

Analyzing African Biblical Hermeneutics with an Excursus on Covenant in Yoruba Context

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Abstract - People in the early times have handled the Bible intently; their keen interaction with the Scripture has spurred the quest to answer certain questions that seem entangling in their pursuit for understanding; this is the beginning of biblical interpretation! Hermeneutics began from the time men sought what biblical texts mean. Although the scripture is the inspired word of God; the truth remains that God used men to pen it down; moving through the trend of man and his environ. History has it that the African world sometimes referred to as 'Sudan' was illuminated by the Good News through the Western world. This inherent suggests a considerable dependence of the Africans on Western knowledge, understanding, and methods of interpreting biblical texts. The world of Biblical scholarship has advanced a lot in recent times; in view of researches discoveries and advancements. Thus, the research presents a lucid discourse on biblical studies and the vehement need for African Biblical studies. The resurging study on biblical hermeneutics has engineered the development of African Hermeneutics. This research employs an analytical methodology, in relation to the excursus of covenant which is the focus of this study. This research though advocates African hermeneutics; explores its example in the Yoruba context. Covenant as a biblical theme is explicitly analyzed in the Yoruba context with sole aim of helping an average African Christian adequately comprehend the concept. This excursus reveals that covenant is not far-fetched from the Yoruba context. Therefore, the prior understanding of a Yoruba person will definitely aid the biblical perception of the concept. In view of this, other African cultural contexts are credible in this regard; however, they vary from one cultural context to another. African Biblical Hermeneutics is not and should not be seen as a means of inserting African Religion into the Bible; rather it is an interpretative methodology makes an average African man closer to the Bible, rather than being an alien.

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

INTRODUCTION

Biblical Studies is important in exploring the Holy Bible with variety experiences and understanding through its pages. For centuries, the understanding of God's word which stems from its interpretation is explicitly considered. Africans are human beings who seem unable to explain life without reference to what is religious and spiritual. An African person finds his or her being and its meaning in community. Africans perceive reality in holistic terms.[1] The research observes that several methodologies have been brought in to play, which in a way or the other do not seem apt to the African context.[2] Although the efficacy of the methodologies to the African context does not invalidate their potency and usefulness;

vacuum for methodologies that speaks to the African mind and addresses the African situation erupts.

Over the years, biblical interpretation has been an ongoing matter with which several schools of interpretation have been developed in view of their own methods of interpretation.[3] The research acknowledges great progress and development in this sphere; yet, observes that these schools and modes of interpretations though not incongruent seem inattentive to the African worldview. This is because the worldviews and settings with which these methodologies are developed are in reality outlying Africa. How can this observed lacuna be bridged? Is the African world view ably embodied in the modern hermeneutical tools? What modus operandi is needed for biblical interpretation in the African setting? Is

there any need for African biblical hermeneutics? These questions encapsulate the dilemma of this research and form the theoretical framework of this discourse.

Biblical Hermeneutics: An Understanding

Hermeneutics is a broad discipline; however, it is used in regards to biblical stance in this research. Terry defined 'hermeneutics as the science of interpretation of a given text'; a method of scrutiny and pursuit of objectivity. Hermeneutics explores "how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in another context of life from our own." [4] 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 [5]. In other words, the aim of biblical hermeneutics is providing the exegete with the tools, techniques, methods or principles needed in order to adequately extract the actual meaning or intention of the original author to the original audience or recipient.

African Biblical Hermeneutics: An Interaction

The research observes several prejudice and presuppositions of scholars concerning African Biblical studies; categorizing this method of interpretation with several derogatory terms as local, fetish, magical, primitive, syncretic, and unchristian. But how true are these terms? Do they actually capture the truth of African biblical hermeneutics? The fact that missionaries from the west helped in the African evangelization and gospel movement does not imply absolute truncation of the African culture; does it? A cardinal stance of culture as simply the way of people sheds more light to African Biblical studies! Lack of clear dichotomy between the African culture and religion will put the understanding of this interpretational method in disarray.

In African indigenous society the belief in enemies as the main sources of all evil and occurrences is so strong; nothing happens naturally without a spirit force behind it. Incidents like barrenness, infant mortality, accidents and other evil occurrences are caused by enemies. [6] Obviously, Africans already had a cultural way of dealing with the problem of enemies and evil ones long before the dawn of Christianity. [7] With the arrival of Christian missionaries all these were forbidden and forsaken; other than prayer, the missionaries did not meet the need of the people unlike the African religion.

How can Africans cope when the things given do not commensurate with the ones that are taken away? In short, the kind of Christianity introduced to Africans did not meet the needs. The subjugation and oppression given to African culture by western missionaries resulted to the African convert's inquisitive search of power and knowledge in the Bible which the missionary seems to have hidden. Later, they found out that there must be secret power in the Bible when they read of the miraculous healings and the imprecatory psalms. Adamoh explained that this quest brought the imprecatory psalms (35 and 109) into lime light for protection against enemies, believing that it is as powerful as the natural potent words, charms and talisman. [8] In view of this, Sugirtharajah argues that African Biblical Studies uses the mode of interpretation that 'seeks to acquire and celebrate their God-giving identity by delving into their indigenous resources and rejecting the superintending tendencies of Western intellectual tradition' [9] In other words, the approach addresses biblical issues in a manner closer to the Africans; thus, referring to this method of interpretation as "local" appears abhorrent.

This brief historical background here reveals an antecedent which was a result of negligence and misunderstanding on the part of the early western missionaries. It is important to note that the recipient's way of life is pertinent to how the message will be received and perceived; because such people have not been idle before time. Bible readings in Africa have suffered under the insistence of the Western academy that their readings are universally valid, whereas they were and are in fact the product of Western Enlightenment, deeply affected by literate print culture, capitalist assumptions and individualism [10].

The task of African biblical hermeneutic(s) includes; the formulation of a biblical hermeneutic that is 'liberational' and 'transformational', breaking the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed. To promote African culture, tradition and identity; in other words, it also help to understand the Bible and God according to Scripture and African culture. To interpret the Bible existentially; in other words, to blacken the Bible [11].

Adamoh further explained that African biblical hermeneutic(s) has the following methodological distinctiveness; communal reading and interpretation, Bible as power, Africa and Africans in the Bible, African comparative, African evaluative, using Africa

to interpret the Bible and using the Bible to interpret Africa, the promotion of distinctive life interest and African identity [12].

The tasks of African biblical hermeneutics outlined in Adamoh's outlook reveal African biblical hermeneutics as a way of making interpretation implicitly and explicitly relevant to the everyday life of the African people. In other words, the realization of African identity in biblical mirror is the core of this interpretation; because "no one has yet been able to invent such language to encapsulate God's completeness." [13] The tasks and objectives of African biblical hermeneutics is not a futile engagement since Africa and Africans are mentioned often times in the biblical literature. [14] Therefore, it will be an understatement to say this method of interpretation is myopic, fetish, irrelevant, local or primitive.

Although, the African Christian converts sort to meet their needs through the scriptures just as it is done in African religion; the research argues that the bedrock on which this satisfaction is done now differs explicitly from the African religion; this in turn forms the framework of the African biblical interpretation. In Adamoh's opinion, African hermeneutics is the biblical interpretation that makes "African social-cultural context" a subject of interpretation. [15] He further argued that 'African biblical hermeneutics' can also be called 'African cultural hermeneutics', 'African biblical transformational hermeneutics' or 'African Biblical Studies' [16].

The significance of African hermeneutics, just as Adamoh puts cannot be discarded since interpretation must be done within a specific context. [17] In addition to Adamoh's opinion, Yorke explained this methodology as that which analyzes the biblical text from the perspective of African world-view and culture. It is the rereads the Christian Scripture from a premeditatedly Afro-centric perspective, with the aim of not only understanding the Bible and God in the African experience and culture, but also to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed [18].

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

are contextual. [18] African biblical hermeneutics devoid of 'the African context' is like a flower without its vase; it will be trampled on.

African biblical hermeneutics is rooted in African realities and is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. It gives the space to the ordinary African interpreters to partially constitute the kind of discipline African biblical scholarship is. Often, African scholars have argued that the several biblical expressions are explicitly familiar to the proverbial and idiomatic lexis in Africa; in fact, they form significant part of the knowledge systems. In other words, African philosophies, ideas and worldview can be of help in scriptural interpretation and understanding (explicating the biblical truth) of the African people. To substantiate this, the research engages the concept of 'covenant'.

Covenant: An Excursus

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

Etymology

Schmidt interprets the origin and primary meaning as 'fetter', which leads to "binding ordinance," 'sentence' in a judicial sense. [19] Mendenhall admits that "the etymology of the term is uncertain," but asserts that most accept the "derivation from Akkadian *biritu*, 'fetter,' or a cognate root." [20] Weinfeld concludes from Ancient Near Eastern literature and the LXX equivalent term '*diaqkh*' that the Hebrew term covenant like those of Israel's ancient neighbours means 'bond' [21].

Thus, '*Berit*' is the Hebrew theological term for 'covenant'; [22] because the contextual usage of a word is more important in determining its meaning than etymology. [23] "To cut" a covenant is from the root "*krt*", which stresses the ceremony as *modus operandi* of the covenant.

This understanding is somewhat congruent to the African understanding of 'covenant' in fact they stress the theological meaning which implies "to cut" – "da". [24] When the action is done, it is said; "*won da majemu*" – "they cut a covenant". Often times, biblical covenant is always exhibit in the act of "cutting" or "breaking"; creating an legal bond and

understanding between the parties. The understanding of an average Yoruba in Africa is that covenant is done between two or more people. In fact, covenant made in time past exists by transferring membership to offspring thereby maintaining the tenets of the treaty. This in turn aligns with the biblio-cultural understanding.

Covenant Process

Suzerainty and parity are types of covenant exhibited in the Bible in view of God's relation with the people (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic and Mosiac covenant) and the relation of Israel with other nations.[24] These types of covenant are inherent and embodied in African society whereby two or more people of the same status quo make covenant; while two parties of different status quo also make covenant.[25] The latter is explicated from the fact that several kings (*Oba*) in African community cut covenant (treaties) with village heads (who are referred to as '*Baale*'). The *Oba* is the superior while the *Baale* is the inferior. The treaties entail stuffs like; payment of tribute (*Ishakole* – farm produce during harvest) and obedience to the *Oba*; while the *Oba* on the other hand give his word of promise (which sometimes entails protection, guidance, or god-father) to the *Balee*.

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

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

water, stone, even marriage between the offspring of the parties.

Whichever type of covenant, there is always something that binds the parties together. In the Bible, animal scarifies, meals or blood serves this purpose. Fensham believes that using "part of the sacred animal for a communal meal" made the covenant tangible.[26] This process is not far-fetched from the African world where the parties come together with either an animal or meal prepared; the highest of which is the parties' blood.[27] Thus, the covenant binds people together mystically because in them is the union of one life with another by transfusion of blood. Bearing in mind the *modus operandi* and consensus which entails inherent stated and established consequences; the parties dance to the tune of covenant.

Beliefs and Philosophies

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

E ni ti yio ba dale ko ni dale – "anyone who will be alive till night will not betray".

O da le bale ku, eni to ba dale a ba le lo – "anyone who betrays will die with the earth, a traitor will surely die".

E ni to ba dale koni dale – "anyone who betrays will not be alive till night".

These common sayings are reflective of the African understanding; bearing in mind the consequences of breaking a covenant. These proverbs explicate relevant African philosophies in this sphere; it reveals an adequate understanding of what 'covenant' entails. Therefore, the research argues that addressing, exploring and interpretation the biblical concept of covenant (which is just an example, among others) in view of African worldview is not misnomer.

An analogous stance between the biblical and African worldview delineates covenant as a binding relationship of dedication, fellowship, commitment and responsibility two or more people. Therefore, a covenant was not just an agreement or a contract; it was a solemn bond established between two or more parties and involved a firm commitment to the

relationship established by the covenant obligations.”[28] It is clear from the above that a covenant provides history with aim and purpose involving a person’s whole being for the duration of life that distinguished covenant to a contract.

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

Biblical truth is supra culture but the biblical text is written through certain cultures which signify the importance of culture here; the engagement of the biblical text and African culture is thus fundamental to African hermeneutics. Gathogo and Kinyua posits that African biblical hermeneutics are typically African in character in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously borrow heavily from African religious heritage in their dialogue with the gospel of Christ [29]. The opinion of Gathogo and Kinyua is not applicable to the gospel of Christ in a narrow sense (along) but in a broad sense since that is the centre of the scripture.

Although the trait of African culture seems to be influenced by African religion; the fact remains that the norm and cultural values of Africa remains when it is dissected from African religion; therefore, the African culture is whole true and inherently free in respect to the worldview of an African.[30] It is high time we set a dichotomy between African religion and African culture.

Mugambi, in the introductory part of his work acknowledges that “the question of the relationship between Christianity and culture is a perennial problem that has endured since the beginning of Christianity. It is a challenge for all churches and a specific challenge for church leadership in Africa.”[31] As challenging as it is; the research argues that they cannot be alienated. In fact, this fray lingers much if Africans are shorn off biblical interpretation in the light of their culture; which inherently is their own ‘context.’ This understanding forms the bedrock for the next sub-section; do we need actually need African biblical hermeneutics?

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the need for the relevance of the understanding of an average African in comprehending the scriptures. Suffice to this standpoint is the analysis of covenant concept, which is an important theme that ravages the face of the scripture. The flourishing worldview of Africans is well portrayed when viewed through the African cultural lens. The Christian community as one should discourage sentiments and segregation against worldviews; therefore, this understanding gives relevance to the biblical perception of African Christians across various settings. The African socio-cultural logicity and reasonability cannot be discarded. African biblical hermeneutics is relevant and cardinal to the African comprehension of the Bible. The marginalization of African biblical hermeneutics as clamored by African scholars endangers and ensnares Africans’ adequate biblical understanding; then what is the essence of the biblical truth when it cannot be comprehended by a continent among just seven continents of the universe? Although there have been variance between the Euro-centric and Afro-centric developing schools of interpretation, the research sees the need for diligence, commitment and dedication among African scholars (home and abroad) in coming up with stupendous contributions in biblical studies (African biblical interpretation especially) to override the long existing debacle of sentiment and segregation of voices to be heard in biblical scholarship.

The engagement of African Biblical Hermeneutics in this research is limited within the Yoruba context (in Nigeria); thus, the research recommends that several other discourses unveiling the correct identity of African Biblical hermeneutics should be done by scholars, especially in several other cultural contexts (Igbo, Hausa, Nupe, Baruba, among others). This is a result of the fact that Africa is blessed with several cultures and traditions; although Euro-centric scholars have used this against African scholars, rendering this means an exercise that is not worthwhile. This research makes use of the Yoruba context as an example of the riches embedded in Africa culture and tradition; also, it has demonstrated the African understanding of the Scripture via the inherent worldviews. The African understanding is neither limited nor myopic; rather it is a viable means through which the biblical message can be adequately disseminated and understood by an average African Christian.

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- [19] In Yorke's discourse, the research observes that this term (which is also the title of his work) can be said to encapsulate what African hermeneutic connotes in Biblical studies. The term comprises of two simple words "Africa" shortened to 'Afro' and "centric" which means 'centered'; altogether, it means a method of interpretation centered on Africans. In view of this, referring to African hermeneutics as "Afro-centric" is congruent with the recent African scholarship development in recent biblical studies. Consequently, the research discovered that the term has gained a wide range of popularity among African scholars; used in published articles and books. An example of such is Resane, *Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Biblical Texts African Approaches*, 9. This assertion is congruent with Adamoh's explanation in the preceding section of this work.
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