

THE GROWTH OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICA: ITS HISTORY AND  
ROOTS

By  
Sychellus Wabomba Njibwakale, PhD Candidate  
Piedmont International University

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## THE GROWTH OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICA: ITS HISTORY AND ROOTS

### Introduction

In the words of George Mulrain, “there has never been an interpretation that has been without references to or dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns or social location of the interpreter.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is nobody who is independently separated from his or her environment or experience or rather influence and culture so as to offer completely one hundred percent in what is being done. Nothing is done in a vacuum, or as Mulrain says, “every interpreter is biased in some ways.”<sup>2</sup> As such, it is not realistic to say that biblical interpretation should be uniform, unconditional, universal, and absolute.

Just as any other third world biblical hermeneutics, African biblical hermeneutics is encompassed in two significant characteristics: “It is liberational, and culturally sensitive.”<sup>3</sup> Some minor characteristics includes narration, orality, theopoetic and imaginative. Sugirthajah says, “it uses liberation as crucial hermeneutics and mobilizes indigenous cultural materials for theological enterprises.”<sup>4</sup> Africa can be referred to as “the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity. The earliest such attempts are traced from the city of Alexandria

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<sup>1</sup> George Mulrain, “Hermeneutics Within a Caribbean Context,” *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press), 1999), 116–132.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> David. T. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies* (Justice Jeco, 2005), 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Vernacular Resurrections: An Introduction,” *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press), 1999), 116–132.

with such names as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others who lived and worked in that north African city.”<sup>5</sup>

The biblical interpretation tradition laid down by these people, became the cornerstone of the western church till the Enlightenment period. This was later replaced by the historical-critical method in the eighteenth century only to be replaced by the literary approaches in the twentieth century. All these methods, took shape in the West, and so far, have become important scientific tools of biblical research throughout the world. In the middle of the twentieth century, these methods began to be felt in Africa, especially South of the Sahara, which is the focal point of this paper. This was a transition period in Africa where there was emergence of political independence as well as the establishment of institution of higher learning.

Although the above methods have been and still in use, “African biblical scholars have developed a parallel method of their own.”<sup>6</sup> The objective of this method is to create harmony between the biblical passage and the African context. This is to ensure that the interpretation focuses on the people receiving the message instead of the people who interpret it. In other words, there are two kinds of academicians when it comes to the area of biblical hermeneutics in Africa. There are those who follow the western methods, and others follow the African methods of connecting the biblical passage to the life of the communities in Africa. Most African authors publish in both. This paper is interested in the African methods.

In this paper, the objective is to examine the growth and developments that have taken place in this field of biblical hermeneutics in Africa. I wish to concentrate my research on

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph W. Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 21–23.

<sup>6</sup> Knut Holter, “Ancient Israel and Modern Nigeria: Some Remarks from Sidelines to the Socio-Critical Aspect of Nigerian Old Testament Scholarship,” A paper presented at the annual conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, Owerri, Nigeria, (October 1995); G. LeMarquand, “The Historical Jesus and African New Testament Scholarship,” in *Whose Historical Jesus?* William E. and Michael Desjardins (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 163.

scholarly hermeneutics, except for the apartheid and common method of using the Bible. Since the first publication came out in the 1930s, this will be the starting point. Therefore, this paper shall divide this growth of biblical hermeneutics in Africa in three stages:

The first stage from 1930s–70s, may be referred to as “reactive and apologetic, directed on legitimizing African religion and culture, dominated by comparative method.”<sup>7</sup> The second stage from 1970s–90s, “a period of reactive-proactive, use of African context as resource for biblical interpretation, dominated by inculturation-evaluative method and liberation or black theology,”<sup>8</sup> and the third stage from 1990s to present time. This last stage is viewed as a period of “proactive, recognition of the ordinary reader, African context as subject of biblical interpretation, dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies.”<sup>9</sup>

As a note to remember, the division into the above three stages is to make the research more effective from one stage to another, but not to put African biblical hermeneutics into blocks of compartments. It is also significant to know that the roots of one stage are carried in the next phase without eradicating the old roots when a new stage emerges.

### **Stage One (1930s –70s)**

This stage examines the establishment of biblical hermeneutics in Africa, by responding to the way African religion as well as culture were condemned by early Christian missionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These two vices were termed immoral and demonic as such, they were to be eliminated to clear the way for Christianity to take its roots. As a result of this, some scholars from the West, some Christians, and historians engaged in research processes

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<sup>7</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (November 2000): 3–18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

to sought out how to legitimize African religion and culture while doing mission work. To do this, the scholars used comparative study method within the umbrella of Comparative Religion. This method aimed at integrating the African religious culture and the Bible, especially the Old Testament. As Dickson notes, “Since the New Testament shares the same cultural world-view as the Old Testament, the consequences of such comparison were considered to extend to the New Testament too.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Comparative Study Method (Comparative Religion)*

The areas covered during this study were western, eastern, and central Africa. Joseph J. Williams’ comparison aimed at illustrating the physical contact with the Near Eastern Hebrews. However, Gaster says, “later studies did not have this intention and were merely meant to illustrate similarities in patterns of thought and feelings and show how certain basic notions have been expressed by people from different places and times.”<sup>11</sup> In his book entitled *Hebrewism of West Africa* published in 1930, Williams presents the first piece, generally referred to as the example of comparative studies. Williams “seeks to show a correlation between the Hebrew language and the Ashanti language of Ghana based mainly on their similarities in sound.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he sees the similarities between the worship of deities apart from Yahweh the God of the Old Testament, and the Ashanti worship of God and the divinities. These similarities prompt Williams to argue “for the possibility of either the descent of the Ashanti of Ghana from

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<sup>10</sup> K. A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London Darton, Longman and Todd: Marynoll, Orbis, 1984), 181.

<sup>11</sup> T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*, 1970 preface, cited in K. A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Ukpong, 5.

the Jewish race or a very early contact between the Ashanti and the Jews.”<sup>13</sup> However, the later generations of scholars find this method by Williams not to be sufficient enough to be impressed.

It took another three decades when Williams’ method was reworked upon and improved for adaptation by researchers. These researchers of the 1960s used the method of Comparative Religion, focusing on religious themes and practices, instead of extrinsic resemblance. Although Williams’ methodology was termed as weak in the beginning, it was the starting point for the future methods. In his extensive studies in this area, Kwezi Dickson points to what he calls the Old Testament “atmosphere” that makes the African context “a kindred atmosphere.”<sup>14</sup> The author of this paper have also done “a comparative study of atonement of the traditional religion of the Luhya people of western Kenya and the atonement of the book of Leviticus.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, S. Kibicho “has shown the existence of a community between the African and the biblical conceptions of God.”<sup>16</sup> John Mbiti has similarly made “a comparative study of the New Testament and African understandings of eschatology.”<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, there is some opposition to this kind of study. The argument is that “ancient Israel and contemporary Africa are far apart both in time and space.”<sup>18</sup> Besides, Gaster argues that “in the field of linguistics, a similar method involving the study of semantic parallels of

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph J. Williams, *Hebrewism of West Africa from Nile to Niger with the Jews* (London: George Allen Unwin, New York Lincoln MacVeach/The Dial, 1930), 35.

<sup>14</sup> K. A. Dickson, “The Old Testament and African Theology,” *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 4, 4 (1973): 141–184.

<sup>15</sup> Wabomba S. Njibwakale, “Atonement in African Pluralistic Context: Examples from the Luhya of western Kenya,” *Perichoresis* vol. 14, 1 (2016): 21– 39.

<sup>16</sup> S. Kibicho, “The Interaction of the Traditional Kikuyu Concept of God with the Biblical Concept.” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 2, 4 (1968).

<sup>17</sup> John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background, A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: London University Press, 1971). n.p.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Isaac, “Relations Between the Hebrew Bible and Africa,” *Jewish Social Studies* 26, 2 (1964): 95.

diverse languages has been successfully used.”<sup>19</sup> The significant weakness pointed out for this approach is that it does not involve drawing conclusions for hermeneutics, and lacks concern for secular issues that are pertinent for African theological research. Dickson sums up that “such studies are generally apologetic, and sometimes polemical. Their values therefore, is mainly heuristic.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, comparative studies in African traditional religion is viewed with African scholars as “Africa’s Old Testament.” Since the Old Testament prepared the way for the New Testament gospel, African culture and religion are known to have been a preparation for the gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*). More so, these studies have been vital roots of African culture and religion for the appropriation of Christianity. As such, these studies remain an important link between the biblical passage and the African context.

### **Stage two (1970s to 1990s)**

In stage one, we find the reactive approach pathing the way for the proactive approach of phase two. We find the African context serving as a resource tool for the study of hermeneutic interaction with the biblical text. Besides, the religious studies framework characteristic of stage one gives way to a rather more theological framework than before. There are two approaches that crystallize, namely, inculturation and liberation. In comparative approach, the African culture is seen as a preparation for the gospel. But Christianity was still viewed as a foreign religion practiced in foreign symbols and images, as well as idioms. As a result, there arose a desire to make Christianity relevant to African-religio-cultural context. This gave rise to the inculturation of theological movement. This inculturation method can be studied in two ways; that is, Africa-in-the- Bible and evaluative studies.

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<sup>19</sup> Gaster, *Myth, Legends and Custom in the Old Testament*, Preface.

<sup>20</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 181.



In this period, there was a greater influence of socialist ideology, which gave rise to a curious desire concerning the need for theology to interact with secular issues. Such background influenced the beginning of a movement in theology later referred to as liberation theology. Liberation theology seeks to face any kind of oppression, poverty, and marginalization in the community. This theology is expressed in liberation hermeneutics, black theology, and feminist hermeneutics as ways of doing biblical interpretation.

a) *Africa and biblical Hermeneutics*

This is an area where we find the presence of Africa and the African people in the Bible and the importance of such in the field of hermeneutics. This section points to the Africa's influence on the history of ancient Israel and Africa's contribution to salvation history. In this section, the author also uses it to correct negative preconceived ideas or interpretations of some biblical texts on Africa. African traditional problems include diseases, sorcerers, witches, enemies, and lack of success in life (not getting education, not marrying, or not getting children in marriage). African people had successfully worked out the method and means to deal with such vices.

When western missionaries arrived in Africa, they introduced teachings that as Christians now, Africans are to disregard all the indigenous ways of dealing with their problems. But they did not offer a solution to replace their indigenous ways, except to read and believe in what the Bible says. "Charms, medicine, incantations, divination, sacrifices, and other cultural ways of protecting, healing, and liberation ourselves from the evil powers that fill African forests were hurriedly discarded in the name of Christianity."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Africans were not taught how to use the Bible as a means of protecting, healing, and solving the social problems affecting

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<sup>21</sup> Adamo, 8.

them. “The Euro-American way of reading the Bible has not helped the Africans to understand the Bible in their African context.”<sup>22</sup> Christian missionaries not only taught the Bible to African people but also translated the Bible into African languages. As Ukpong says, “Africans read the Bible with their own eyes, or with their own cultural perspectives.”<sup>23</sup>

In the area of correcting negative vices on Africa as well as the African people, there are certain traditional readings of some biblical passages. As Peterson notes, “An important theme in this regard which has appeared in different versions is the so-called curse of Ham.”<sup>24</sup> This story is listed in Genesis 10:1–14 and 1 Chronicles 1:8–16. Ham sees the nakedness of his father Noah in Genesis 9: 18–27, and instead of covering up his father, he reports to his two brothers Shem and Japheth who cover their father. This was contrary to Hebrew tradition. Ham had committed an act of disrespect toward his father. When Noah became sober, he pronounced a curse to Ham’s son Canaan. According to the fifth century midrash, Noah had cursed his son Ham. It states, “Your seed will be ugly and dark-sinned.”<sup>25</sup> The Babylonian Talmud of the sixth century also states, “The descendants of Ham are cursed by being black and are sinful with degenerate progeny.”<sup>26</sup>

It is from this interpretations that came the idea that Africans are black because of the curse of Ham. However, it is clear from the biblical passage that the interpretations above are

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<sup>22</sup> This should not be misunderstood as blaming the Christian missionaries for African woes. Regardless of the problems and mistakes the Christian missionaries have made, it should be noted that Christian missionaries have been a great blessing to Africa in many humanitarian areas such as education, health, and agriculture.

<sup>23</sup> Ukpong, “Reading the Bible with Africa Eyes,” *Journal of Theology for South African* (June 1995): 3–14.

<sup>24</sup> T. Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: the mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Methuene and London: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Gene Rice, “The Curse that never was (Genesis 9: 18–27),” *Journal of Religious Thought* 29 (1980): 17–25.

<sup>26</sup> Ephraim Isaac, “Genesis, Judaism, and Sons of Ham,” *Slavery and Abolition* 1 no. 1 (1980): 4–5.

mere ideological, since it is Ham's son Canaan plus his descendants that were cursed. There is no logic to follow that justifies that Ham was cursed. It is out of such mythic interpretation of the biblical passage which lacks foundational truth that the Boers in South Africa and southern USA used as their weapon of support to oppress the blacks. Therefore, there has been research going on today that shows up such an interpretation as having no foundation in the biblical text, only based on ideological dominance.<sup>27</sup>

Another area of concern is the presence of Africa as well as African peoples in the Bible and their contributions to the history of the Bible. This is a reaction to the de-emphasis and exclusion of Africa and its contribution to the history of the Bible by western scholars. Such de-emphasis shows that Egypt is considered biblically to be in the Near East instead of Africa. Also, introductory courses in the Old Testament, the areas of ancient Near East and Mesopotamia are dealt with without mentioning the continents where these nations come from. Some modern scholars like Heinisch, claims that "in the table of nations in Genesis 10, 'the Negroes' are not mentioned because the author had not encounter them."<sup>28</sup>

In his research, Temba Mafico<sup>29</sup> has shown evidence of African influence on the religion of the patriarchs and matriarchs, also, in several studies, David T. Adamo<sup>30</sup> has focused on this theme. Just as it is in the comparative method, this approach does not involve how to find the

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<sup>27</sup> See; *Stony the road we trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. H. Felder (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); David T. Adamo, "The Table of Nations Reconsidered in African Perspective (Genesis 10)," *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy* 2 (1993): 138 – 143; M. Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism* (Sheffield Academic, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> P Heinisch, *History of the Old Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1952); W. F. Albright, "The Old Testament World," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> T. L. J. Mafico, "Evidence for African Influence on the Religious Customs of the Patriarchs," Abstract: *American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature* 1989, eds. J. B. Wiggins and D. J. Lull (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989): 100.

<sup>30</sup> David T. Adamo, "The Black Prophet in the Old Testament," *Journal of Arabic and Religious Studies* 4 (1987):1– 8.

theological meaning of the passage, but it plays a significant and foundational role in sensitizing the readers about the significance of African countries and African people in the history of the Bible. This contrasts with what most western scholars have written without recognizing the importance of Africa and her people in the biblical story.

To do African biblical hermeneutics successfully, one must follow certain conditions. First, the interpreter must do the interpretation from inside. This means that the would be a good interpreter must have lived in Africa and is well acquainted by all aspects of African life in Africa or an African. As Adamo writes, “it is difficult to do African cultural hermeneutics without living in Africa and going through, the joy, problems like poverty, ethnicity hunger, communalism, diseases, and other palatable and unpalatable aspects of African culture.”<sup>31</sup>

Second, one must be well versed in the biblical content. Knowing the content is not sufficient, but absolute believe in the stories and the events of the Bible as a rule of faith. In other words, the biblical events serve as reflections of our own present individual and communal life. There must be a demonstration of strong belief in the power of the word of God. Third, it is significant for one to comprehend the African indigenous culture. This is because, the African culture cannot be ignored while doing African biblical hermeneutics. Although there is resemblance of African and biblical cultures, there is still some distinctive aspects of African culture. These distinctive aspects of African culture influences or overshadows the biblical interpretation.

Fourth, the biblical interpreter must have a strong faith in God. This is because this faith in God is not only in his existence but also in his absolute power to do the interpretation. Fifth, the interpreter must have excellent ability to read and memorize the portions of Scripture. The

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<sup>31</sup> Adamo, *Exploration in African Studies*, 10.

interpreter must not be scholar of the Bible, but one with sound biblical knowledge of what he/she involves in. God has used blind people in Africa and around the world to memorize the Scripture, and as such, they have achieved great things through miracles and wonders.

b). *Evaluative Approach*

This approach aims at encountering African traditional religion and culture, as well as the Bible. It is done by evaluating the theological underpinnings that come because of the encounter. This is more than looking at the similarities and dissimilarities between African religion and the Bible to interpret the passage of Scripture basing on these similarities and differences. The point of emphasis here is to facilitate the communication of the Scripture message within the African milieu, and to evolve a new understanding of Christianity that would sound Africa and biblical. Basically, for the Scripture message, the historical-critical method is used, and for analyzing the African situation the anthropological or rather the sociological approaches are applied.

In the first approach, the elements of African culture, religion, beliefs, concepts or practices are evaluated. This evaluation is done considering the biblical witness to realize a Christian understanding of each of them and flesh out their value for Christian witness. The historical-critical method is used in analyzing the biblical passage. The belief or practice is analyzed in its different manifestations. Its values as well as disvalues are spelled out against the backdrop of biblical teaching. One such example of studies includes Patrick Kalilombe in his piece, "The Salvific Value of African Religions: An Essay in Contextualized Bible reading for

Africa.”<sup>32</sup> Also Ernest A. Mcfall in his writing entitled: “Approaching the Nuer through the Old Testament.”<sup>33</sup>

The second approach deals with the what the Scripture passage says in critiquing a particular practice in the community life as well as church life. Also, the lessons learned from a biblical passage for a particular context. This approach presents liabilities that could be challenged, unlike the first approach which presents values. Andrew Igenozu<sup>34</sup> has offered a biblical critique of the practice of medicine and healing in African Christianity, while Chris Manus<sup>35</sup> has studied Paul’s attitude toward ethnicity in a critique of the situation of ethnic discrimination in Nigeria. Gabriel Abe<sup>36</sup> has shown the significance of the Old Testament concept of the unmerciful servant against the context for the Nigerian community, while Nlenanya Onwu<sup>37</sup> has researched the parable of the unmerciful servant against the context of the erosion of the traditional concept and experience of brotherhood in Africa.

The third approach interprets the biblical passage against the background of African culture, religion, and life experience. The objective is to reach a new understanding of the biblical passage that would be informed by the African situation and would be African and

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<sup>32</sup> Patrick Kalilombe, “The Salvific Value of African Religions: An Essay in Contextualized Bible reading for Africa,” *Christianisme et identite Africaine: point de vue exegetique – actes du ler congress des biblistes Africains, Kinshasa, 26–30 Decembre 1978*, eds. A. Angang et al. (Kinshasa: Facultes Catholiques de Theologie, 1980): 205–220.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest A. Mcfall, *Approaching the Nuer through the Old Testament* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Igenozu, “Medicine and Healing in African Christianity, A biblical Critique,” *African Ecclesial Review* 30 (1988): 12–25.

<sup>35</sup> Chris Manus, “Galatians 3:28 A Study on Paul’s Attitude toward Ethnicity; Its Relevance for Contemporary Nigerian,” *Ife Journal of Religion* 2 (1982): 18 – 26.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriel O. Abe, “Berith its Impact on Israel and its Relevance to the Nigerian Society,” *Africa Journal of biblical Studies* 1 (1986): 66–73.

<sup>37</sup> Nlenanya Onwu, “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant [Matt 18:21–35],” *Gospel Parables in African Context*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong (Port Harcourt. CIWA, 1988): 43–51.

Christian. The tools used to analyze the biblical passage is the historical-critical tools. The importance of doing so is to realize that any interpretation of a biblical passage is done from the socio-cultural perspective of the interpreter. The aim is to approach the passage from the African perspective that shall give fresh insights, though the interpretation remains western. The key figures here are Daniel Wambutda<sup>38</sup> who has offered some fresh insights by examining the concept of salvation from an African perspective and Bayo Abijole<sup>39</sup> has given an African interpretation of St. Paul's concept of "principalities and powers" that is different from western interpretations.

The fourth approach deals with building "bridgeheads" for effective communication of the biblical message. In other words, the interpreter makes use of the concepts from either the Bible or African culture. This is to identify Africans easily and to show the continuity between African culture and Christianity with an objective of communicating the biblical message. For instance, while exploring the subject of Christology in an African context, John Pobee<sup>40</sup> has shown that for the Akan people of Ghana, Jesus' kinship as presented in the gospels is a key concept for underscoring his humanity. Pobee has also used the anthropological concept of "the grand ancestor," with which Africans can readily identify, to describe Christ.<sup>41</sup> John Mbiti has also pointed out that "the New Testament images of Jesus as miracle worker and risen Lord, (Christus Victor) are images Africans can easily identify with, because they show Jesus as the

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<sup>38</sup> Daniel Wambutda, "Savannah Theology, A Reconsideration of the Biblical Concept of Salvation in the African Context," *Bulletin of African Theology* 3 no. 6 (1981): 137–153.

<sup>39</sup> Bayo Abijole, "St. Paul's Concept of Principalities and Powers in African Context," *Africa Theological Journal* 17, no. 2 (1988): 118–129.

<sup>40</sup> John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 88–94.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

conqueror of evil spirits, diseases and death, which Africans fear most.”<sup>42</sup> All the above concepts serve as bridgeheads for communicating to Africans the role of Christ in the human society.

In the fifth approach, the interpreter studies the biblical passage to discover the biblical foundations for the aspects of contemporary church life and her practice in Africa. For instance, in his study, Balembu Buetubela has “studied the relationship between the mother churches in Jerusalem and Antioch, and the mission churches they founded in early Christianity, and has shown how the relationship was marked by the autonomy of the mission churches rather than by their dependence on the mother churches.”<sup>43</sup> Joseph Osei-Bonsu has pointed to “some New Testament antecedents of contextualization of Christianity that form the basis for the contextualization of Christianity in Africa today.”<sup>44</sup>

This approach of evaluation is the most common one used in biblical hermeneutics in Africa today. It is based on the classical understanding of exegesis, as a recovery of the meaning of a text intended by the author through historical-critical tools. The only weakness with this approach is it does not pay attention to social, economic and political issues which have become significant today in theological debate. This research on African culture and religion has not just been a preparation for the gospel, as is in the comparative study, but is an indispensable resource in the interpretation of the gospel message and in the development of Christianity in the continent of Africa.

### c). *Liberation Hermeneutics*

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<sup>42</sup> John Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” *Christ and the younger Churches*, ed. George F. Vicedom (London, SPCK, 1972), 54.

<sup>43</sup> Balembu Buetubela, “L’autonomie des jeunes églises et les Actes,” *Les Actes des Apôtres et les Jeunes églises actes du deuxième congrès des biblistes Africains, Ibadan, 31 Aout, 1984*, eds. W. Amewowo et al. (Kinshasa, 1990): 77–105.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Osei-Bonsu, “The Contextualization of Christianity: Some New Testament Antecedents,” *Irish Biblical Journal* 12, no. 3 (1990): 129–148.



This kind of hermeneutics uses the Bible as a resource for struggle against oppression of any kind based on the biblical witness. This is to bear in mind that God does not sanction any kind of oppression instead, God always stands on the side of the oppressed to liberate them. The focus in this section is on centered on political and economic oppressions. The episode from the Bible about the liberation of the Jews in the book of Exodus forms the hermeneutics of political liberation. In Exodus 23:11 and Amos 2:6–7; 5:21–24, God calls on Israel to take special care of the poor among them and deal justly with all. In Luke 4:18–19; 6:20–21 about Jesus’ sympathetic attitude to and teachings in favor of the poor provide the basis for the hermeneutics of economic liberation. The biblical message in the entire passages of Scripture is that while the poor are to be loved and cared for, there should be commitment to action pointing to eradicate poverty and oppression.

Jean-Marc Ela writes that “Africa today is crucified”, and if the Bible is read from this perspective, Christians will be able to link their faith with commitment to transform society.”<sup>45</sup>

C. Banana uses Marxist analysis of the biblical passage to “show how the Bible not only points the way to economic exploitation and political oppression, but also points the way to economic and political transformation of society.”<sup>46</sup>

#### d). *Black Theology*

This is a form of liberation hermeneutics that focusses on the activities of apartheid racial discrimination that dominated in South Africa until 1994. Here, the point of departure is the

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Marc Ela, *Christianity and liberation in Africa: Paths of African Theology* ed. R. Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 146–147.

<sup>46</sup> C. Banana, *The Gospel According to Ghetto* (Gwero: Mambo, 1981), 44 – 51; Also, *Theology of Promise* (Harare College Press, 1982), 21.

ideology of black consciousness whereby the black people are made critically aware of their situation of oppression based on their skin color. The black community are made to analyze the situation and struggle against. When using the term black, it means all those who were discriminated against in the apartheid system of governance, using the Bible as a resource for oppression. This includes ethnic blacks, Indians and colored people. There are two camps in this kind of theology. One camp “seeks to interpret the Bible in light of apartheid experience and reflect on this experience in light of the biblical message.”<sup>47</sup> The point of argument, says Tutu, is that “since the Bible is wrongly used by apartheid to oppress blacks, it is central to black theology and it contains a liberating message that apartheid is diametrically opposed to the central message of the Bible which is love of the neighbor, and that God is always on the side of the oppressed and therefore in support of the black liberation struggle.”<sup>48</sup>

The other camp argues that the Bible cannot be uncritically accepted as a resource for the liberation struggle. This argument explains that the Bible was written by the elite to serve their own interests. The Bible is steeped in the ideology of the elite, it is oppressive, and in some places mutes the voices of the oppressed. This is why the apartheid used the Bible to oppress the black people in South Africa. Itumeleng argues that “the Bible must first be liberated from that ideology of the elite to serve the oppressed.”<sup>49</sup> For such purpose, Itumeleng proposes the use of historical-materialist analysis of the biblical text.

Black theology has made great contributions in ending apartheid regime in South Africa. The Kairos document of 1985 issued by many theologians in South Africa condemned apartheid

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<sup>47</sup> Basil Moore, Black Theology Revisited, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* 1 (1994): 7.

<sup>48</sup> Desmond Tutu, “The Theology of Liberation in Africa,” *African Theology en route*, eds. Kofi AppiahKubi and Sergio Torres (MaryKnoll: Orbis, 1979), 166; Alan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984), 149–160.

<sup>49</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 13–42.

regime. The document which utilized international community aimed on the ethical and theological impropriety of apartheid. Apart from this document, black theology has contributed immensely on issues of socio-political and economic relations which other theologies on the continent do not have. The aim is total liberation for fullness of life, reconciliation and integration.

e). *Feminist Theology*

The main objective for this kind of theology is to focus on the oppression of women. Feminist theology uses the Bible as a resource to fight the subordination of women in the contemporary society as well as church life. Since the Bible has been used to support such subordination, a critique from the feminist wing of the Bible and the conventional mode of biblical interpretation forms part of the feminist hermeneutics. African theologians discern five methods in doing feminist theology.

According to Mercy Oduyoye,<sup>50</sup> the first method is to challenge the conventional hermeneutics by which Scripture and the history of Christianity are interpreted in androcentric terms. For instance, it is presumed that God is male, and areas where God is addressed with feminist attributes in the Bible are ignored. As such, translators render God's name with a masculine pronoun. Female theologians argue that such hermeneutics is imprisonment of God in maleness. This is key to all feminist theologies.

The second method seeks to critique those biblical passages that seems oppressive to women or portray women as inferior to men. This done by examining the literary and cultural contexts through rereading the passage of Scripture. Teresa Okure has indicated that “the

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<sup>50</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye, “Violence against Women: A Challenge to Christian Theology,” *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 1 no. 1 (1994): 47.

creation of Eve from Adam's rib is far from denoting a situation of inferiority as is often understood, denotes their identity in nature, their destined marital status and their equality."<sup>51</sup> As concerns Pauline sexist passages, Mbuy-Beya has pointed out that Paul was dealing with specific situations of disorder that required establishing "a certain hierarchy for the sake of order."<sup>52</sup> The third method focuses on passages that show the positive role of women in the history of salvation or in the life of the church. Through examining Jesus' teaching, parables and miracles, Anne Nasimiyu Wasike<sup>53</sup> has shown Jesus' attitude to women to be positive.

The fourth method identifies the biblical theological orientation that can function as a guide to interpreting both the negative as well as the positive biblical passages concerning women. The fifth method seeks to interpret the biblical passages basing on the African women experience. While reading the stories of polygamy in the Old Testament from the African women perspective, Nasimiyu Wasike is "able to articulate that the Old Testament itself contains a critique of this institution, contrary to the common assumption that it extols it."<sup>54</sup>

By and large, there are two key issues in dealing with feminist hermeneutics. First, a critique of the androcentrism both of earlier interpreters of the Bible and of the Bible itself. Second, a recovery of the forgotten and muted voices, the image and contributions of women in the biblical passage. The use of critical tools, such as historical and literary criticism, as well as others like sociology and anthropology, it has resulted in the attention of scholars to revisit many

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<sup>51</sup> Teresa Okure, "Biblical Perspectives on Women: Eve, the Mother of all the Living (Genesis 3:20)," *Voices from the Third World* 8, no. 3 (1985): 82–92.

<sup>52</sup> Marie Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, "Doing theology as African Women," *Voices from the Third World* 13, no. 1 (1990): 155–156.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Nasimiyu Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 73–80.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Nasimiyu Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique," *The Will to arise*, ed. Mercy A. Oduyoue and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992), 106–118.

issues in the Bible that were taken for granted or ignored. This section of feminist hermeneutics ushers in a new stage of hermeneutics which is referred to as stage three.

### **Stage Three: 1990s to Present**

This stage of the 1990s and beyond is a stage when biblical studies in Africa becomes more assertive as well as proactive, with original contributions being realized. Here, we find two key approaches: inculturation and liberation that dominated the second stage, are carried forward with improvements. In one improvement, there is a recognition of the ordinary African readers, i.e. none biblical scholars as important associates in academic biblical reading. As such, their perspectives are integrated in the process of academic interpretation of the Bible. The key exceptions are found in Gerald West's writing entitled *contextual Bible studies method*.<sup>55</sup> The other improvement seeks to make the African context the subject of interpretation of the Bible. This is found in inculturation hermeneutics. In other words, this stage pictures African context as both providing the critical resources for biblical interpretation and the subject of interpretation.

In contextual Bible study, the main purpose is to read the Bible against a human situation that is pressing. In this case, the situation of racial discrimination and poverty in South Africa are key. This is done within the contextual circle of faith, and with the commitment to personal and social transformation. It shares the similar goals with black theology, except the starting point of black theology is black consciousness. Since it recognizes the perspectives and concerns of the ordinary reader of the Bible, it seeks to empower them for serious study of the Bible in relation to life situation and for personal and social transformation. West, who is the principal exponent

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<sup>55</sup> Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1993).

of this approach says, “If we are serious about relating biblical studies to ordinary readers, then the contextual Bible study process provides the framework in which to read the Bible.”<sup>56</sup>

Ukpong describes inculturation hermeneutics saying:

it is the approach which seeks to redress the situation by adopting a holistic approach to culture whereby both the secular and religious aspects of culture are seen to be interconnected and as having implications one for the other, and the Bible is read within the religious as well as the economic, social and political contexts of Africa.<sup>57</sup>

Another distinctive feature of this approach is that it operates at the interface of academic and ordinary Bible readings. Some of the attributes of ordinary readers spelled out are that they are strongly influenced by the world-view provided by their indigenous culture as opposed to the world world-view of the western technological culture, and that they are poor, oppressed and marginalized. The third feature is that African context forms the key subject of interpretation of the Bible. On the other hand, the conceptional framework of interpretation is informed by African socio-cultural perspectives. This means that instead of the Bible passage being read through a western grid and the meaning derived applied in an African context, the biblical passage should be read through the grid developed within the African socio-cultural context. The point of interest is to make the people’s context as the subject of interpretation of the text of the Bible. The main goal of interpretation is to actualize the theological meaning of the passage in the present context in order to forge integration between faith and life and engender commitment to personal societal transformation.

The root paradigm of African culture that informs the interpretative framework include, the unitive view of reality. This reality is not only seen as composed of matter and spirit, sacred

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<sup>56</sup> West, 58–61, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Toward a Renewed Approach to Inculturation Theology,” *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 1 (1994): 3–15.

and profane but as a unity with visible and invisible aspects. It is also viewed as the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos, and the sense of community whereby a person's identity is defined in terms of belonging to the community. This is to say that the basic hermeneutic theory at work is that the meaning of the passage is a function of the interaction between the passage in its context and the reader in his/her context. In other words, there is no one absolute meaning of the passage to be recovered through historical analysis alone. It should not be understood as having two processes, but only one process of a reader who is critically aware of his/her context interacting with the passage through historical analysis and then applying it to the current context. Ukpong analyzes two things in this section. First, <sup>58</sup>one clarifying the methodology, and the second, applying the methodology to a particular biblical passage."

### **Conclusion**

In the words of Gerald O. West, modern biblical interpretation is grouped into three main approaches, namely, historical-critical approach, which focuses on the history of the text, its author and original audience. Here, the meaning of the passage is identified along with the meaning intended by the author. Literary approaches focus on the passage and its underlying structure, meaning as attained in decoding the passage or they focus on the reader in interaction with the passage, seeing the meaning of the passage as emerging in the encounter between the reader and the passage. The third approach, which is closely related to this one is the contextual approach. In this one, the focus is on the context of the reader relating to the passage. This

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<sup>58</sup> J. S. Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1–13): An Essay in Inculturation Hermeneutics," *Semeia* no. 73 (1995): 189–210.

approach uses the context of the reader in many ways as a factor in determining the meaning of the passage.

The approaches to biblical interpretation in Africa discussed in this paper belong to this last approach. In all of them, the point of departure is the reader's context. The biblical passage is linked to the context of the reader. With the wide diversity in African culture, religion, political, social and economic terrain, as well as the strategy of linking the biblical passage to the African context, the contribution of modern day Africa to biblical hermeneutics cannot be underestimated.



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