

Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa

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Abstract

Contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa has been a welcome development in Africa biblical scholarship. The Bible is written by God's inspiration but it was physically designed in human cultural attire hence interpreting it without contextualization can cause some cultural gap. Using the comparative and evaluative models as methodology, this work aimed at the examination of biblical interpretation from an African perspective; encouragement of localization of biblical interpretation in Africa; presentation of various methodologies of biblical interpretations in Africa in relation to that of the West; and evaluation of contextual biblical interpretation in Africa in relation to evangelization, inculturation and the universal Christian faith. The work showed that contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa through the means of inculturation can help the African Christian in effective evangelism and Christian growth. The work also showed that evangelization by inculturation will help the African Christian to understand the bible message better as a result of the presence of African illustrations. It also showed that contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa was not to be understood in terms of accommodation of syncretism in the African Christian worship and as such, biblical text must be interpreted in the context of African materials and experience without losing its original meaning. In spite of the challenges confronting African biblical studies, there are still some prospects.

1. Introduction

The history of biblical studies in Africa can be traced from the conference in Ibadan, Nigeria of the 'Consultation of African Theologians' in 1966 (Mbiti, 1986:73). The need for African biblical interpretation in the soil of Africa has led many African scholars to do contextual biblical studies in Africa. In the opinion of Abogurin (2000:1), frustration over the foreignness of the approach to theological studies has paved way for vigorous search for theology in context in Africa, hence giving room for fresh reading and interpretation of the Bible in the African context. In this same line of thought, Ukpong (2006:4) also states that African biblical studies is not only done for African audience alone but also for the Western audience as well because some Western scholars who became aware of African biblical scholarship after the African Hermeneutics conference that followed the 1996 Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS) meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, became interested in African biblical critical scholarship. As will be seen later in this work, the historical critical method of biblical interpretation was introduced by Western scholars but also accepted by African scholars as a method of

biblical interpretation in Africa until such a time when African biblical scholars started the contextualization approach. The modern methods of biblical interpretation were introduced into the African region about the middle of the twentieth century with the founding of African universities (Onwu, 1985:35; Roux, 1993). However, African scholars have made a lot of scholarly contributions to modern critical biblical scholarship.

Contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa refers to an approach in biblical criticism, which takes the African worldview into consideration. As a hermeneutical and contextual approach, it emphasizes a move from what the text meant to its original audience to what it means to Africans in their context (Nyawung, 2013). Therefore, contextualization in this context can be seen as an urge to interpret God's mind as contained in Scripture to humans in a way that people may feel God's effective presence in their midst (John 1:14). The need for contextual study of the bible in Africa is compelled by the awareness that the Scripture speaks to people of diverse cultures but its message is understood, depending on the contextual milieu of the people.

This paper therefore seeks to present the problems, modern African approaches used in African biblical studies and prospects of contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa. Therefore, the objective of this paper is: to encourage contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa; to present various methodologies of biblical interpretations in Africa in relation to that of the West; and to evaluate contextual biblical interpretation in Africa in relation to evangelization, inculturation and the universal Christian faith.

2. Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Issue of Methodology

African biblical scholarship has generated a lot of arguments as to the issue of mythology. It is the opinion of some African Biblical scholars that African biblical hermeneutics cannot escape the historical critical method (Ukpong, 1999; Abogunrin, 2000:2). To these scholars, the importance of the traditional methodological questions of *what*, *why* and *how*, should certainly not be neglected, but there is also a growing understanding of the importance of the questions of *where* and *with whom*: what are the implications of the (geographical, institutional, sociological, cultural, ideological) location of African scholarship, and who are the interlocutors or dialogue partners?

Ukpong (1999) states that the historical critical method, which came into use in biblical studies about the 17th century, constituted the only methodological paradigm for academic biblical studies up to the middle of the 20th century and about the 1940s, another approach, the literary approach, which was then called "new criticism", also came into use. While historical criticism focuses on the history behind the biblical text and uses historical tools of research, literary criticism focuses on the biblical text itself and uses the tools of literary criticism of classical literature. The two main paradigms today make up the grapevine of western academic biblical studies. Moreover, Ukpong (1999) recounts that most African biblical scholars today have been and continue to be trained in the tradition of western scholarship, including even those trained in Africa itself. Modern biblical scholarship in Africa is therefore a child of this western tradition of biblical scholarship. As a result, both the currents and the counter-currents of western biblical scholarship have found expression also in Africa, and many African biblical scholars are competent in the use of the western tools of biblical interpretation.

This wave scholarship has challenged the African scholars to propound the African methods of biblical interpretation. The African biblical method of interpretation

so forged by African scholars is significantly different from that of western interpretation. In particular, this type of interpretation consists in relating biblical research to specific issues and interests of the African context. Thus, unlike their western counterparts, these scholars focus their research not only on the context of the text (historical critical method) or on the text itself (literary criticism), though these are also important components of their methodology, but on the context of the recipients of the text, that is, the African context (Ukpong, 2006:4-5).

In western scholarship for example, some scholars have discussed the relevance of the many models now in vogue such as: Role Analysis Model (Theissen, 1998), Sociology of Knowledge Model (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), Millenarian Sect Model (Gager, 1975) and Cognitive Dissonance Model (Manus, 1990; Festinger, 1957; Gager, 1975). In African Biblical Studies, Ukpong (2006:7, 37,59,102,130,152,190,228,260) gave nine contemporary Models as follow: Comparative Model (Kibicho,1968; Dickson,1979; Akao,1987; Goba,1993), Africa in the Bible Model (Adamo,1998; Habtu,2001; Ntre,2001), Evaluative Model (Pobee,1979; Manus,1985; Abongurin, 2000; Mbiti,1992; Ukpong,1995), Inculturation Hermeneutics Model (Onwu,1985; Ukpong,2001;), Liberation Theology Model (Ela,1986; Nolan,1988; Banana,1990), Feminist Hermeneutics Model (Okure,1988; Nasimiyu-Wasike,1992; Oduyoye,1994; Akoto,2000), Black Theology Model (Tutu,1986; Maimela,1986; Mofokeng,1987; Mosala,1989; Balia,1994), the Narrative Reading Model (Avotri,1999; Masoga,1995; Dube,2000) and the Popular Reading Model (Mwaura,2001; Otieno,2001; West,2000).

In African Biblical hermeneutics as enumerated above, the Comparative Analysis model is interested in comparing the Bible and African life and culture. This type of study was very common up to the 1980s. Their analyses of the biblical text are based on insights from the historical critical method. The approach referred to as Evaluative Model, is the most popular approach in use today in studies that relate the biblical text to the African context. It involves the study of the local situation in the light of biblical witness, and the historical critical method is used in analyzing the biblical text. Moreover, the Africa in the Bible Model seeks to identify references to Africa in the Bible. It is an approach that seeks to show the importance of Africa in the world of the Bible. Furthermore, the Inculturation hermeneutics Model is a recent development which attempted to evolve a holistic approach to inculturation that would, among other things, be interested not only in the religious aspect of culture, but also in its secular aspects. As applied to biblical interpretation it is heavily dependent on the historical critical method for the analysis of the context of the biblical text. While the Liberation Hermeneutics Model seeks to use the bible as a resource for socio-economic and political critique injustice and oppression and uses the bible to struggle for a change of the status-quo, Black Theology Models, emanated from South Africa and seeks to use the bible to fight against apartheid or racial discrimination. The Feminist Hermeneutics Model seeks to use the bible to fight against the oppression of women. It also uses the historical critical method when necessary, but does not always depend on it directly, for often the literary approaches serve its purpose better. The Narrative Reading Model focuses on the application of African genre such as proverb and story to read the Bible. It cuts across inculturation and liberation paradigms. The Popular Reading Model, intends to present biblical scholarship in Africa in such a way that the bible is made available to the ordinary people in such a way that is congenial to the ordinary people's way of reading the Bible. This model is also cuts across inculturation and liberation paradigms.

Although African biblical interpretation advocates contextualization of the biblical text, it cannot avoid critical reading of the bible. It is on this basis it is expedient to simultaneously use the historical critical and African contextual reading method to interpret biblical text. Contextualization de-globalizes biblical interpretation and application. It is worthy of note here therefore, that the historical background of a text is multifaceted. What determines which facet is to be focused on in the process of exegesis is the scholarly community-based on the experience of their contexts (though this is hardly acknowledged). Therefore, comparative and evaluative methods shall be adopted here as methodology for this work.

3. Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa: A Bridge Between the Biblical Cultural Distance and African Culture

The Bible that is being read today was not originally written in English or African languages. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and few Aramaic. The New Testament was written in koine Greek. This has some times created a serious language barrier. Moreover, the Bible was written in the Jewish cultural backgrounds which may not be exactly the same with that of the West and Africa. This has also caused a cultural distance to those who read the Bible outside the original Jewish cultural milieu. Another major problem identified by Abogunrin (2000:5) is the great gap between the thought-forms of the Bible world and the West, through which the Bible was transmitted to Africa.

In order to bridge the gap created as a result of cultural variations between the Hebrew culture within which the bible was written and the contemporary African culture, African biblical interpreters should study biblical languages in all levels of biblical studies and give the African equivalents to the bible language and that of the westerners. When the bible is accurately translated in the African languages, it becomes easier to interpret. Although, the difficulty of exact equivalent of words or terms cannot be ruled out and the possibility of the nearest word and cultural equivalent cannot also be ruled out either. Another step which can be taken to bridge this gap is contextualization of the biblical interpretation. Contextualization plays an important role in biblical interpretations. What is the meaning of contextualization? Contextualization deals with the act of interpreting and applying the Biblical meanings to the African situation without the Bible losing its original and universal message (Abugurin,2000:7). In the opinion of Odoemene (2007:25), contextualization is derived from the word context and it implies any given situation. According to Schineller (1990:19), contextualization means a weaving together of two or more items and it refers to third world methods of theological and biblical interpretations. A contextual biblical interpretation is therefore a biblical method of interpretation that takes the uniqueness of every context into consideration, which consists of the history, identity, aspirations, norms, values and the time of the particular contexts, knowing fully well that contexts are relative. The relativity of culture is a serious basis for contextual interpretation of the bible so that in any cultural milieu where the bible is being interpreted, such interpretation can put into consideration the culture of such a people. A typical example of contextual biblical interpretation was that of South Africa, where the third world black theology was formed as a result of apartheid. Even though, the experience of the Israelites was some how similar to that of South Africa, the experience was not the same in the sense that; while the Israelites were being enslaved and maltreated in a foreign land, that of South Africa was apartheid in

their own land, hence black liberation theology became more resonant with their situation.

4. The Role of Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa in Relation to Inculturation

Does contextualization of biblical hermeneutics in Africa have any role to play in evangelization of the African people? Of course, contextualization, within evangelical Christianity, is communicating the gospel using methods and terms appropriate to a given audience. It represents the understanding that although the gospel message is abiding and universal, the cultural contexts in which God revealed it and in which it is delivered are distinct and different (Ware,2007). Here the role of contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa in relation to inculturation will be examined as follows:

4.1 Evangelization by Inculturation

What is the meaning of Evangelization? The English verb “evangelize” comes from the Greek verb *euaggelizo* which means to preach the good news, God’s loving kindness, the messianic blessings and message of salvation. From this we have the Greek noun *euaggelion* which means thanksgiving offering for good tidings and it also means gospel or good news (Abbot-Smith, 1964:184). In the Old Testament, the equivalent of *euaggelion* is the Hebrew word *besora* (plural) which means tidings especially tidings of victory (cf. 2 Sam.18:20,25,27; 2 Kings 7:9), that is, “good news.” In 2 Samuel 4:10; 18:22, *besora* also has a specific religious and eschatological connotation (Ukpong,1995:22-30). The Hebrew verb *bissar* came to mean to proclaim the eschatological message of joy, and the noun *mebasser* (evangelism), means eschatological messenger of joy (Friedrick, 1964:721-726). In the religious context, *euaggelion* was used by the Greeks in connection with oracles and the cult of the Emperor (Ukpong,1995:22-30). The news of the birth of a divine ruler, of his enthronement as well as his speeches, acts and decrees, were glad tidings; and the proclamation of the *euaggelion* brought about a new era of salvation and joy (Becker, 1976:107-109). In consonance with its usage in the Old Testament and Rabbinic Judaism, Paul uses the substantive *euaggelion* as a *nomen actionis* (Ukpong,1995:23). The term describes not only the content of what is preached but also the act, process and execution of the proclamation (Friedrick, 1964:110). Thus, in 2 Corinthians 8:18, *euaggelion* denotes the action of preaching the gospel. Besides, the gospel itself is full of dynamism, for as with the Old Testament concept of *besora* and the ancient Greek understanding of *euaggelion*, the gospel of Christ effects what it signifies. Preaching the gospel means announcing to all nations the breaking in of the divine rule on earth, and above all, the Easter victory of Christ as could be seen in Romans 1:6 (Ukpong,1995:23). This proclamation stirs up faith and brings salvation (Roman 1:16; Philippians 1:27), it reveals God’s righteousness. Preaching the gospel requires reaching the entire world with the gospel of salvation.

What is the meaning of inculturation? There seems not to be a generally accepted standard definition of inculturation yet but the idea looks the same. This is partly because, the concept is new and still developing and partly because of the elasticity of the concept of culture on which it is based (Crollius, 1986:31). Inculturation according to Abu (2012:275) is an environment created as a result of the presence of the gospel which takes into cognizance the world-view and culture of the local people so that the

final outcome of the New World is not foreign to the Christians. In Ukachukwu (1985:64) view, inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but also becomes a principle that animates church and initiates the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. Inculturation may be viewed as a model (that is as an objective reality, with the focus on *what* it looks like), or as a method (that is, as a process, in this case an interpretative process, with the focus on *how* the reality comes to be). Most current definitions of inculturation view it as a model (Arrupe, n.d). We prefer, however, to view it as a method since it has to do with approach in evangelization. Viewed as a method, inculturation may be defined as the process of interpreting and living Christianity (that is, Christian faith and practice) from within the perspective of a particular culture and of its people's social and historical life experience in such a way that Christian values are made to animate the people's way of life. It involves a mutual interaction and influence between a culture and the Christian faith whereby the culture is transformed in the process and Christianity is reinterpreted in the light of a new culture and historical life experience (Ukpong, 1984:30). Ukpong further identifies three things which characterize this process. The first is the utilization of the resources of the culture in question for interpreting and articulating the Christian faith. The second is that the good news of Jesus is made to challenge the culture. The third is that all this is done from within the perspective of the culture and through the agency of insiders in the culture. From a specific African socio-cultural point of view, inculturation as a process of interpreting Christianity involves the use of an interpretative frame of reference that sees the material/profane/secular and the spiritual/sacred/religious aspects of reality as inseparable, interdependent and complementary. Any attempt to interpret the Bible outside the culture of the people in which the exegete intends to apply the bible text, a cultural distance may be created and as such the text can become vague (Ijezie, 2007:3-18). To Abogunrin (2000:7), inculturation deals with the communication of the Gospel meaningfully in every cultural situation and recognizes that the scriptures were communicated to the African Christian in cultural context.

From the above, it is clear that evangelization means bringing the good news of God's salvation to people; and inculturation means doing so from the perspective of the people's culture and life situation. It is on this basis that contextual biblical interpretation becomes pertinent. African Christian scholars including our clergies and professors of Christianity in general are being challenged here to rise up to the task of evangelizing our people within our cultures. When we do this, our people will easily comprehend the message of the Bible in our cultural, church and secular milieus. Biblical interpretation should not be foreign to the people who the interpreter intends to apply the message of the bible because the foreignness of the presentation can even cause communication barrier between the preacher and the hearer. For example, the language of the Bible has to be translated into the language of the particular people it intends to address. This was why we have the Targum (translation of the Hebrew Scripture into Aramaic), Vulgate (translation of the bible from its original language to Latin), Septuagint (LXX-translation of the Hebrew Scripture to Greek), Anglo-American and Anglo-Saxon translation (translation of the Bible from its original language to English language), etc. All of these were done so that the readers of the Bible in the, Aramaic, Greek, Latin and English milieus can read, understand and teach the Bible in their mother tongues. In the context of this paper, this can be termed contextualization. It is on this basis that one can also call

on African clergies and scholars alike to package the bible in our various languages in Africa to enable the Church in Africa to maximize it for more meaningful and impactful evangelization in the African society.

4.2 Inculturation: Bridging Christology

The Christ that is known within cultural milieus and salvation experience has become object of various debates by scholars. This debate probably gave birth to the Historical Jesus quest. True Christianity as could be seen in the New Testament is anchored on Jesus Christ who came to reconcile the world to God as could be seen in 2 Corinthians 5:19 and the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and this should be seen as real events in time and space as historical realities (Hagner, 1991:73-74). These historical realities are indispensable foundation of Christian faith. To the evangelicals in the opinion of Hagner (1991:77), assessing the Jesus of Christian history with the historical critical method and the *aufklärung* (German-enlightenment) model, is destructive of the historical Jesus. If the statement concerning the importance of history to the Christian faith made pointed out above are true, it is obvious that the identity of Jesus, established to no small extent by his deeds and *ipsisima vos Jesu* (the words of Jesus), his death and the reality of his resurrection, are all of inestimable importance but it is precisely these things, except for the death of Jesus, that are frequently denied historical reality by scholars using the historical-critical method (*ibid*). In this same line of argument, Schweitzer (1961:398) observed that the conclusion of the historical quest is born out of humanistic and philosophical rationalism and as such saw Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher with a message of imminent doom, not the gentle manly nineteenth-century European humanitarian that was portrayed by the quest (Evans, 1988:48-63). The historical Jesus quest scholars did not put the divinity of Jesus in perspective. The Jesus confessed by the Church is the Jesus that came from above, lived among men, did ministry, died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead on the third day. The act of viewing Jesus Christ trimorphically from the perspective of His divinity, humanity and universal salvation is what is being referred to here as bridged Christology. It is a bridged Christology in the sense that one cannot talk about Christ without referring to the three personalities mentioned above.

This work does not intend to go into the details of the historical Jesus debate but to view Christology from a bridged perspective. Irrespective of scholarly debates, on Jesus, an African Christian cannot afford to acadimize faith to the detriment of personal salvation experience. Therefore, the Christ that is being preached in Africa like that of the missionary is the Christ who was sent by God from above to earth to save mankind from sin and eternal damnation. The faith in this Christ requires repentance, confession of sins and constant profession of faith on this same Christ as the one who resurrected from the dead as Lord. Ukpong (1995:4) gave two contemporary theological approaches to Christology. First, a Christology that is focused on the meaning of Jesus (Christology from above). Second, a Christology that is focused on the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus (Christology from below). Another dimension that could be added is the Christology that is universal. The universal Jesus who came and was experienced in the cultural environment of the Jews as given by the gospel writers was the Saviour of the World including the Jews. Abogunrin (2000:27-43) affirmed that Luke's Gospel in the New Testament for example, gives the concept of a universal Jesus who came to give salvation to men irrespective of their cultural and racial affinities. It is in this context, it becomes important to present Jesus in all the habitations of man as the same Christ of

Christian history and faith. By so doing both the Jesus Christ above, below and universal becomes bridged to become the same Jesus Christ that came from above to save humankind. The Christ from above is the Christ that ministered on earth and that same Christ is the Saviour of all. It is this same Christ that the apostles preached and was preached by the missionaries that came to Africa which we are also now preaching in Africa. Although, we criticize the missionary for relegating our cultures to the background, the Jesus Christ who they preached is the true and only Jesus Christ, the saviour of mankind. This same Christ is relevant in African Christian faith, hence he is preached in Africa with the African cultural garb so as to understand him better in Africa. The role of contextualization of biblical hermeneutics in Africa, therefore, is to make the identity and presence of Jesus to be more real to the Church in Africa through contextual biblical interpretation using the African language and illustrations to show to the church that the Jesus who came from above and did ministry in Jewish cultural environment is also the saviour of Africa and the entire world. Therefore, the church in Africa should be taught and encouraged to see the Jesus who came from above and lived in Jewish land as presented in the Bible as the same Jesus who gave salvation to Africans and the whole world.

4.3 Christian Experience in the Light of Inculturation

Christian experience in the Christian understanding is to become born again (John 3:1-6) and remaining in the *didache* (teachings) of Jesus Christ. Being a Christian starts at the point where one received and put his faith in Christ as his personal Lord and saviour. Paul had this experience while on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians of his time (Acts 9) and never remained the same again. Paul also taught that becoming a Christian is not on the basis of cultural affinity but on the basis of faith in Christ the saviour in one's cultural milieu. While the issue of faith for salvation is universal, the method of preaching the faith to all nations of various cultural backgrounds for them to understand it varies from culture to culture.

The above understanding gave birth to the idea of inculturation. It must be noted that inculturation in African biblical interpretation does not encourage fetishism and syncretism in any form, rather it encourages monotheistic faith in the finished works of salvation by Jesus Christ. This is a clear indication that the bible cannot be Africanized but can be experienced in African cultures and as such, any cultural practice that contradicts the bible must be dropped. For example, human and animal sacrifices and any form of idolatry must be abolished in the church in Africa and all places of human race because Jesus' death on the cross has atoned for the sins of man once and for all (Hebrew 8-9). It should be understood that using the method of inculturation to preach the gospel is one of the effective ways of conveying the Good News in the soil of Africa and it helps the African person to see more clearly the relevance of the bible since it is interpreted with a familiar language and illustrations. African scholars should take it as a duty to constantly teach the church through contextual bible studies that the Jesus who was presented by the gospel writers must be accepted as Lord and saviour for personal salvation before one can be saved.

5. Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Challenges and Prospects

Contextualization of biblical studies in Africa has some challenges. One of such challenges is the fear of syncretism. To those outside of the soil of Africa and even within some African Christians, there seemed to be skepticisms as to whether if African

interpretation of the bible will make the African Christian to believe in the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices. The Christian religion as seen in the bible is a monotheistic faith and as such it is universal. Being that religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions, there is the fear that African Christianity can be missed up with African traditional religion. This can occur in a situation where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture (Ferdinando, 1995:264,272). This fear is dismissed with the understanding that biblical exegesis is universal but it can be contextualized without it losing its original meaning in Africa or elsewhere in the world.

Second, the fear of Africanization of biblical text. This challenge possess the fear that the exponents of African contextual biblical studies might temper with the original truth of biblical text by using inculturation in such a way that can derail Christianity in Africa. This was also dismissed with the same reason with which syncretism was dismissed.

Third, the fear of vulnerability and oversimplification of African biblical studies. Krog (2005:39-40) writing from the point of view of neo-traditionalist method of biblical interpretation states that biblical studies in Africa are comparatively very young and are, therefore, vulnerable to outside influence that could potentially prove very counterproductive. Unfortunately, the prediction that Africa has “assumed the inevitability of theological insights emanating from the west” has become more of a reality than an assumption in African scholarship today. Although not many African scholars would admit this, an academic divide is slowly creeping into African scholarship; dividing the trained from the untrained. One example of this is the published ‘African Bible Commentary in 2006. To Krog, nothing is essentially done wrong by this commentary, but it does in effect negate neo-traditionalist philosophy by implying that certain interpretations, and therefore interpreters, are more valid than others. In this sense, African hermeneutics has succumbed in its vulnerability. On the other hand, though, African hermeneutics enjoys a very privileged position today. Everything is new and fresh and the absence of any rigidity allows for it to manipulate approaches and ideas effectively to conform the message of Scripture to a trans-cultural African context.

Fourth, the fear of *eisegesis*. The activity of biblical interpretation necessitates a lot of creativity. By this understanding, the possibility of African exegete imposing a cultural mindset on biblical text cannot be ruled out since African scholars are yet to generally agree and accept a particular method or methods. However, to fall into the trap of ethnocentrism and/or anachronism is a wrong theological creativity, which is *eisegesis*, because in that way the exegete simply sticks his own words into the mouth of the biblical writer (Nyiawung, 2013; Malina 1991:23).

Fifth, besides the challenges cited above, there exist other subtle threats such as the inability of African theologians to agree on a common methodology in the reconstruction of African biblical theology (Nyiawung, 2013). In this same line of thought, Aben (2008:104) criticizes early African theologians like Harry Sawyer, J.K. Agbeti and John Mbiti, describing their theological method as ‘syncretism’. There is also the question of the a-historical nature of African traditional religion, which albeit remains an important source of information for the recollection of models and theories from the African context that are appropriate for an African biblical interpretation. The above threats are not to be feared, instead, they should be considered as a guard to contemporary readers interested in African biblical interpretation. There are ‘safety

measures' that are intended to create awareness in the difficulties that one encounters when interpreting a text from one cultural context to another. Although these are legitimate threats, they are not a hindrance as such; they can be surmounted and managed (Nyiauwung, 2013). Rohrbaugh (1996:1) dismissed this fear preposition of a cross-cultural reading of the biblical texts. Cross cultural reading of the bible as being proposed here is seen as an indispensable route which can then offer an African biblical interpretation a great potential for an effective reading, understanding and interpretation because a cross-cultural reading of the bible can enable the reader understand biblical characters in their own terms before interpreting their behaviour to another context.

Sixth, diversity in African cultural contexts in the light of high and low context societies. (Nyiauwung, 2013) also identified this as a challenge to African biblical interpretation. It is a challenge because almost all contemporary biblical interpreters find it uneasy to determine the context of the ancient world of the New and Old Testaments which have been described by anthropologists as 'high context' documents in the sense that they are written within the context of the ancient Mediterranean world (Elliott 1993:11; Rohrbaugh 2007:9; Van Eck 2009:13; Nyiauwung 2010:138). This understanding gives the presumption of a high knowledge of their context on the part of their readers and as such, little or no background information is given to these texts in order to explain why certain events occur the way they are described (Nyiauwung, 2013). Rather they leave much to the reader or hearer's imagination and common knowledge (Malina 2001:2). This is so because authors and original readers of such biblical texts share the same social system and experiences. Being that the original cultural milieu of the bible times is homogeneous, it poses a serious interpretative problem to a multicultural milieu such as Africa.

Seventh, lack of adequate attention and funding of African biblical scholarship by the academia and even the government in Africa. This is due to more emphasis placed on the study of pure science and technology in African academia and society. Many people especially, church leaders who are willing to do deeper biblical studies are being denied scholarship. Apart from the church and interested individuals, interested scholars are left alone to sponsor themselves in the area of religious studies. We have even observed recently that most of the churches that opened a University in Nigeria do not have religious studies department in their curriculum. If the church can do this, one wonders what happens to secular universities that may be established in the future by the government. Researchers in African biblical studies and religious studies in general are not well funded like their counterparts in the field of science and technology. This is indeed a challenge to the future of African biblical scholarship.

Besides the challenges of contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa, there are some prospects. Contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa will help in evangelization of Africa in the sense that the message will be preached in the understanding of the people. Being that biblical contextualization is the application of exegesis, biblical exegetes who want to do a contextual study in Africa will be conscious of applying the texts in such a way that the cultural environment of the African people will be put into consideration. This understanding calls on bible exegetes to use African relevant materials for illustration and understanding of the bible. The duty of African scholars, is not to Africanize the Bible because it cannot be rewriting but can draw illustrations from African rich heritage (Abogunrin, 2000:9). In this light, drawing illustrations from African experience and heritages will help to explain or convey the bible message in such a way that can make the African Christians to easily understand the

text of the bible. The continuous usage of African heritage from generation to generation by biblical scholars and church leaders will further immortalize Africa's cultural heritage and make Christianity more familiar to Africans from generation to generation.

The future is very bright and the stage has been set for improvement especially for the future African biblical scholar. Unlike the African scholars of the past who relied totally on western methods of biblical studies, the present and future African biblical scholar already has a foundation that is African oriented. Contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa has not only come to stay but will further make Africa to be consistent in her position in biblical scholarship globally. Moreover, there are potentials for future improvement in line with the growing scientific study in Africa's academia. Presently biblical studies have also gone scientific of which African scholars are not unaware of such trends. This will further deepen the desire by present and future African scholars to do African biblical studies along scientific line of thought as more challenges unfolds in the society of Africa in particular and the world at large. For instance, the issues of global warming, climate change, health challenges, environmental degradation, indiscriminate deforestation, religious bigotries and terrorism, human depravity, etc, cannot be ignored in Africa biblical studies. This will no doubt spur future African biblical scholars into rigorous research in African biblical studies.

6. Conclusion

Contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa has been identified as a process and scholarly methods of localizing biblical text in Africa by using African existential understanding and materials to interpret such text. This work has also shown that doing biblical interpretation in an African context as Africans for Africans will make biblical understanding and evangelization to be more effective in the soil of Africa. Reading, interpreting and applying biblical texts to Africans from western cultural oriented background can constitute a problem to the understanding of the bible within the African context.

Although, African scholars still make use of the historical critical method of biblical interpretation as evented by the western scholars, Africa biblical scholars have also evented African method of biblical hermeneutics which also involves inculturation hermeneutics all of which are intended to drive home biblical messages for the African Christian understanding. In as much as the western scholars and missionaries are applauded for eye opener in the area of biblical scholarship and evangelism, their ignorance about African culture cannot be denied. This is a lesson African scholars and missionary should learn in the course of taking the gospel to other nations different from the soil of Africa. Within the understanding of contextualization of biblical interpretation in Africa, the preaching of the gospel in the soil of Africa will arouse the church in Africa to understand the message of the bible better than when it is presented in a foreign thought-form.

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