



Quest for Africentric Biblical Reading among African Christians

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Abstract. The paper examines the need for Africentric biblical reading among Christians of African origin both at home and in diaspora. It examined the Eurocentric biblical approach with strong emphasis on historical-grammatical emphasis on the text, an exercise that profits the academic society with little or no direct benefit to the average whose quest for power, deliverance, protection and daily need drawn to study the Word for inspiration. The paper drew inspiration from scholarly works of an African like: Prof. D. T. Adamo. It discovered that the approach of Africans to Bible reading is a problem-solving approach. It shows the reality of the African worldview with the manifestation of divers' powers, poverty and the need for emancipation. It concludes by drawing the attention of the Bible readers among Africans to be more realistic in tapping into the professed power as contained in the written Word. It recommends the Africentric reading of the Bible in mother tongue and the, demonstration of the power therein as a paradigm for successful daily living.

Keywords: Decolonisation, deconstruction, Biblical Reading and Africentric

1. Introduction

Many have thought that the presence of the missionary religions in Africa, will usher in great sigh of relief for the people's religious experience and culture. However, the converse is the case. Hence, Africans are given several names which are otherwise derogatory and abysmal. The classification by E. B Tylor of the people and their religion as animism is the peak of scandal to the amiable people

of Africa who had the first encounter with the gospel message as early as the first century (Adamo, 24).

Prominent Africans like Augustine of Hippo, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria Origen and Athanasius were part of the foremost scholars who from the humble African worldview received and contended for the gospel. Adamo (67) notes that the works and place of Africa are greatly contested today because the mention of Egypt as the cradle of civilization and the hub of African Christianity is not pleasant to Eurocentric scholars. The later choice of the 'Pan- Babylonians' the Sumerians is greatly favoured.

The continuous juxtaposing of biblical artefacts sites and persons has continued and dovetailed into the 19th century quest for biblical interpretation. Fatokun (12) notes that it is laughable to think that Africans have not had so much romance with the gospel, as to gain the requisite knowledge for biblical interpretation based on her worldview, yet, void of syncretism.

Scholars of African aborigine have contended with the anthropological classification by Western scholars of African indigenous religions and practices as a breed of syncretic traditions, not freed from idolatry and fetish (Mbiti, 1). The epoch of accusation, witnessed the rise of biblical scholars who simultaneously like those in ATR, raised questions about the authenticity of Eurocentric biblical approach giving rise to the hegemonic attitude of Western scholarship. The question that begs for answer is: Has God limited his self-revelation to anyone race or tribe alone? Mickelson 1991 posits that there are acceptable and

unacceptable principles of interpretation but most importantly, the cultural milieu of the interpreter as well as his social background cannot be devoid from the process.

2. Systematic alienation of Africa and Africans.

In as much as the continent consist of the ancient world, there are efforts made to smuggle out the continent which has been perceived as alienation of the people from the Bible. Adamo note that the quest for identification of Africa and Africans which is the crux of his thesis, is not only to understand the Bible and God within the context of African purview, but to undo the hegemony and superiority complex of Western scholarship.

The Bible which remains the inspired Word of God is not strictly subjected to a stereotype interpretation. Becker (79), in his discourse on biblical methods of interpretation, identify the various approaches including: historical-critical the ground approach with other forms such as: textual, source, form and redaction criticisms. The point here is not emancipation of the people, rather, epistemology, and man's knowledge above the written text of scriptures.

Adamo (48) notes that such methods of interpretation lack the potency that can bring about liberation to the readers. Readers instead of criticizing and critiquing, they are encouraged to draw up strength for personal healing and deliverance. Among Africans there is a very strong belief in the potency of the spoken word and prayer. This practice cannot be separated from the culture of the people. Hence, the observation about the colonization of African thoughts and ways of life should not be made a private discussion. Since biblical interpretation lays claim to universalism, Africentric approach should not be left out of the current table of events, otherwise, it should be perceived and construed as modern-day slavery and neo-colonialism amidst globalisation (Paranti, 162) Fledgling of Missionary Enterprises

The introduction of the church came with the establishment of schools, hospitals and the setting up of training centres. The curriculum of the schools was tailored towards the development of manpower for the church and for the missionary enterprise. As common to most African countries, there was the strong desire, to make the colony independent. However, the paths seemed difficult to define hence, the two commissions: Phelps- Stoke and the Elliott took the challenges as part of their missionary sacrifice, to revamp the failed government of the different Nations in Africa (Itedjere, 20).

The beauty of these commissions was the establishment of some forms of functional education devoid of Western coloration but profitable to the needs of the people in developing technical skills that is required for personal development. Fafunwa (139) notes that the continent, was rescued from the shackles of missionary oriented curriculum that lays emphasis purely on cognitive development. Adamo (61) posits that God has turned their errors to our blessings. The curriculum of the Bible Colleges has remained the most powerful tool of the missionary's adventure in colonizing the continent. Based on the two commissions above, the task of the schools is to produce able-bodied men to serve in the church missions and missionary activities. Thus, all who were trained, were ordained to become priests for life.

The teaching methods employed where western using foreign language or languages as medium of expressions, with little or no bearing with African worldview. Ample examples were taken from their home background written from their own worldview and given similar interpretation. This betrays the fact that there are no cultural vacuum. Henceforth, Western culture was also taught to Africans. Professor David Tuesday Adamo recounts that the seminary education was something else. He described how they were taught to eat, drink, sit, talk, work and behave like an American. He adds that they were bombarded with foreign history, culture and development as contained in the school curriculum. He decried the fact that they were treated less than humans; a situation that actually made some seminarians to withdraw back home.

3. Eurocentric Methods of Biblical Interpretation

The beauty of hermeneutics which is the science and art of interpretation of any written document lies on the principle of *right handling* of the word (s) under consideration within a context (Mickelsen, 3). The words *orthotemeo in Greek* and *hodous* strongly suggest that the tasks of interpretation are not to be taken with levity, as to arrive at the truth (Bauer,584). Mickensen (99), posits that any act of levity in handling issues bothering on the context, like the hermeneutics, constitutes distortion of the original author's intention, and false application void of the recipient's related and relevant experiences.

Eurocentric methods of biblical interpretation within the rich Black continent have one thing in common: They bear no link with the African socio-cultural context of Africans, they seem to apply rigidity to the

biblical message thereby, imposing and equating Western culture with the Bible tradition. Becker (1) drew the attention of his readers to the historical-critical method of interpretation which emphasises the nature and power of historical reasoning. It became popular in the 19th century, with the claims that reality is both uniform and universal; assessable to human reasoning and investigation; interconnectedness and comparability with contemporary human experience of reality with simple analogy.

Since the Bible is a written text, the call for multicultural approach to its reading and understanding should not elicit palpable fears as expressed by some Western biblical scholars. Bracey (68) lends his voice to the call for a rethink on the process of biblical interpretation especially as the cultural contexts greatly suggest diverse worldview. Felder (cxiii) advocated for the rediscovery of multiculturalism in reading and approaching the Bible. Hence, efforts to short-change the culture of the people amounts to alienation and disenfranchisement from a common wealth of salvation which is from God (Redfield, 35).

The circumventing of multicultural approach has been described as a way of promoting the Western hegemony and scholarship. Ukpong (11) in his reaction, reaffirmed the indisputable fact that the Black continent otherwise referred to as Africa is the cradle of biblical interpretation. He avers that the task fledged early in the first century around Alexandria University in Africa.

Metzger (129-142) notes that great biblical scholars of African origin such as: Augustine of Hippo, Origen, Tertullian, Cyril of Alexandria, Arius, Panteanus, Athanasius among others, laid the foundation for biblical interpretation. They made significant contributions to biblical scholarship from the first century, the springboard for contemporary biblical interpretation of the Bible today. Oosthuizen (277-283), attributes the departure, ostracize, and flight from the norm, to the arrival of early Western missionaries, anthropologists and explorers. He259eoplebed their activities using the biological term *smothering* as the process adopted for anything which they failed to understand about the people. The use of the word *irrational*, in the description of the rich knowledge of the259eoplee is not only ridiculous but unfounded. Hence, the continuous involvement of Western oriented church in Africa cannot be adjudged as being free from suspicion, exploitation and rape of the people's sociocultural intellectual and economic wealth.

4. Eurocentric Biblical Interpretation in Africa

There are growing concerns over biblical interpretations and their relevance to the average man in the continent of Africa. From colonization to political dominance, imposition of a dysfunctional curriculum and Eurocentric imposed Bible interpretation. Becker (19) motions the famous historical-critical method of biblical interpretation that seems to present some form of holistic approach based on reasoning and historical facts. It became popular in the 19th century, the major strength of which lies on affirming the universality of reality in uniformity, being open to reasoning and human experiences, based on an ever growing and dynamic society.

Crawford (2002), some 24 years late after Becker, addressed himself to the same method of biblical interpretation.

He premised his arguments on the rising interests on the biblical text that has witnessed the emergence of many translations. The battle for supremacy over textual interpretation has been predominated by euro-centric interpretations. Lastly, the Renaissance reawakened some form of renewed interest in ancient history, the main actor in historical critical method of biblical interpretation.

Isiorhovoja (79-80) notes that the core value of Eurocentric interpretation is to probe the historical background of the text and the ascribed meaning given to any passage. This method gives no room for deconstructive reading of the biblical text. Krentz (75) did not only affirm this hegemony, but exalted the written works which serve as the basis for establishing the supremacy and dislodgement of other forms of interpretations. There was a palpable battle between Sanders (279) and Childs (385) over canon criticism which laid its emphasis on the biblical Canon text. Sanders sees it as, 'a process' while Childs sees it as a 'final product.' The battle line is thus drawn along the polemic views of the above scholars. Consequently, Western scholarship has remained a scholarly venture for the bourgeois at the expense of the proletariat.

Textual criticism lays emphasis on the sacredness of the text of scriptures in arriving at the exact word used in biblical text, the task becomes difficult because the exact scriptures cannot be made available presently. Metzger (197) notes that only serious students can follow the process through to the end while going through the manuscript of the original.

Historical criticism emphasizes the role of history and consider the faith from that perspective. Scholars have considered the time the history itself and its transmission giving room for probability and speculation. Its strength lies on supporting the interpretative process. Grammatical criticism according to Hayes and Holladay (191), is primarily concerned with the language construct of the text, the grammar, parsing, syntax, phrase are of importance in determining the authenticity of the text.

Tradition criticism is largely concerned with the knowledge of known historical tradition that are recorded in the text. Cranford (12) notes that some scholars seek to know the volume and quantity of both oral and written traditions that were communicated adequately through both channels which account for the synoptic challenge. The biblical traditions are thus subjected to the rigour of traditional presence.

Source and Form criticism. Both methods are linked to tradition criticism, especially, in relation to the synoptic gospels. The thesis of source criticism, is to establish the literary connections and interconnectivity of the gospels, considering their structure vis-a-vis the fourth gospel. The two-document hypothesis theory remains the epicentre of the scholarly debate among scholars. Form criticism has been considered as the brainchild of Martin Debellis and Rudolf Bultmann both scholars where of the 20th century. Cranford (21) suggests that the primary concern is to establish the existence of discernable fixed forms of material before the analysis and usage within the context of the early church practice. The duo posit strongly that the particular form of the text can be determined only through sufficient probing of the life situation. Literary criticism surfaced in the 21st century as a form of question raised to ascertain the authenticity of historical criticism as a method. It generally seeks to establish the value of authorship, time, place and date of composition as vital aspect of the text (Powell,11).

From the above approaches to biblical interpretation though exhaustive, the Eurocentric approach has remained a battleground for ostensible display of knowledge, fame and superiority complex. These methods did not speak to or address the fundamental challenges of the masses as expected rather, they provide robust ground for scholarly discourse and interactions. This is the fundamental lacuna discovered and filled by Africentric biblical interpretation with emphasis on liberation and emancipation interpretation of the literary text.

5. Background for Africentric Biblical Reading

The journey towards Africentric biblical Reading came alongside with the quest for interpretation. They are considered to be responsive, adequate, liberative and emancipatory in nature. Africans have pushed and are pressing for the contextualization, otherwise known as the inculturation of the gospel - text and message, in such a way, that it will remain relevant to the social, cultural, economic, political and environmental challenges that have bedevilled the continent. Amidst Eurocentric hegemony, scholars of African aborigine and African-diaspora have not thrown in the towel based on God's self-revelation to mankind which is not bounded by race, colour, ethnicity and gender. In the philosophical contention of Martin Luther King Jr., he posits that death becomes necessary when it is worthwhile otherwise it becomes useless, vain and profitless. Thus, decolonization serves as a springboard for self-discovery and recovery from the Eurocentric garbs; the colonial aprons couched in interpretation of the Bible.

Sheridan (31) notes that some of the famous approaches to Bible reading suggested by Eurocentric scholarship, include: Devotional - with emphasis on several readings, Chapter Summary Method, with the reader making short notes, Character Study from the pages of the Bible, Thematic, Biographical, Topical Method, Subject Approach, Word Study, Book Background, Book by Book, Survey Method, Chapter Analysis, Book Synthesis, Verse By Verse. In as much as these methods are good in themselves, like the biblical interpretation method, they have little application for day-to-day living, such that the average reader is made to path find the tangent for successful living. The method has underscored some important factors about Africans. Torrey (6) notes that the reader must devote so much time to the study of the word as a means of achieving the head knowledge as enunciated in Eurocentric interpretation. Can such venture be meaningfully pursued amidst poverty, hunger and environmental challenges?

Mbiti (41) posits that African carry their God along with them. This can be expressed in the manner in which their faith is demonstrated. The people have had practical revelations about God, a continent that gave birth to two notable scholars of no mean repute. The practical dimension which is result oriented give birth to African cultural hermeneutics, the springboard and melting pot both to the Africentric interpretation and the reading of the Bible. Adamo

(2005), thus posits strongly that any biblical interpretation and Reading that failed to encourage an African cannot be said to be authentic. He decried the earliest missionaries, anthropologists and western scholarship that denied this fact.

6. Methods of Africentric Biblical Reading.

It is pertinent to note that the concept of reality plays dominant role in the lives of the people. It provides the basics for understanding their worldview ontologically. It consists of the Divine spirit women animate and inanimate elements which function together. Thus, the visible and invisible world man, animals and environment are understood within the spheres of God ancestors and spirits, hence, the centrality of culture to Africans cannot be overemphasized (Temple, 19). Adamo (36) posits that culture plays dominant role in the understanding and communication of the Bible within Africa. He knows that the success of the venture within Africa requires being an insider, familiarity with the problem and the challenges of Africa cannot and should not be read from papers or discussed by seat at home anthropologists. Thus, a good knowledge of the Bible, the culture and expression of faith in God's omnipotence, his absolute power and sovereignty are required. Lastly, the level of education attainment to the point of scholarship, is very good with the ability for memorization, it is of great importance. God's word to heal and bring about Deliverance to mankind. Wise to the Eurocentric approach to biblical Reading the following are methods of Bible reading in Africa.

a). Therapeutic reading of the text.

From the humble Africa background, the treatment of various diseases and ailments are not strange to the people. The Bible is replete with verses that speaks of God as the healer. Ukpogon (5) contends that contrary to Eurocentric teaching about the Bible, Africans have basic understanding of using the word for the healing that is desired most commonly

The expression of faith in the power of God through his word over sicknesses and the presence of healing texts in both Testaments have become the basis for such repeated Reading. Exo.15:22-25 speaks about the bitter water of Marah, the people complained but under God's leading, the introduction of the wood brought about sweetness. Similarly, when members of the Baptist soul winning band at the General Crusade were experiencing stooling due to bad water available at a crusade being organised, the leaders took salt, quoted the text, called on God for the

restoration of the water source and the people were healed.

The family of Mr Alfred Onoriode of Orogun witnessed the presence of God's healing during an all-night home prayer session, after reading Acts 3:1-9, the five-year-old child who never walked before, stood on his feet and began to walk.

b). Joblessness

Deuteronomy 28:12 brought about another miracle within the same family of Mr Alfred. Even as a graduate of the Delta State University for many years he was jobless. After reading the text over his situations in prayer with the family chorusing amen, his situation changed. Today, the man has got a job with the Delta State University as a tutor

c). Protective Reading of the Psalms.

Ubrurhe (24) avers that there is power in the vegetation in Africa. While Western scholarship depends on bulletproof singlet and armoury for self-defence, Africans simply resort to some herbs for protection. Among the Urhobo people, we have *umu r'ekpo* "bullet proof" herbs. Adamo (35) motions that the missionary on arrival in Africa depended on advanced technology for self-defence. However, African Christian sees the Bible as a source of defence, protection from all attacks and deliverance with multiple results and testimonies

d). Potency of the Spoken Word

Traditionally, Africans believe that the words of the elders and the priests are potent. For this is the reason, they are respected in the society. There is the general belief that God answers the prayers they offer as custodians and curators of the society. This is also true of The Bible. It bears testimony to the potency of the spoken word (Matthew 8:8). During a wedding ceremony at Omega Baptist Church, Abraka, there was an incidence that caused pandemonium. The bride under strong influence of spirit manifestations, refused to express verbally, the exchange of the marriage vows. While the church was expecting her to joyfully speak up in the euphoria, she suddenly slumped. The man of God under divine instruction, was directed to call the lady's name. Immediately, he shouted her name, the bride sneezed and regained consciousness to continue with the exchange of marriage vow. The emphasis here is on the potency of the spoken word based on God's directives. (Omegwe, Testimony hour 2021)

e). Success Reading Approach

Isiorhovoja (79) contends that the rate of failure in Africa truly calls for a deconstructive reading of the Bible. Traditionally, the people can consult medium for solutions, this is the case with non-Christians. However, among Christians, the Biblical text, speaks about success in all areas of life. Deuteronomy 28:13, speaks of being ahead, successful and victorious in all of life's undertakings. With continuous recitation of the words, prayerfully laying claims over the situation, positive results are achieved.

f) Personal Retreat and Vengeance Reading

From the traditional religious background of Africans, men traditionally embark on retreats before indulging in certain rituals, otherwise considered to be sacred. This is also true when embarking on vengeance mission. If unjustly persecuted or denied, then vengeance becomes inevitable. Notable men often embark on personal retreat for some tasks. The Bible speaks of men set apart, those who have undertaken personal journey just to make sure they have encounter with God. David was a man who practiced personal retreat. Psalm 35:1, speaks of a divine invitation for God to vindicate his children. The story of this old woman attests to it. An old woman had a hen with 10 chicks, but behold, there came a cobra that desired not only to kill the chickens but the hen. The old woman being helpless cried out. Oh God! I hand over this snake to you, avenge this enemy. Unconsciously like David (Ps. 59:1), she threw the can at it, unknown to her that fuel spilled over the snake. While crying and calling on God for his intervention, the snake stretched and died.

Here, we see that there are no situations among Africans that are considered to be little or otherwise. Different texts at different locations are used, read and interpreted to minister to the situations the individual is going through. Such biblical readings in Africa, encourages African worldview; the ontological understanding as well as the contemporary challenges of the people. The Bible therefore, becomes the key that opens the door to liberation, revival, equipment, discovery and advancement. Any reading of the Bible that denies these facts to the Africans, ends up in Eurocentric shelf, building head knowledge yet never coming to terms with the life situation of the people.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper is not an attempt to ridicule Euro-centric biblical interpretation. However, it seeks to establish

the fact that there is no theological vacuum as every text is interpreted based on the cultural value and the need of the interpreter. For an African, the gospel has become the springboard for speaking to, addressing and receiving answers to pressing needs and challenges that daily confronts him. Africa and Africans in diaspora should continue to publish views that are aborigine to Africans. Contemporary scholars of Africa and Africans in diaspora, should continue to mentor younger generation of Africans to cultivate and develop more interest in African cultural hermeneutics, as the window to achieving Africentric reading and interpretation of Biblical text in a way that minister to the needs of the people. Our institutions of learning should provide centres for African biblical scholarship, with Africentric scholars, daily researching and publishing findings about Africa; Africans and African worldview that are free from syncretism and idolatry.

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