁴⁹ To this, they warn that an exegete should never necessarily assume that he/she knows the meaning of words like grace, righteousness, love, hope, faith, etc., when such words appear in the passage(s) for which the exegesis would be carried out.⁵⁰

There are other tools, such as a Bible Atlas, which, if your Study Bible does not have maps (in fact, a Bible Atlas is essential for the Study Bible; it might not give you other related geographical terrains), Bible Handbooks, introduction books for historical background information on Bible times and people, Bible Encyclopaedia, books on systematic theology, and books on the manners and customs of Bible lands. These books help the contemporary African interpreter to be aware of the possible influences of biblical geography, topography, location, climatic conditions, and other related features. They help in exposing the biblical history and cultural factors associated with events, persons, economic, political, and sociological conditions. They help explain the Bible customs and practices, life situations of the people, their worldview, concerns, rites of passage, and their general and specific characteristics. We could now add others, for example, books on anthropology, historiography, geography, and typography. We can even mention the use of numismatics, i.e., the study of coins.

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (2nd Edition). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 87.

⁵⁰ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 87.

Study books are tools and are the fruit of other men's research and enquiry; however, they also must be read with great caution, as they may also include views that may be at variance with God's Word.

3. Practical Qualifications

There is a need for the interpreter to be open to learning from the Holy Spirit. Most times, we jump into the biblical data without being objective and with subjective minds. An individualistic interpretation is given preference over the views of other individuals. This is somewhat foolish and flourishes in a pluralistic society, and is another form of human arrogance. Arrogance or pride is dangerous to human spirituality. Anybody who wants to be a good interpreter of the Bible must be open to learning doctrinal truths from the Holy Spirit. The message should first be felt in the life of the interpreter. He or she should first note the principle(s) derived from the passage. This is not an easy task, and it needs prayer, meditation, and dependence upon the Holy Spirit to find them (Ps. 119:18). The principles found should generally fit the teachings of the Bible and speak to the interests, needs, quests, and concerns of the present *Sitz im Leben* in the modern African world and, lastly, outline a course of action. Hendricks and Hendricks suggest that "interpretation is one; application is many."⁵¹ The interpreter should learn to first apply the Bible's message to his own life. In Africa, some pastors, teachers, and theologians are better at applying biblical truth to the lives of the members or students than to their own lives first. Some believe that the members are the "testing ground" for biblical truth. They tell members to practise what they say when they are also victims. This is a fraud in the Christian faith. The message is not meant for the members but for all, including the preacher, teacher, theologian, or biblical scholar.

He or she should be willing to teach others what he or she has learnt. Teaching or applying the Bible in the life of other people or Christians is successful when the African exegete applies it first to his life. The message should be seen in his life. He or she needs to acknowledge what Sam Oleka called the "Bible's dual authorship – divine and human."⁵² Oleka advises that, as African Christians with sound hermeneutical methods and principles, Africans can save themselves and the entire Christian Church in Africa from falling into deep interpretative errors. The understanding of the Bible's message is parallel to relating it to the lives of people. The great teacher is none other than the Holy Spirit, who helps us learn, interpret, and apply the truth properly for our daily lives. Some pastors get the message during interpretation and keep it for themselves or only for their ethnic group. That is why some pastors select messages for certain people, thinking it is only certain people who are destined for certain messages. Some pastors call such moments "special Sundays" with "special messages". This was the practice among the Jews of the Early Church, who tried to confine the gospel message only to the Jews, refusing to preach to the Gentiles. However, others have a passion for all races and relate the Bible message to all people. We have the faithful ones in Africa who are concerned about the growth and sanity of the African Church, those who work day and night to greatly influence the African understanding. These people are trying harder, using their theological "flashcards," to add to the knowledge of others in the Word of God because they are willing. This is accomplished through preaching, teaching, singing, and writing for the enhancement of knowledge and spirituality on the African soil. African biblical exegetes should be willing to relate biblical truth to the lives of African Christians. We should aim at making it relevant to Christians and non-Christians (mainly to convert them). This is the last aspect in biblical interpretation. When this is done, Christians should obey what the Holy Spirit puts in their hearts. Jesus commanded that the immediate disciples and subsequent disciples must teach those who will become disciples to obey all that he has commanded (Matt. 28:20). The Bible holds obedience as a Christian virtue, a proof of belonging to God through keeping and doing the commands of God (1 Jn 2:3-4). James exhorts that Christians should not be listeners only but rather doers of what the Word says (Jas 1:22-25). Besides, the whole transaction is evident in the lives of some Christians, particularly during prayers. Most

⁵¹ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 292.

⁵² Sam Oleka, "Interpreting and Applying the Bible in an African Context," *Issues in African Christian Theology*. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou eds., Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993), 108.

times, we pray, “Father, help us not to be only listeners of Your Word but doers of Your Word.” This should be our request when it comes to biblical truth. Obedience to the real disciple is not optional but occupational and the only proof of Christian reality.

Misinterpretation and Misunderstanding of the Text among Christians in Africa

Misinterpretation embraces an act of inadequate interpretation of any data and is an addendum to the causes behind the varieties of false teachings that we have in the African Church. However, in our present time, misinterpretation of the biblical data is very common. We have people who, because they think they are Christians, attach different meanings to the biblical literature. We know that religious embodiments are of interest since everybody is a religious being, and Africans are particularly said to be notoriously religious.⁵³ Economics, politics, and religion are different concepts, even though there is a binding nexus that relatively unites them, as evident in the ancient Middle East, where kings were actually priests.⁵⁴ Church History, where the popes controlled the governmental systems (papacy),⁵⁵ and the present experiences, where religious legalisms are embedded in the constitution of the country (e.g., the Nigerian constitution).

Everybody is interested in religion. And that is why we have various teachings because of the misinterpretation of Bible passages, since everybody can access the Bible. In some religions, where their members are not conversant with the didactic materials, they are mostly dogmatic on doctrinal issues. But in Christianity, the reverse is the case. Most people want to interpret the Bible without having the biblical qualifications for interpretation. That is why we have different conclusions. This is because everyone is an interpreter, and we give meanings to looks, handshakes, greetings, touches, smiles, speeches, and even the way people walk.

By this, we misinterpret ourselves and the world around us. We make wrong judgements of what our minds do not understand. People have misinterpreted Christianity, pastors, theologians, and seminarians (it is believed that every seminarian is a pastor and is called ‘pastor’ by the wider Christian society). The attitude of misinterpretation of the board's fear among ministers.

Teachers have been greatly misinterpreted. Most people have misinterpreted the Bible in sermons, speeches, books, meetings, etc. Once the message of the Bible is not adequately envisaged, it becomes a wrong teaching to the Church. Sam Oleka argued that “it must be done in mind...that faulty

⁵³ This is so for some, who are religious because God has revealed and has done something to them. This is conditional religiosity. We use our corrupt religious systems to invoke God to act on our problems.

⁵⁴ See John Bowle, *Western Political Thought: From the origins to Rousseau* (London: Methuen, 1947), 3-14. A. Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36-38. In the traditional African society, religious institutions are related to the political structures. It is this traditional understanding that could account for the subsequent merging of some aspects of traditional African religions with African leadership in the immediate post-colonial context, in the case of President Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, President Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, and Francisco Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, who claimed mystical authorities to accentuate their continuous stay in leadership. See Elizabeth Iseichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 339-350.

⁵⁵ The Papacy was a Medieval Ages’ system of Church Government started by Gregory I, a Roman, where the Church was in control of the governmental systems. This reached its peak under Nicholas I, the most powerful pope, Gregory VII, and Innocent III, but lost its power when Boniface became the Pope. This time experienced constant political and religious struggles. On the Papacy, particularly the stage of growth, the pinnacle, and the decline of the Medieval Papacy, see Cyril C. Richardson, *The Church through the Centuries* (New York: Scribner’s Press, 1851), 75-80. Paul Enn, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 439-440. William R. Cannon, *History of Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 38-42. B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952). Earle Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 202-210. During the Reformation, there were attempts to relate the Church and the state by the reformers. See Thomas G. Sanders, *Protestant Concepts of Church and State* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964). Jacques Maritan, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). William A. Mueller, *Church and State in Luther and Calvin* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1965).

hermeneutics may lead to faulty biblical interpretation and faulty theology.”⁵⁶ It can be argued hotly that Oleka’s usage of “may” has distorted his argument since he is never sure of the havoc faulty biblical exegesis can cause to the theological world in Africa.

It should be clarified that once the interpretation is faulty, it becomes a misinterpretation and automatically becomes a faulty theology to the African Church. Lines of certainty need to be drawn whenever we are agitating for facts that are related to the Bible. Take, for instance, Deuteronomy 18:18 has been misinterpreted to mean some prophet instead of Jesus. Moreover, some people receive right and good information in sermons, teachings, and from authors in books, but misinterpret it to mean different things. For example, Dan Brown misinterpreted the code by Leonardo Da Vinci, which led to the heretical conclusions that Jesus got married to Mary Magdalene and had a daughter with her who was born after the death of Jesus, and her name is Sarah, and in the Holy Grail, it was Mary Magdalene who sat at Jesus’ right-hand side, not John, who was the youngest.⁵⁷ Such misinterpretations will make us look at who a biblical interpreter is in the next chapter. People get into the Bible without the qualifications, and misinterpretation abounds. No doubt, unless we get rid of this in the African Church, false teachings will always accompany our doctrinal beliefs.

Conclusion

It can be stated that the Bible is the Word of God, which exposes the place of the Godhead and how they have existed from the beginning, before the creation of the earth. The Word is alive today since Jesus is alive. The Bible is the source of our doctrinal beliefs and a book filled with prophecy, psalms, history, and expositions of the Church. It gives us hope and reveals God’s caring and saving purpose for our lives. The Bible has a central theme, i.e., Jesus Christ. It gives solutions to our needs, problems, and questions in African society.

It is worth noting that biblical interpretation has taken various shapes in Africa. A lot of misinterpretations abound, which have metamorphosed into various false teachings and practices. African biblical interpretation has become the most dominant aspect of African theological discourse. Many Africans, because of this domination, have developed several readings and methodologies for African biblical hermeneutics. Most of these are radical, traditional, cultural, liberal, and reactionary to what is called Western biblical hermeneutics and to classical biblical hermeneutics. These are generating false teachings to the African Church; hence, the methodologies lack the crucial ingredients derived from the Bible.

It should be made known that the task of biblical interpretation in the African context is not meant for every theologian. Many people do not have the qualifications, yet they jump into the Bible to derive and argue about vital biblical conclusions. The African biblical interpreter should meet these qualifications before sound exegesis can be obtained. He or she should put them into practice, or else the African Church will accentuate false doctrinal beliefs. For us to prevent the African Church from heretical beliefs and practices, African biblical interpreters must be scrutinised and filtered. If this is done, the African Church can be sure of having a sound and solid interpretation which would speak well of our understanding within and outside our frontiers.

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⁵⁶ Oleka, “Doing Theology in Africa,” 79.

⁵⁷ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2003), 331-4, 321-328.

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