

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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If the key elements of biblical interpretation in general include the biblical text, the cultural context, and the act of appropriation through which they are linked, the interaction between them must be clearly defined. In a consideration of the African academy, as in many parts of the world, the setting is incredibly diverse and affected by numerous components. How an African reader moves between text and context is determined by a range of factors, including tribal biases, ideo-theological orientation, ecclesio-theological missionary heritage, engagement with territorial communities, accepted community mores and a wide variety of issues unique to Africa. In becoming cognizant of the complexity of approaches on the continent, I am convinced it is dubious at best to even speak of “an African context.” However, in this discussion, I want to explore African biblical hermeneutics within these particular parameters to which we have alluded.

If we are to define biblical hermeneutics as ‘methods of interpretation’ in the sense of devising ‘rules’ for a viable understanding of the biblical text there appears to be scant regard for a sound methodological approach in general. The term “hermeneutics,” particularly since Schleiermacher, seems to suggest a much broader sense of understanding as the fundamental philosophical and theological assumptions ‘behind’ different methods of interpretation. Taking such an approach to the discipline, it becomes possible to discern the complex elements that make up the African consciousness.

The biblical text ever remains the one constant factor in the discipline of hermeneutics. Yet the text does not exist in a vacuum, it speaks to a particular audience within a specific cultural context. In Africa, the problem arises in the dialogical approach between text and reader “where a comparative methodology facilitates a parallel interpretation” of certain biblical texts or motifs and supposed African parallels, “letting the two illuminate one another.” Knut Holter has rightly suggested that in African biblical hermeneutics the biblical text “is approached from a perspective where African comparative material

is the major dialogue partner and traditional exegetical methodology is subordinated to this perspective.”¹

Justin Ukpog, a Nigerian scholar, takes us a step further in his comments on the comparative approach. He indicates that the goal of comparative interpretation is “the actualisation 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.”²

Because engagement between biblical text and African context is fundamental to African biblical scholarship, it is important to view the cultural landscape that is Africa. Gerald West has pointed 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 is what links ordinary African biblical interpretation and African biblical scholarship, a common commitment to ‘read’ the Bible for personal and societal transformation.”³

The ideo-theological orientation of any particular interpreter has been radically affected by such factors as Africa’s socio-cultural context unheeded by the global West. As a result, biblical hermeneutics is understood within the African life experience invariably in contrast and even opposition to those forms of biblical interpretation inherited from the Christian missionary movement and Western academic biblical studies. As Ukpog states, “[t]he focus of [African] interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context.”⁴

A similar emphasis can be perceived in the work of the South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala, who suggests the starting point for biblical hermeneutics in Africa can only be seen in “the black

1. Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 88.

2. Justin S. Ukpog, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trends, and Trajectories* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 24.

3. Gerald O. West, “Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa,” a paper presented at the Ujamaa Centre (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2008), 1-14 at 2; to be published in John Parratt, ed., *John: A Reader in African Theology* (rev. ed.; London: SPCK, forthcoming).

4. Justin S. Ukpog, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 19 (1995): 3-14 at 6.

struggle for liberation”⁵ with its emphasis on the economic and the political dimensions of African life. In this scenario, the Bible is a source of oppression and domination resulting in an intertwining of suspicion and trust in the ideo-theological orientation of liberation hermeneutics.

Within African scholarship, one sees a commitment to relate biblical scholarship to the realities of Africa, an oppositional stance towards the missionary-colonial enterprise which brought the Bible to Africa, a recognition that the Bible is an important text in the African context which must be engaged with and by critical scholarship, and a preference for socio-historical modes of analysis for both the biblical text and the African context. This reaction of the African academy to missionary-colonial imperialism does not appear to be particularly widespread beyond the academy and, for the most part, appears antithetical to the ordinary African believer and pastor who are gratefully cognizant of the work of European missionaries, in particular, who introduced them to Christianity’s book and taught them to read it.

While for some the Bible “will always be linked to and remembered for its role in facilitating European imperialism,”⁶ hopefully the recognition that the Bible is not a western book will ultimately provide grounds for opposing the present institutional need of reading the Bible for decolonization. Musa Dube has posed the question of “why the biblical text, its readers, and its institutions are instruments of imperialism”⁷ as the first part of the task of postcolonial hermeneutics. However, if that becomes the first question to ask in the task of the understanding the text, then engagement with this very inquiry will surely lead to the excesses of a hermeneutic bereft of objectivity – an essential objectivity that lies at the heart of the inductive methodological approach to biblical study.

It is necessary to point out that “the African context” is complicated further by the parceling up of territory by denominations often in conjunction with the colonial enterprise. The result has been lasting missionary ecclesio-theological memories that continue to affect African biblical hermeneutics to the present time. In his detailed study of the role of religion in the making of the Yoruba people of West Africa, J.D.Y. Peel reminds us of the enduring impact of the missionary endeavor

5. Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 67.

6. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminism Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 3.

7. Ibid, 6,

in African biblical interpretation, the clearest cases being those of the Catholic and the Evangelical missionary ecclesio-theological legacies and the more recent impact of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.⁸

The problem facing the church in Africa today is a distinct lack of ability to hear the text, first in its original Sitz im Leben, its own socio-historical context, and then second, in its consideration of the writer’s intent, and third, in its unbiased approach to the African context and, in a larger sphere, to the world. African scholars are often eclectic in their approach and the ideo-theological orientation of a particular biblical interpreter tends to define the focal point of analysis.

The idea that African interpreters often blur the original and present meaning of the text – what was meant with what is meant – may be indicative of a holistic worldview intrinsic to African thinking and symptomatic of Max Wertheimer’s understanding of Gestaltian theory: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.⁹ As best I understand philosophical and psychological holism, there appears to be two divergent views: that of Wertheimer, on the one hand, and that of Kurt Koffka on the other. The latter insists that the Gestaltian approach might be better summed up in the statement the whole is *different* from the sum of its parts as opposed to the *summation* of the parts.¹⁰

When I speak of African holism, I want to make clear that I am taking my lead from Maurice Leenhardt, the French Protestant missionary who coined the term “cosmomorphism” to indicate the state of perfect symbiosis with the surrounding environment that he observed in the culture of the Melanesians of New Caledonia.¹¹ In a similar fashion Africans, when not infected by western ideas, have an innate propensity of seeing the world as an interactive whole with the parts contributing meaning to the greater entity. I would postulate that it is precisely this

8. J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

9. D. Brett King and Michael Wertheimer, *Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Theory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

10. Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1935), 176.

11. Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo. La Personne et Le Mythe Dans Le Monde Mélanésien* (La Montagne Sainte-Geneviève 6; Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Translated by Basia Miller Gulati, *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). For a helpful summary in broader anthropological context, see Malcomb R. Crick, “Anthropology of Knowledge,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1982): 287–313 at 302.

that awakes the African mind to the discipline of inductive biblical study (IBS).

Holism may be disadvantageous to the African biblical scholar who insists on biblical comprehension within an ideo-theological orientation. But within the methodological approach of IBS, the holistic philosophy intrinsic to the African mind can have distinct advantages. Holism asserts that systems should be viewed as wholes not collection of parts. Indeed one could reasonably argue philosophically that any doctrine that emphasizes the priority of a whole over its parts is holism. This holistic emphasis ought not to be mistaken for reductionism (that a system is nothing more than the sum of its parts) nor deny the usefulness of divisions between the function of separate parts and the workings of the 'whole.'

Understood in this way, one can recognize the ready grasp of IBS methodology by the African mind. As such, it is imperative that the discipline of inductive study be vigorously promoted in Africa to combat the ideo-theological tendencies of the African academy, but also the uncritical embrace of the populist western preacher-propagandist all too easily accessed through the medium of television and internet – a topic for another paper.

The African church is humbly aware that the center of Christendom is moving to the global south and perceives its role in twenty-first Christianity to be of immense leadership significance. It is incumbent, therefore, that we in the global West make a huge investment in the future of the global church that latent apostasy be avoided and that God's Word will be more fully understood and communicated effectively.