

African Christianity and the Bible: Exploring Approaches to Contextual Hermeneutics

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Abstract: Historically, issues relating to the critical role of the Bible in gospel proclamation and its contextual relevance across diverse socio-political milieus have dominated the theological and missiological landscapes of the Christian Church. In the African context, concerns have been raised about the challenges associated with Eurocentric approaches to biblical hermeneutics, which provide a largely uncritical appraisal of the African socio-cultural milieu by Western missionaries. This work's burden is first, to appraise Eurocentric approaches to biblical interpretation and gospel communication in Africa, and second, to underscore how the apparent misalignment of Western methodological approaches makes contextual biblical hermeneutics much better suited for the African context. A piece of analytic-historical research, the present work places the inherent disparity of Western missionaries' approaches to biblical Christianity in Africa in juxtaposition with Africa's socio-cultural realities and milieu. This will demonstrate the value of contextual hermeneutical approaches in Africa and beyond. The overarching assertion of this paper is that African contextual hermeneutics is not merely an adaptation or expansion of Western evangelical interpretation, but a fundamentally different hermeneutical posture – one grounded in, and attentive to, the social-cultural and religious realities of African contexts.

Keywords: Contextual Hermeneutics, Gospel Communication, Eurocentrism, Christianity, Africa

In the history of the Church, there have been significant discussions on the critical role of the Bible in gospel proclamation and its contextual relevance across diverse socio-political milieus. While numerous approaches and methodologies to gospel communication in Africa have been employed, there remains a pressing need to examine biblical interpretation and gospel communication in relation to Africa's distinctive religious and socio-cultural realities. This need is primarily anchored in a hermeneutical impasse: Western models cannot adequately theorize or support African Christian interpretation and gospel communication as a unique and distinct expression of Christianity.

This work's burden is therefore to appraise Eurocentric approaches to biblical interpretation and gospel communication in Africa, underscore how contextual biblical hermeneutics addresses the shortcomings of the former, and thereby address the misalignment of Western methodologies and African worldviews. The paper first discusses the meaning of contextual biblical hermeneutics, and then moves on to explain Eurocentric approaches to Biblical hermeneutics and gospel Communication in Africa. Thereafter, the paper evaluates Eurocentric hermeneutical methods and highlights some possible ways we can shift towards contextualized approaches to biblical hermeneutics in Africa.

Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics refers to the science of biblical interpretation. In the evangelical tradition, the Bible plays a critical role in theological formulations and gospel proclamation; hence, its interpretation

and application must be handled with due diligence. Contextual biblical hermeneutics has been defined as a biblical method of interpretation that recognizes the uniqueness of each context by taking its history, identity, aspirations, norms, values, and time into consideration.¹ It is a hermeneutical principle circumscribed by the following question: What does the witness, or text, say today, and what is the value of this witness to the contemporary reader or hearer?² In other words, contextual interpretation – and the practical application of biblical principles that it supports – is based on the supposition that the Bible does not come to us in a cultural or theological vacuum, but rather is interpreted by communities situated within particular historical, social, and religiously plural contexts that shape its meaning and relevance.

The biblical canon itself bears witness to multiple cross-cultural encounters, having emerged through interactions among Hebrew, Persian, Babylonian, Graeco-Roman, and later European contexts.³ In the Old Testament, God communicated His mind to His people and through His prophets from the viewpoint of their respective cultural nuances and distinctiveness to ensure clarity and adequate comprehension of His purpose. The New Testament also provides a vivid picture of contextual interpretation and application. The historical Jesus' teaching and ministry was embedded within the social, cultural, and religious realities of first-century Palestine, and his use of parables, legal debates, and everyday imagery – such as those found in the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the lost sheep, payment of tax to Caesar, etc. – was tailored to the lived experiences of his contemporary audience.⁴ This fact underscores the need to understand and appreciate the cultural grounding of Scripture

C. H. Kraft defines contextual biblical hermeneutics as “the process of interpreting Christian truths in terms of applying them to real-life issues arising from the socio-cultural context within which the interpreters live,”⁵ while Wilbur O'Donovan describes it as “applying the truth of God to a local culture.”⁶ Contextual hermeneutics can therefore be understood as Biblical interpretation and application undertaken in recognition of the recipients' context and cultural setting, and it maintains that effective interpretation and communication of the gospel must be grounded in the cultural and existential realities of the receiving community. While describing contextualization as “the cutting edge of missiology,” Darrell L. Whiteman asserts that it is the most urgent need in mission today, and, moreover, that unless the gospel is presented locally “in ways that connect to people's language, culture, and worldview, we will fail in our efforts at world evangelization.”⁷ This comment from Whiteman firmly underscores the imperative of contextual interpretation and application in all settings of ecclesiastical cum missiological engagements. One of the ways to appreciate the validity of Whiteman's assertion is to place it within the context of Western approaches to hermeneutics in Africa.

1. John Arierhi Ottuh, “Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa,” *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2014): 31.

2. Michael Kyomya, *A Guide to Interpreting Scripture* (Zondervan: Hippo Books, 2010), 23.

3. Dapo F. Asaju, “Afro-Centric Biblical Studies: Another Recolonization?” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*, ed. Samuel O. Abogurin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 121.

4. Elizabeth Adeyoola Oluwole, “Contextualizing Gospel Message for Discipleship in the Contemporary Society,” in *Going and Making Disciples of all Nations: The Missionary, Evangelistic and Nurturing Tasks of the Church*, ed. Emiola Nihinlola (Ogbomosho: NBTS Publishing Unit, 2016), 100.

5. Charles H. Kraft, “The Contextualization of Theology,” *Evangelical Mission Quarterly*, (1978): 35–36.

6. Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1996), 6.

7. Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 21, no. 1 (1997): <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693939702100101>.

Features of the Eurocentric Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa

This section briefly examines some means and methods by which Western Christians have carried out biblical interpretation and applied gospel communication in Africa. Three prominent patterns will be identified and discussed.

The Historical-Critical Approach to Biblical Interpretation and the Gospel

The historical-critical method of biblical interpretation is a branch of the broader method of historical criticism, an approach developed from the recovery of ancient manuscripts and classical texts from antiquity in the Renaissance.⁸ The historical-critical method aims to account for the history, time and cultural matrix of biblical texts in a bid to understand them in the context of their ancient settings.⁹ It emphasizes, however, that, while historical analysis helps us understand the original circumstances of a biblical text, interpretation should not stop there: the text must also be considered in relation to how it can be understood and applied in other contexts.

It has been observed that the Western overemphasis on the historical-critical foundations of biblical interpretation has often resulted in readings shaped by assumptions common within modern Western intellectual culture.¹⁰ A well-known example is Rudolph Bultmann's program of "demythologization,"¹¹ which interprets the New Testament's references to demons and spiritual powers as mythological expressions rather than descriptions of real spiritual realities. While this reading reflects the intellectual climate of twentieth-century European biblical scholarship, African theologians have criticized how such interpretations often fail to seriously engage with the cosmologies, orality, storytelling, parables, and norms that shape the African Christian experience.¹² While the historical-critical formulation has proven valuable for reconstructing the historical setting of biblical texts and explaining their meaning within their original contexts, many African Christians have expressed concern over how these interpretations address practical and existential questions within their own cultural and spiritual context. This misalignment has thus resulted in a significant hermeneutical lacuna within many African Christian contexts, where interpreters and adherents yearn to engage the biblical message in ways that resonate more clearly with their cultural and spiritual realities.¹³

8. John J. Collins, "Historical-Critical Methods," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Steven B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511843365>.

9. Collins, "Historical-Critical Methods."

10. For a discussion of how, in interpreting Christian doctrine, European nations such as Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands have historically disregard the intrinsic value of African culture and presented their scientific and industrial society as intrinsically far superior, see: "The Philosophy of Colonialism: Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce," *Violence in Twentieth Century Africa* (blog), Emory University, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/violenceinafrica/sample-page/the-philosophy-of-colonialism-civilization-christianity-and-commerce/>.

11. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Message," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hanes-Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, 1–44 (London: SPCK, 1953).

12. See, for example, John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

13. Joel Mokhoathi, "From Contextual Theology to African Christianity: The Consideration of Adiaphora from a South African Perspective," *Religions*, 8, no. 12 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8120266>.

Uncritical Interrogation and Inadequate Contextualization

Another feature of the Eurocentric approach to biblical hermeneutics in Africa relates to how Western missionaries and interpreters have often historically failed to examine African cultures carefully or sympathetically, leading to the inadequate contextualization of Christianity in African contexts.¹⁴ For instance, historian J. D. Fage has noted that many European intellectuals, explorers, and missionaries of the mid- to late nineteenth century operated within a racialized framework that led them to treat African practices unfamiliar to them as lesser or “savage”¹⁵ – assumptions which then often shaped the way the Christian message was communicated in Africa. In other words, the uncritical portrayal and presentation of the gospel in European cultural garb, has often resulted in an inadequate appreciation of and engagement with, African socio-cultural diversities. As Kwame Bediako has argued – a point which Diane B. Stinton then further theorizes – this dynamic reflects “the missionaries’ presumption of European value-setting for the Christian faith,”¹⁶ a posture that “excluded Africa’s religious past from serious theological reflection.”¹⁷ Stated more plainly, Bediako and Stinton point to how the tendency of presenting Christianity primarily through the Greco-Roman and Judeo Christian heritage of Western Europe depicts an attitude of insensitivity to the cultural diversity of other contexts/cultures.¹⁸

The inadequate appreciation, interpretation, and contextualization of Christianity in Africa is multifaceted. As Whiteman avers, “when Christianity is not contextualized or is contextualized poorly, then people are culturally offended, turned off to inquiring more about who Jesus is, or view missionaries and their small band of converts with suspicion as cultural misfits and aliens,”¹⁹ which, at worst, can lead to Christianity being “dismissed as a ‘foreign religion’ and hence irrelevant.”²⁰

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Triumphalism

Ethnocentrism describes the tendency of Western cultures to display of a sense of superiority in cultural engagements and assessments. As Tersur Aben observes, this tendency imposes European socio-political, cultural, and religious beliefs on Africans, forcing them to imbibe European cultural practices, education, and languages in an attempt to “civilize” Africans.²¹ A typical instance has been captured in the poem *The White Man’s Burden* by Rudyard Kipling, who in alluding to the United States’ imperialist ideology in the Philippines, denounces the religious practices of Africans as witchcraft and heathenism.²² Likewise, in a missionary memoir, a monk named Daniel Kumler Flickinger describes the state of African

14. For details, see John S. Pobee, “I Am First an African and Second a Christian,” *Indian Missiological Review* 10, no. 3 (1989): 268–277.

15. “The Philosophy of Colonialism: Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce,” *Violence in Twentieth Century Africa* (blog), Emory University, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/violenceinafrica/sample-page/the-philosophy-of-colonialism-civilization-christianity-and-commerce/>.

16. Kwame Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century,” *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* 3, no. 2 (1996): 4.

17. Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 9.

18. Séamus Murphy, “Cultures, Pluralism, and Religious Faith,” *An Irish Quarterly Review* 92, 365 (2003), 34.

19. Whiteman, “Contextualization,” 3.

20. Whiteman, “Contextualization,” 4.

21. Tersur Aben, *African Christian Theology: Illusion and Reality* (Bukuru, Jos: African Christian Textbooks, 2008), 10.

22. “The Philosophy of Colonialism,” *Violence in Twentieth Century Africa*.

culture, religion, and society in the nation of Ethiopia as follows:²³ “The only reason why our theological views are not as foolish and corrupting as theirs (Ethiopians), and that we are not believers in witchcraft, devil-worship, and a thousand other foolish things, is simply because the light of Heaven shines upon us.”²⁴

Flickinger’s statement indicates the extent to which Western missionaries cast unnecessary aspersions on the cultures of the African people, aspersions cast without a critical evaluation of their inherent merits and prospects. Consequently, the gospel mission was sometimes understood as an invitation to embrace Western cultural values, ideals, and practices. Adrian Hastings further alludes to this scenario by recounting the tendency of European missionaries to treat everything pre-Christian in Africa as either harmful or valueless – leading to the condemnation of almost everything African.²⁵ Disturbingly, some foreign missionaries branded Africans as pagan and/or demonic.²⁶ As Atokor avers, “the ancestral veneration, spirit world, the use of herbs for curing diseases, polygamy, medicine, locally brewed wine, traditional dances, and native names were assumed to be condemned by missionaries as being satanic.”²⁷ These tendencies on the part of Western missionaries eschewed a holistic appraisal of African culture and religious expression, and, in turn, led to the perception that Western culture represented the necessary interpretive framework for Christianity.

This imperialistic tendency is clearly articulated by Stephen Neill in his famous book *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, as follows:

In many parts of the world, the Christian voice can only be a Western voice. [...] In the past, it was too readily assumed that out of the seed of the Gospel, only one kind of tree can grow – sow the Word, and what you will see emerge is something like the culture of the Western world. So, it was natural for the early Portuguese missionaries to give their converts Portuguese names, some of which their descendants still proudly bear, and to expect them to conform as nearly as possible to the habits of their teachers and their rulers.²⁸

Neill’s submission reveals the extent to which Westerners erred in their attitude towards the African socio-cultural climate. While some of the practices and features of African culture that Westerners degraded and condemned might not perfectly conform to the principles of the Scripture, this does not mean that they are altogether devoid of intrinsic value. Yet, the “I am better than you” mentality on the part of Western Christians in the past often assumed that genuine commitment to Christ required a total break from African cultural expressions.²⁹ These cases therefore lend credence to what is considered the ethnocentric attitude of Westerners, which often leads them to assume that their culture is superior to that of others.

23. “The Philosophy of Colonialism,” *Violence in Twentieth Century Africa*.

24. Daniel K. Flickinger, *Ethiopia: Twenty Years of Missionary Life in Western Africa* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publish House, 1877), 84.

25. Adrian Hastings, “Christianity and African Cultures,” *New Blackfriars* 48, no. 559 (1966): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb01050x>.

26. Clement O. Oyelakin, “Challenges of Religious Syncretism on the Vibrant Spirituality of African Christianity: Implications for Theological Institutions,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* xxvii, no. 1 (2022), 82.

27. Patrick Ishaku Atokor, “The Emergence of Nationalism and Ethiopianism and Their Implications for African Christianity,” in *Christianity and African Society: A Festschrift in Honour of Pastor (Dr.) Gabriel Oladele Olutola at 80*, ed. Samson A. Fatokun (Ibadan: BookWright Publishers, 2013), 24.

28. Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 271.

29. Atokor, “The Emergence,” 24.

An Appraisal of Eurocentric Hermeneutics

There is no gainsaying that Western missionary efforts laid the solid foundations for the current state of Christianity's outlook in Africa. As Kwame Bediako has shown, African Christianity has not simply rejected its missionary origins, but has appropriated and reinterpreted them in ways that affirm their enduring significance.³⁰ This suggests that the earliest missionaries' efforts should not simply be regarded as colossal failures. As Bediako emphasizes, "the negative side of missionary history in Africa must not be exaggerated."³¹ Therefore, it would be misguided to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" in a bid to undermine the contributions of Western missionaries to the development of African Christianity.

Moreover, the hermeneutical legacy of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation that was introduced by Western scholars has now been accepted by African scholars as a valuable method of theological formulation and gospel communication.³² Ottuh states that the historical critical method, which came into use in biblical studies around the seventeenth century, constituted the only methodological paradigm for academic biblical studies up to the mid-twentieth century before the emergence of the literary approach, which was then called "new criticism."³³ However, while this "new" method has proven valuable, it does not in itself sufficiently address the contextual and practical concerns of African Christian experience, and, accordingly, African Christians and scholars have continued to explore various approaches to contextual hermeneutics in Africa to relate the Bible to specific issues of interest.

Weaknesses and Manifestations of Eurocentric Hermeneutics in Africa

The outcome of Eurocentric interpretation and contextualization in Africa is multifaceted. First, the development makes African Christians feel unnecessarily burdened with having to bear at least two cultural loads, both Western and traditional,³⁴ which, in turn, reinforces the idea that to become a Christian is to embrace Western culture. This is because, as Bediako and Lamin Sanneh have shown, the close association of Christianity with Western cultural forms has often obscured its translatability and universal character, thus leading to tensions within African Christian identity.³⁵ This restrictive approach to Christianity – where it is tied to Western cultural forms – is theologically incorrect because it misunderstands the universal nature of God's salvation and the mission of the Christian Church.

Syncretism is another worrying challenge arising from inadequate contextual hermeneutics in Africa. Religious syncretism, which arises from the cultural and theological gaps in gospel communication in Africa, has also hindered what Bediako describes as "intensive Christological inquiry,"³⁶ thereby making it difficult for Christ to inhabit the spiritual universe of the African consciousness.³⁷ This is because under subtle cultural influences, many Africans tend to equate extra-biblical revelation with divine Reality due to

30. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

31. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 5.

32. Ottuh, "Contextualization," 28.

33. Ottuh, "Contextualization," 29.

34. Tite Teinou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1982), 20.

35. See Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, and Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

36. Bediako, "Understanding African Theology," 2.

37. Kwame Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Bangalore: Partnership in Mission-Asia, 1983), 125.

an inadequate understanding, interpretation, and application of the Scripture within their cultural context. As such, some professing African Christians practice syncretism under the guise of “we should not destroy our culture,” aiming to fill the theological chasm created by the Western lack of appreciation for the African socio-religious climate. In the same vein, some Africans believe that the search for authentic Christian theology in Africa can only be achieved if there is a merger between Christianity and African Traditional Religion.³⁸

Undoubtedly, there are contemporary expressions and practices that align with this idea in African Christianity today. This accounts for why some Christians are using magical paraphernalia and occult objects such as amulets, magic hair, water, blood, talismans, crucifixes, pendants, earrings, wedding or engagement rings, hagstones, demonic marks and symbols to protect themselves. Moreover, I have witnessed instances where some professing Christians who want blessings in their trades and businesses were involved in rituals and sacrifices in order to attract numerous customers. Also, in some African churches, such as the “white garment churches,” there are some practices that are subtle invitations to syncretism or multiple religious ideologies. The persons involved in these practices do not seem to understand where to draw the line between involvement in cultural obligation and biblical ethos. This unsettling disparity is often associated with the gap between Africans’ vibrant religious and spiritual activity and a clear biblically grounded understanding of faith. This is a major ecclesiastical and missiological paradox in African Christianity, suggesting that biblical Christianity is still not deeply rooted in the lives of many leaders and members in Africa.

The Way Forward: Approaches to Contextual Hermeneutics in Africa

This section focuses on highlighting some helpful approaches for incorporating contextual hermeneutics to respond to existing gaps in African Christianity. These approaches apply to the African and global Church in general.

Prioritize Biblical Unity over Ethnic and Cultural Differences

Prioritizing biblical unity over ethnic and cultural differences is crucial to reconciling the theological and hermeneutical gaps in African Christianity, and the global Church needs to engage more intentionally in this regard. This is because the Bible is the primary witness of God’s revelation in Christ, whose testimony cuts across cultural boundaries, regions, political structures, education, and social status. Moreover, the Bible is the common bond that unites believers and bridges the gulf of cultural differences. Just as neither the Jews nor the Gentiles were required to surrender their cultural heritages to be accepted into God’s family,³⁹ the truth of the Bible is intended for all human beings of all cultures and all ages. Therefore, the global Church needs to do away with all discriminatory tendencies and practices.

38. An example is Bolaji Idowu, a Methodist minister who believed, not only that African Traditional Religion had a lot to offer Africans, but that it must also be well embraced by Africans. See Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM PRESS, 1973), xi.

39. Fehintola M. Akangbe, “Scripture and Culture: Interplay of Influence,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* xvii, no. 2 (2012): 30.

A Theocentric Orientation cum Gospel Universality

The Christian Church should address the hermeneutical gaps in Africa by emphasizing theocentric universality, which deals with recognizing God's universal and cross-cultural revelation to humankind. In advocating for the unrestricted universality of God, it must be noted that God is one, and this one God is the God of the whole universe. As David Adamo observes, "God is not considered a one-way track God. His mode of revelation to the world cannot be limited."⁴⁰ This indicates that God should not be understood as being exclusively at work in Western culture, as though He were insensitive to cultural diversities. It must be emphasized, however, that recognizing God's work in all cultures is not the same as pluralist universalism, which holds that all humans will be saved irrespective of their religious beliefs, without faith in Christ. Rather, the idea is to affirm that God is the Lord of the whole universe, irrespective of cultural and tribal differences.

Embrace a Liberationist Approach to Decolonize Biblical Hermeneutics

The Church in Africa and beyond should adopt a liberationist approach to "break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold of Eurocentric hermeneutics."⁴¹ This approach entails the continued use of biblical passages that give credence to Isaiah's exhortation to "seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, [and] plead for the widow" (Isa 1:17), in order to develop contextual hermeneutical paradigms that address existential sociopolitical issues in Africa. A typical example of the liberationist approach is found in South Africa, where the Third World Black theology emerged in response to apartheid and contributed to the formulation of Black liberation theology.⁴² In the same vein, the challenges and shortcomings in the application of contextual interpretation and gospel communication in Africa, as highlighted above, have triggered various counter-reactions to contextual hermeneutics among by African Christians and scholars.

Diane B. Stinton has traced the contextual expressions in the liberation model among Africans to the sociopolitical developments of the 1950s, when the struggle against colonialism gave rise to several newly independent states.⁴³ She recalls, "For example, in 1955, shortly before Ghana became the first African nation to attain independence 1957, the Christian Council of the Gold Coast sponsored a conference in Accra, 'Christianity and African Culture,' which proved to be instrumental in forging new theological directions."⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Timothy D. Stabell recalls that "liberation theologians have insisted that the Scriptures address not only matters of culture, but also of social exclusion, economic injustice and political oppression."⁴⁵ Stabell notes that this liberation-transformation approach to the Bible is of significant relevance to the objective social, economic, and political realities in which people live, and also speaks to questions of injustice, exploitation, domination, and oppression (e.g., James 5:1–6).⁴⁶ In light of these

40. David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African biblical Hermeneutic(s)," *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 1 (2015): 35, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n1a4>.

41. Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness," 35.

42. Ottuh, "Contextualization," 32

43. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 7.

44. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 7.

45. Timothy D. Stabell, "Rethinking Contextualization and the Gospel in Africa," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2005): 173.

46. Stabell, "Rethinking Contextualization," 169.

considerations, the Christian Church needs to continue to explore the merits of the liberationist model as a paradigm shift crucial to developing an indigenous theology based on sociocultural realities.

Effective Integration of the African Worldview

Having noted earlier that Western interpretations and illustrations have tended to center on what is familiar to the average Westerner, there is a need for the proper integration of African worldviews in biblical hermeneutics by the global Church. As discussed above, while the historical-critical formulation often satisfied scholastic and cognitive purposes, Africans have been concerned with finding practical solutions to biblical and life questions. The misalignment between historical-critical hermeneutics and this concern has resulted in a significant hermeneutical lacuna for the African people who yearn to experience authentic African Christianity within their cultural setting.⁴⁷ Integrating the African worldview therefore requires taking steps such as adopting African orality, storytelling, parables, and norms to dissect and interpret theological complexities. Scholars and mission stakeholders must be unmistakable about the compelling spiritual and socio-political realities in Africa, such as the reality of the spirit world, poverty, insecurity and other cultural, religious, and political struggles confronting the African nations.

This further necessitates adopting biblical interpretations and illustrations that resonate with African cosmology, narratives, and thought forms. Just as the Gospel writers provided different portraits of Jesus along with the interpretative statements of the New Testament, so too should diverse Christologies in Africa continue to emerge in an ongoing dialogue between text and context.⁴⁸ For instance, “since the spirit-fathers or ancestors are central to the Akan heritage, Bediako develops the image of Jesus as an ancestor, concluding that, “Jesus Christ is the only real and true Ancestor and Source of life for all humankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors.”⁴⁹ African Christians have also drawn on the notion of kingship in instituting contextual Christological hermeneutics, a notion which is deeply embedded in African cultures and therefore provides a foundation for articulating the doctrine of the kingship of Christ.⁵⁰ All these suggest the compelling relevance of adequate analyzing and interpreting parallel models in African belief systems and the Bible, which are essential to entrenching genuine African Christianity.

Exploration of power dynamics vis-à-vis the Holy Spirit is another worldview paradigm for contextual hermeneutics in contemporary Africa. By extracting relevant biblical passages and utilizing contextual application, indigenous missions have responded appropriately to the reality of traditional African worldviews concerning the spiritual world and demonic forces, including occultism, superstitions, idolatry, fatalism, witchcraft, syncretism, etc.⁵¹ Consequently, in addition to gospel proclamation, African Christians have emphasized spiritual warfare, power encounters, miracles, and divine healing in the power of the Holy Spirit to respond to African existential challenges.⁵² By exploring the dynamics of spiritual power encounters in relation to the Holy Spirit, African Christians have recognized the need to

47. Joel Mokhoathi, “From Contextual Theology to African Christianity.”

48. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 15.

49. Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective*, 51–52.

50. Hastings, “Christianity and African Culture,” 130.

51. Matthews A. Ojo, “The Growth of Indigenous Cross-Cultural Missions in Nigeria,” in *Contemporary Issues in African Missions*, ed. Kayode Owojori (Ibadan: African Christian Centre for Leadership Advancement and International Missions, 2020), 50.

52. Ojo, “The Growth of Indigenous,” 50.

communicate the gospel message with clarity and in terms that engage the deepest levels of a people's thought and belief system.⁵³

Bible Translation into Local Dialects

Bible translation is another helpful contextual hermeneutics approach in contemporary Africa. While previous efforts in translating the Bible into local languages must be acknowledged, the Church in Africa and beyond should intensify efforts at making the Bible available in local dialects. Bediako has noted that the far-reaching implications of vernacular translations of the Bible cannot be overemphasized.⁵⁴ Historically, Joseph Merrick, a Jamaican freed slave of West African ancestry, translated parts of the New Testament into the local language of Cameroon in 1843,⁵⁵ while Ajayi Crowther also translated the Bible into the Yoruba language, despite having no formal degree in linguistics or Translation, and was instrumental to the development of translations in Igbo and Nupe in Nigeria.⁵⁶ The benefit of the translation model, Bevans argues, is that the gospel is understood to be, in its essence, a universal message, applicable to all peoples and transcending particular cultures.⁵⁷

As we know, the Bible as we have it today was not originally written in English or African languages. While the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, the New Testament was written in Greek. The efforts of African Christians to translate the Bible from English to various local dialects represent an attempt to overcome the language barrier in biblical interpretation and gospel communication. Translation is therefore a helpful way of addressing the cultural gap experienced by readers of the Bible outside the original Jewish cultural milieu.⁵⁸ Justin S. Ukpong asserts that the development of African indigenous languages is essential for a genuine appreciation of African culture and for the effective communication and internalization of the gospel within African contexts.⁵⁹ This is because, he argues, Language is not merely a neutral medium, but carries cultural meanings, symbols, and modes of thought; therefore, engaging the Bible through African languages enables a deeper, culturally rooted interpretation.⁶⁰ At the same time, Ukpong recognizes the practical role of English as a wider communication medium, suggesting that it can serve as a vehicle for promoting and supporting the development of African indigenous languages rather than replacing them.⁶¹

Raise the Bar of Indigenous Scholarship

With partnership and support from the international ecclesiastical bodies, the Church in Africa must be intentional in raising the bar of indigenous scholarship. This will go a long way in building a theology that is Christian, biblical, and African – which is to say, sensitive to meeting the spiritual, social, and

53. Stabell, "Rethinking Contextualization," 169.

54. Stinton, *Jesus in Africa*, 11.

55. Mike Adegbile, "Africa's Missionary Identity: How African Missionaries Evolved," in *Contemporary Issues in African Missions*, ed. Kayode Owojori (Ibadan: African Christian Centre for Leadership Advancement and International Mission, 2020), 158.

56. Adegbile, "Africa's Missionary Identity," 159.

57. Bevans, quoted in Stabell, "Rethinking Contextualization," 170.

58. Ottuh, "Contextualization," 31.

59. Justin S. Ukpong, "Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa," in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*, ed. Samuel O. Abogurin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 36.

60. Ukpong, "Inculturation as Decolonization," 36.

61. Ukpong, "Inculturation as Decolonization," 36.

religious yearnings of the African people. As Emiola Nihinlola posits, achieving this objective is a crucial task for Christian theologians in Africa.⁶² Apart from providing direction and guidelines on critical doctrinal issues, theological institutions should intensify efforts to provide theological guidelines and hermeneutical principles on [African?] religious practices.⁶³ Such theological formulations and biblical hermeneutics are expected to address pertinent issues regarding faith, human situations, and the appropriate human response to God.

This should also involve writing of theological books that are contextually relevant in expressing how Africans understand God and his dealings with humans.⁶⁴ Abogunrin recounted an experience that is very crucial to raising the bar of contextual scholarship and academic theology in Africa:

Throughout my years in the Bible College and seminary in Nigeria, I cannot remember courses on African culture and religion. The only course in African indigenous religion was taught with the main purpose of showing how heathenistic and useless the African religion and cultures are. When I first entered the Bible College in 1968, I was taught how to sit on the toilet comos, how to use toilet paper, how to dress like Americans and even how to use spoons and forks on the dining table. But not any atom of the value of African culture was taught. By the time I graduated, I had learnt to interpret the Bible the African way, and preached it the American way.⁶⁵

The narration above is a pointer to the imperative of theological contextualization in African theological institutions towards beaming a consistent searchlight on contextualization challenges and issues in African Christianity.⁶⁶ Christian theology should be adequately developed to address traditional religious beliefs and worldviews as a means of elucidating, guiding, and influencing theological understanding, interpretation, and application.⁶⁷ Biblical, cultural, and theological concepts that are germane to the religious life of the African people should be both of contemporary relevance and also recognize the uniqueness of the African context. There is a need for it to be given adequate attention by professional theologians. A “post-colonial” approach to biblical studies should challenge biblical scholars to explore the contexts of biblical interpretation in a bid to draw out implications for politics, culture, religion, and spirituality in modern Africa.⁶⁸ This goes a long way in combating factors militating against the vibrancy of African Christianity.

Conclusion

This paper has appraised the inherent disparities in Western missionaries’ approaches to biblical hermeneutics in Africa and articulated helpful approaches to addressing misalignments in contextual

62. Emiola Nihinlola, *Theology Under the Mango Tree: A Handbook of African Christian Theology* (Lagos: Fine Print & Manufacturing Limited, 2013), 18.

63. Oyelakin, “Challenges of Religious Syncretism,” 86.

64. Atokor, “The Emergence,” 29.

65. Samuel O. Abogunrin, quoted in David Tuesday Adamo, “The Task and Distinctiveness,” para. 6.

66. Oyelakin, “Challenges of Religious Syncretism,” 87.

67. Afolarin Olalekan, Dairo, “New Trends in African Christianity: Biblical Theology and African Religion, Culture and Society,” in *Christianity and African Society*, ed. Samson A. Fatokun (Ibadan: BookWright Publishers, 2013), 154.

68. J. A. Oladunjoye, “Decolonizing Biblical Studies: An Opening Address,” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*, ed. Samuel O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 7.

hermeneutics. It noted that, while the earliest missionaries' efforts in entrenching Christianity in Africa should not be discredited outright, the tendency to clothe Christianity predominantly in garb of Western culture contradicts the very nature of the gospel as good news for cultures, tribes, and languages that don't recognize that garb.

The recommended approaches to addressing contextual hermeneutical challenges in Africa include prioritizing biblical unity over ethnic and cultural differences, emphasizing theocentric cum gospel universality, embracing a liberationist approach to decolonize biblical hermeneutics, the effective integration of African worldviews, Bible translation into local dialects, and raising the bar of indigenous scholarship. The paper submits that these approaches are critical to bridging the gap created by inadequate hermeneutics and contextualization in Africa, thereby fostering more effective communication and comprehension of the gospel message. The paper concludes that effective contextual hermeneutics is necessary, not only as a major precursor to birthing authentic African Christianity, but in deepening the spiritual vibrancy of Christianity on African soil.

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