



# Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Biblical Texts: African Approaches

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## Abstract

This article argues the importance of exegesis and hermeneutics in the African context. There is a need for bible translation to be exercised within the African context as opposed to the Western context. The end-readers should become partners in the translation; as these partners. The example of name giving is cited as arguable case that can assist Bible translators to indigenize biblical names by translating them into indigenous meanings. These partners can use their worldviews, proverbs, and idiomatic expressions to make the text meaningful. Afro hermeneutics and exegesis integrates life and biblical narratives and life experiences, are wrapped with indigenous knowledge, and exercises personal involvement of the reader of the text and the context. The paper proposes three influencers in African hermeneutics and exegesis. These are liberation hermeneutics which acknowledges the importance of both the spiritual and the material with the emphasis on economic and the political dimensions of African life. Then inculturation hermeneutics, which basically means that the interpretive process should be informed by the worldview and experience within the cultural context. And finally, contextualisation whereby translation should aim at preparing and empowering translators to facilitate translation processes by involving communities instead of top-down decision making and implementation. This is overall the acknowledgement of the role of indigenous knowledge systems in text translation and interpretation.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Text, Context.

## Introduction

There is a shift in the hermeneutical and contextual approach, emphasizing ‘a move from what the text meant to its original audience to what it means to Africans in their context’ (Nyiauwung 2013:1). Contextual issues had become an obligation for the contemporary exegesis. Biblical hermeneutics is the art or technique of interpreting the biblical text in order to understand its original context and then find its contemporary meaning. Nthamburi and Waruta (1997:40) note that ‘unless an African is enabled to understand Scripture in his/her own cultural patterns, the Scripture will not only lose its validity but its authoritative relevance as well.’ In a nutshell, biblical hermeneutics is the scholarly engagement of the indigenous language translations of the Bible in order to understand what they say and mean to the readers. On the other hand, Biblical exegesis involves the examination of a particular text of Scripture in order to interpret it properly.

Good Biblical exegesis is commanded in Scripture (Kuwornu-Adjaottor 2012:10). By Afro-biblical hermeneutics, we mean biblical interpretations done in Africa especially by African Instituted Churches. These hermeneutical works are typically African in character in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously borrow heavily from African religious heritage in their dialogue with the gospel of Christ (Gathogo & Kinyua 2010:251).



## **Afro-Hermeneutics are Socio-Culturally Embedded**

### ***African Exegesis and Hermeneutics integrates life and Biblical Narratives and Life Experiences***

Africans consistently stress the necessity to connect the biblical truth to everyday life in Africa. Life experiences are expected to intertwine with the biblical narratives. The Bible story is not seen as a distant mythology coloured with mystics and mysteries. Mshana (1972:21) from the early seventies appealed:

We have to look for ways in which the Christian faith is being implanted in African art form, music, drama, traditional dances, stories, proverbs, wise sayings, analogies, metaphors... We have to translate the Christian truth into African thought forms... languages... terminologies.

### ***African exegesis and hermeneutics are wrapped with indigenous knowledge***

There is no need for academics to interpret and apply the Bible. Out of human experiences, truth is stated, and epistemology becomes engrossed in the Bible. West (2010:29) writes as follows:

The African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy alone; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities.

Indeed, "Languages are best learned while sharing in the ways of life of the people concerned rather than in the classroom." (Harries 2016:38). The same idea is also promoted by Ukpong (2000) that the African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities. This will contribute enormously in making Christianity acceptable to Africans on the margins of the high density areas, where it is still foreign. Osadolor Imasogie (1983:23-24) wrote:

Christianity, for many Africans, remains a foreign religion. . . . It is only when incarnation takes place that Christianity ceases to be a foreign religion.

African hermeneutic does not require a background in Bible studies or biblical language proficiency. The western hermeneutics is viewed as individualistic, detached, hypothetical, and futuristic, therefore irrelevant to empirical realities. The idiomatic and proverbial expressions of the Bible are in many cases also encased in African knowledge systems. Many African proverbs, philosophies, and worldviews can be used to enhance the biblical truth. For instance:

- *Motho ke motho ka batho* can be used to enhance the biblical concept of communion or togetherness of Christians, which gives a perfect picture of ecclesia.
- The *letsema* concept can be used to express cooperation or strength in unity.
- The *ujamaa* in Swahili expresses peoplehood or familyhood – the biblical principle of church as a family or the people of God. Mwoleka (1975:203-205) considers that *ujamaa* could serve Christians in understanding the mystery of the Trinity because in the Trinity the question is not of an "intellectual puzzle" but of a concrete life of sharing

African biblical hermeneutics is rooted in African realities and is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. It gives the space to the ordinary African interpreters to



partially constitute the kind of discipline African biblical scholarship is. Uchegbue (2011:2) correctly points this out:

One major outstanding feature of liberation theology which distinguishes it from other radical theological perspectives is its conviction that Christianity and its basic symbols must be reinterpreted from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in the light of the popular struggles for social justice.

### ***African Exegesis and hermeneutics exercises personal involvement of the reader of the text and the context***

Examples to be cited are in the names that Africans, especially, African Christians, give to their children. The names give a child a unique identity; as Mbaya (2013:70) asserts that:

...in African culture, a name conferred a unique identity to a person. Hence children were not considered to have a full identity until they were given names

In the Setswana language there are many theophoric names starting with "O" referring to God e.g. Omolemo (God is good), Olerato (God is love), Obakeng (Praise God), Olefile (God has rewarded), Otlotleng (Honour God). Then there are those that start with "Re" e.g. Rebaone (We belong to God), Remmone (We have seen God), and Reshoketswe (We have received God's mercy). Last examples are names that speak directly about this God and literally mentioning his name (Modimo) e.g. Goitsemodimo or Goitseone (God knows), Tiroyamodimo (God's work). These names are not just given, they are attached to some circumstances under which a person is born. Giving a name was often associated with the circumstances of the birth of a child, for instance the coming of the first rains, the night or the day on which a child was born. It was a way of remembering a person's time of birth. Other names referred to characteristics of the child's birth, or to characteristics of the mother's pregnancy (Mbaya 2013:70).

These names are always an expression of faith in this God. Parents are personally involved with the circumstances under which the baby is born. The context, which is the circumstances under which a person is born, plays a role in bringing faith into memory. It is the situation that may not be fully understood by the Westerners. To African readers, these examples may... be recognised as something special. However, in the Western context, it is unusual. Authors typically do not reflect on their own personal life experience in their Biblical commentaries. In African culture, it seems to be perfectly normal (Wünc 2015:7).

These names are hermeneutical in nature, possessing value in hermeneutical and exegetical processes. They communicate feelings, perceptions, worldviews, and serve as a memorial to the generation that gave birth to these children. Adamo (2018:4) explains it better:

This is an expression that reflects name theology. As names are so important in African tradition, so also it is in ancient Israel. Names mean the totality of what a person is, including his or her power, character and honour. Traditional Africans do not bear names that do not have meanings.

I have heard a number of African (Setswana) preachers indigenizing some biblical names, translating their meanings into the local language e.g. Moses (Montshiwa i.e. the drawn out one), Abraham (Ramerafe or Rabontsi i.e. father of nations or multitudes), Miriam (Khutsafalo i.e. sorrow or bitterness), Elizabeth (Maikano i.e. Goad's oath), Peter (Lefika i.e. the rock) etc. These translations of the names into the indigenous languages play a crucial role in Bible translation processes as it assists the readers to identify. African hermeneutics is not just a belief in a construct or dictum, it is participation in the truth, the real life situations. African hermeneutics embraces the fact of humanness as well as circumstances and cultural surroundings which always make theology 'fit for life'. That is why Bible translation should



take the context such as naming ceremonies seriously. By context here I agree with Ukpong (2000:24) as:

...the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation

The famous African scholar, West (1991:1), asserts the fact that:

Biblical interpretation in Africa typically consists of three poles: the pole of the biblical text, the pole of the African context, and the pole of appropriation.

There is no doubt that the Bible and culture should enter into dialogue during the processes of translation. The biblical text and African context do not on their own participate in a conversation. The human element with its experiences should forge partnership with text and context to dialogue. The dialogue between text and context is a real flesh and blood convergence. The engagement between biblical text and African context is fundamental to African biblical scholarship. The dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. West (1991:2) correctly points out:

Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context.

This synergises well with Ukpong (1995:8) that “the focus of African interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context.” The correct Bible translation takes both the biblical text and context seriously. For African hermeneutists and exegetes, the application hermeneutics that engages a community on how to read the biblical text in the present day context is the realistic and relevant one. This is an endeavour that all interested in theologising cannot afford to ignore, on the pretext of doing exegesis (Farisani 2017:7).

The bottom line is that the interpreter and the text should be in synergy in order to make the text relevant to the African context and experiences. This does not mean divorcing the text from its historical reality, but in reality it means contextualisation of the text for African readers. The fact remains as Roberts (1987:35) points out that “African theologians are often influenced by Western sources, but the African personality radiates throughout their thought.”

### **Afro Centric Hermeneutics and Exegesis**

Historically, in the postcolonial era, Afro-centric hermeneutics had evolved through four exegetical methods. These include liberation hermeneutics, which encompasses feminist hermeneutic and deliverance hermeneutic; white South African hermeneutic, missiological hermeneutic; and neo-traditional hermeneutic (Nyiauwung 2013:3). These had played some primary commands in influencing African hermeneutics to a certain degree. In a broader context, they gave rise to three influencers in African hermeneutics and exegesis:

**Liberation:** African liberation hermeneutics has its starting point with the experience of the masses. Mosala (1989:67) asserts that, the hermeneutical starting point of liberation hermeneutics is the “social and material life” of “the black struggle for liberation.” We all know that African liberation hermeneutics acknowledges the importance of both the spiritual and the material with the emphasis on economic and the political dimensions of African life. Religion and culture are important but peripheral, and economic and political analysis is central. Race and class, not religion and culture, are the critical categories of liberation hermeneutics. Mosala further contends that the biblical text and African context should not only be brought into dialogue in terms of content, they should also be brought into dialogue in terms of methodology. Both the Bible and the black experience and struggle must be analysed



structurally using historical materialist categories; in other words, African interpreters must recognise that the biblical texts are rooted in the struggles of their material sites of production, just as the life of ordinary black South Africans is rooted in particular sociohistorical modes of production (Mosala 1989:3132). Liberation theology through its hermeneutics, is a form of contextualization that places the Gospel in the contemporary African setting. Instead of focusing on the traditional African culture, liberation theology is passionately concerned with rectifying the glaring injustices in our society (Palmer 1994:2).

The Bible translation endeavours should seriously consider liberative ideals that encapsulate inclusivity, diversity, feminist, black, and African theological perspectives. It is critically important to note that Bible translation must contextually take the issues of gender justice very seriously, especially in the African context, to fight against oppressive patriarchal movements. Bible translation in Africa must train women and men to fight against the oppression of women and patriarchal dictates in order to defeat gender-biased final product (text). Above all, 'The work of liberation hermeneutics is not done until everyone has a place under the sun (Ngan in Botta & Andrinach 2009:223). In other words the relevance of the text is not complete until translation is done, under and bearing the importance of the context,

**Inculturation:** Like other forms of African biblical interpretation inculturation hermeneutics emerges from life outside the academy. Inculturation is a process of acculturation i.e. learning from other people's cultures (Luzbetak 1988:65). Pobee (1992:34-44) expresses inculturation as a dynamic process involving translation, assimilation, and transformation in order to confront new norms and forms of life. Historically, African socio-cultural concerns were not reflected in missionary and Western academic forms of biblical interpretation. Inculturation hermeneutics arose as a response, "paying attention to the African sociocultural context and the questions that arise there from" (Ukpong 1995:4). He further elaborates that inculturation hermeneutics "designates an approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African ... context the subject of interpretation" (1995:5); which means that every dimension. This basically means that the interpretive process should be informed by the worldview and experience within the cultural context. In essence, inculturation is intertwined with contextualisation.

Inculturation theology is a form of contextualization. The context into which the Gospel is placed in this case is usually the traditional African culture. The non-formal inculturation of the Gospel in the African context is as old as the African church. The preaching and praying and singing of African Christians throughout the history of the African church are forms of the inculturation of the Gospel. Often these forms of inculturation are in the local African language. (Palmer 1994:1, 2)

If there is a need for relevance in Bible translation, the translation processes must include these themes (liberation and inculturation) as they are the burning issues in and for any theological education in Africa. Resane (2018:9a) alludes to the fact that "there is a talk about decolonisation of education, and this cannot take place without the themes of inculturation and liberation." Reservations and quiet diplomacy regarding liberative hermeneutics such as inculturation should come to cul-de-sac and open to new channel of dialogue. Indeed, Chung (2017:97) 'nails it on the head':

A project of inculturation of biblical narrative seeks fresh theological insights that learn from the newly encountered traditions and the home tradition in light of the coalescence of multiple horizons

**Contextualisation.** Colonialism resulted in a serious marginalisation of African ways of being, knowing and doing, with the consequence that the minds of African people were colonised, even after the end of Apartheid. This paper argues that Bible translation should be aimed at preparing and empowering translators to facilitate translation processes by involving





communities instead of top-down decision making and implementation. Therefore, indigenous knowledge should be developed to ensure that translation and training relate to the African context, “which implies that we become informed by grassroots bottom-up research findings.” (Van Der Westhuizen, Greuel & Beukes 2017:3). Inculturation and contextualising relate to each other and show how communities informs academic work on the one hand and becomes a result of academic work (i.e. praxis) on the other hand. Contextualisation gives greater attention to self-theologising. It seeks to take the positive elements of indigenisation and avoid the negative elements such as colonial connotations. Contextualisation is related to other terms that grapple with similar issues: adaptation, incarnation, possession and accommodation (De Vries 2016:2).

Bible translation invites the interpreter to immerse into scenic complexities, not just to passively contemplate the truth, or what passes for such (Vattimo in Antonello 2010:73), but regarding translation as a process of maturation. It should focus on subgroups within a specific community in an effort to identify practical ways to engage them in a process of translation where members of different subgroups start to work together with professionals towards a common goal. The canon and the context should dialogue and enter into agreement to birth the translated text. According to De Vries (2016:5)

God’s revelation must be allowed to transform the interpreter and the interpreter’s context. Contextualisation includes not only the translation of Scripture into symbols selected from the local context, but also the confrontation and transformation of culture, rejecting or recycling corrupted symbols.

The American missiologist, Hesselgrave (Hesselgrave 1985; 1991; Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989) promoted idea that contextualisation implies that relevant application of the meaning of texts in a specific context, requires from a minister of the Word to apply incarnational theology. Contextualisation means that the Word must dwell among all families of humankind today as truly as Jesus lived among his own kin. The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the worldview and culture of people in a specific context provides a framework for communication. The interpreter has to know and understand the worldview and culture of his audience in order to connect with them so that they can eventually be confronted with the claims of the gospel on their lives. Cultural differences in individuals should be identified and utilised with discernment to advance the gospel. The message should be mastered so that it can be communicated in culturally relevant ways without compromising its meaning (Koning & Buys 2016:2).

## Conclusion

African hermeneutics is theologically suspicious, but socio-culturally accepted. It is theologically marginalised, but academically impactful. It is critiqued by Western and mainstream theology – sometimes in a very negative outlook, yet it has appealed greatly and made sense to the masses who experience the negative impact of social injustice. Its contextuality and culturality had promoted communality among the Africans who had been proliferated by the colonial segmentation and apartheid segregationism.

Afro hermeneutics promote inclusivity in promoting Africaness and non-sexism in its liberative exegetical deliberations and approaches. It is for this reason that this paper appeals to the Bible translators to re-look into dialogue with these approaches.

Dialogue kicks theologians out of their *parochial silos*. When the voice of *moseka phofu* reverberates, citizens stand attention to listen or to leave or enter a *laager* for safety. Theological safety is not inside the *laager* or a *silo*, but is in jumping out and crossing the dividing walls of self-righteous or self-imposing enclaves such as race, power, economy, traditions, gender, institutions etc. (Resane 2018:4b).



This paper promotes hermeneutical and exegetical exercises by Africans using the text within the context without compromising or diluting the text. Byang Kato (1985:38) said, "Contextualize without compromise." We need responsible contextual theology. But we should guard ourselves against theologies that distort the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bible translators must reflect theologically on the necessary "contextualization" of Christianity within African culture.

Bible translators participating in the theological discussion should be realistic in confronting cultural realities, especially as their translation endeavours are affected by traditional culture, for example with respect to rites of passage, polygamy, liturgical custom, divination, traditional healing, or the role of ancestors (Bowers 2002:118). However, the recommendation is that balance of ideology or prejudice must be maintained. Uchegbue (2011:10) appeals for this attitudinal approach:

While appreciating the humanistic and humanitarian motivations of liberation theology's hermeneutical approach, it should be recognized that good and sincere motivations do not justify a wrong methodology. The popular maxim that the end justifies the means is not biblical. Apostle Paul affirms that we are not to do evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8).

In the end, Afro hermeneutics and exegesis immerses itself in the socio-political context in order to make Christian faith appealing and relevant to the readers of the final text. West (1991:160) alludes to the notion that the kerygma of the Bible is with the poor. The kerygma belongs to them preferentially – first and foremost. They must be partners in Bible translation endeavours.

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