

Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana

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Abstract

Biblical Studies is the study of the Judeo-Christian Bible and related texts. It seeks to determine the meaning of the biblical books or given passages, especially as intended by the biblical writers for their addressees. Biblical Studies over the past few centuries have been categorized into three broad areas. First, there are those that locate the meaning of the text in the world behind the text; second, those that locate the meaning of the text in the world within the text; and third, those that locate the meaning of the given text in world in front of the text. The third method has opened the way for Biblical Studies to be undertaken, using the mother-tongue translations of the Bible. In the paper, the writer has argued scholarly that, the mother-tongue Bibles in Ghana have enough problems that call for academic engagement. The significance of this study is that, it has added another dimension to the already existing methodologies for Biblical Studies. Scholars and readers of this paper will be exposed to this methodology which they may want to use in the academic study of the Bible. The author recommends the mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics approach to the Departments of Religious Studies in Universities and Theological Seminaries in Africa, for, it will in no doubt add to biblical scholarship worldwide.

Keywords: mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, biblical studies in Ghana, African biblical studies, historical-critical method of biblical studies, biblical exegesis.

INTRODUCTION

Biblical Studies is the study of the Judeo-Christian Bible and related texts. It seeks to determine the meaning of the biblical books or given passages, especially as intended by the biblical writers for their addressees. It is an academic discipline in the sense that it involves a rigorous scientific study of the Bible that leads to a systematic evolution of new knowledge criticized by academic departments or faculties in universities and colleges, and in academic journals where such researches are published.

Biblical Studies over the past few centuries have been categorized into three broad areas. First, there are those that locate the meaning of the text in the world behind the text; second, those that locate the meaning of the text in the world within the text; and third, those that locate the meaning of the given text in world in front of the text (Tate, 2008). The first group which is the oldest and most dominant focuses on issues of history – the writer’s intended meaning, the historical authenticity and the historical circumstances of the text. The second category concentrates on the text in a way that suggest that authentic meaning is derived from the text and not outside the text. The third category which is the newest is oriented towards the reader(s) or reading community and the part they play in the communication process. The readers bring their own

points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings.

❖ The world behind the text

This category is made up of the Historical Critical Methodologies. These include: Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, Historical Criticism, and Tradition Criticism, all of which are Higher Criticism approaches to Biblical Studies.

❖ The world within the text

Locating what the text meant in the world within the text uses exegesis – a careful systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. Exegesis requires knowledge of many things – the biblical languages; the Jewish, Semitic and Greco-Roman backgrounds; how to determine the original text when early copies (produced by hand) have differing readings; the use of primary sources and tools such as good Bible dictionaries and commentaries.

The first stage in doing exegesis of a text is to consider the larger context within which a text is found. In Scripture a text provides a situation behind the text. Two areas worth considering are the historical context, and the literary context. As Osborn puts it, “The historical context provides the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth meaning of the passage” (Osborn, 1991:19). Under the historical context one studies introductory material on the biblical book in order to determine

the situation to which the book was addressed. The historical context which differs from book to book has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his readers; that is the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting; and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. Information on the historical context of a book can be found from several sources, including, good Bible commentaries, encyclopedia and dictionaries.

In academic study, scholars consider the Bible as literature which has literary forms. Crucial to the understanding of the Bible as literature is the concept of genre. The literary context essentially means two things. First, words only have meaning in sentences; and second, that biblical sentences for most part only have clear meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. The literary context uses the inductive approach in order to trace the thought development of a book. Fee and Stuart give some important contextual questions that an exegete should constantly ask over every sentence and every paragraph – “What is the point?” The exegete must try to trace the author's train of thought, to find out what the author is saying and why he or she says it right here. Having made that point, what is the author saying next, and why? The question may vary from genre to genre, but it is always the crucial question (Fee & Stuart, 2003: 27-28). Another important question to be asked by the exegete is that which relates to the content of the text. Content has to do with the meanings of words, the grammatical relationships in sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts (hand written copies) differ from one another. It also includes a number of the items under “historical context,” for example, the meaning of denarius (Matt 20:2), or a Sabbath day's journey (Acts 1:12) or “high places (Eph.1:3).

Fee (1993:32) outlines eight basic rules for New Testament exegesis:

1. Survey the historical context in general.
2. Confirm the limits of the passage.
3. Become thoroughly acquainted with your paragraph or pericope.
4. Analyse sentence structures and syntactical relationships.
5. Establish the text.
6. Analyse the grammar.
7. Analyse significant words.
8. Research the historical-cultural background.

In short, Biblical exegesis involves the examination of a particular text of Scripture in order to interpret it properly. Good biblical exegesis is commanded in Scripture. “Study [be diligent] to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be

ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). What this verse means is that we must handle the Word of God properly, through diligent study. If we do not, we have reason to be ashamed. In doing biblical exegesis, we follow the grammatical principle; the literal principle; the historical principle; the synthesis principle; and the practical principle.

❖ **The world in front of the text**

As mentioned earlier, the use of this methodology creates space for Bible readers to bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings. This methodology which is reader-centered is based on the presupposition that “once the text leaves the hands of the author, the author's intention and entire matrix of originating circumstances lose any claim of being constitutive of meaning (Tate, 2008: 228).” It runs contrary to the position of formalist critics, who claim that a text itself has autonomy, and provides the objective standard of meaning. Those who use this method swing the pendulum of interpretive emphasis to the direction of the reader's role in the construction of meaning. The methodology finds support in what Mulrain says about biblical interpretation; that it has never been without references to or dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns, or social location of the interpreter (Mulrain, 1999: 117-121). What Mulrain means is that, there is no individual interpreter who is completely detached from his or her environment, experience and culture. Thus an African biblical scholar born and raised in an African environment, will not throw his or her culture, thought patterns and experiences away when doing biblical studies. The scholar will engage in this adventure in a way that is unique to his or her African culture and experience, and different from that of Western scholars (see Keeseey, 2003: 129-137). This does not however mean that the scholar is biased.

Mother-Tongue Biblical Studies in Ghana

One of the biblical scholars in Ghana who has taken the third category of doing biblical studies those - locate the meaning of the given text in world in front of the text – further is David Ekem. Who has proposed that that “The varied mother tongues of Africa have a lot to offer by way of biblical interpretation in Ghanaian/African languages as viable material for interpretation, study Bibles and commentaries” (Ekem, 2007: 48). Ekem's point is that, the mother-tongue Bibles have issues which need interpretation, a person who wants to engage himself or herself in this adventure must of a necessity include formal exegesis that reflects a dynamic encounter between Christian and traditional African world-views, both of which continue to exert a powerful impact on communities.

A mother-tongue is the medium of our innermost feelings and thought (Amonoo, 1989). It is that native language into which one is born and in which

one grows up (Quarshie, 2002:7). It is a person's first language as compared to other languages one might learn later in life, for instance, at school. A mother-tongue is not the same as a vernacular which is the common language of a region or group, no matter how naturally a person may be well vexed in such a language and its usage. Rather, the mother-tongue is a person's own native and indigenous language, very much intertwined with a person's identity; it confirms and affirms who a person is, where one comes from and one's sense of identity. A mother-tongue is a repository of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insight, science, theology and philosophy. It is in the mother-tongue that one thinks and dreams, before translating one's thoughts to other languages (Bediako, 2006:37). Mother-tongue biblical studies is the scholarly engagement of the indigenous language translations of the Bible in order to understand what they say and mean to the readers. Mother-tongue biblical studies uses the mother-tongue Bibles - the translations of the Bible into such languages into which people are born and nurtured. Mother-tongue Bibles give Ghanaians/Africans the opportunity to interpret Scripture from their own world-view.

Methodology for Mother-Tongue Biblical Studies

Mother-tongue biblical studies use eclectic methodology. It borrows from the fields of Biblical Studies, Bible Translation Studies, and Language Studies – Biblical Languages: Ancient Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek, and Local African/Ghanaian Languages.

1. Identify a Biblical text which you think has been wrongly translated into your mother-tongue.
2. Discuss why the translation is problematic in your culture.
3. State and explain the methodology you will use, and the proponents.
4. Do a study (an exegesis) of that text, using Bible Study resources – Dictionaries, Commentaries, Encyclopaedias, Word Study helps, etc.
5. Find out what scholars have said about the text, how they interpret it and reasons for their interpretations.
6. Discuss the usage of the concept in your language/culture; interview indigenous speakers of your mother-tongue for deeper insights into the concept you are researching. Use local terminologies in your writing and explain them in English.
7. Compare the text in your mother-tongue with other Ghanaian translations you can read and understand.
8. Analyze the mother tongue-translations; what do they mean? How are the meanings of the text similar to that of the Hebrew/Greek? How are they different? What might have accounted for the differences in translation?
9. Come out with a new translation of the text that fits into your culture.

Examples of publications in which mother-tongue biblical studies appear

- (a) (1) J. D. K. Ekem, "The Use of *Archierus* 'High Priest' as a Christological Title: A Ghanaian Case Study." *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* Volume XI. Numbers 1 & 2. 2001: 57-64. (2) ----, "Translating *Asham* (Isaiah 53:10) in the Context of the Abura-Mfantse Sacrificial Thought." *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*. Volume XII. Numbers 1 & 2. 2002: 23-29. (3) ----, "Biblical Exegesis in an African context: Some Reflections." *Journal of African Christian Thought* Volume 6, No. 1 June 2003: 31-34. (4) ----, "Interpreting 'The Lord's Prayer' in the context of Ghanaian Mother-tongue Hermeneutics," *Journal of African Christian Thought* Volume 10. No. 2, December 2007:48-52. (5)----, "Spiritual Gifts or Spiritual Persons?: 1 Corinthians 12:1a Revisited, *Neotestamentica, Journal of the New Testament Society of South Africa* 38. 2004 (1): 54- 74. (6)----, *New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting*. Accra: SonLife Press. 2005. (7)----, "Interpreting 'The Lord's Prayer' in the context of Ghanaian Mother-tongue Hermeneutics," *Journal of African Christian Thought* Volume 10. No. 2, December 2007:48-52. (8)----, "A Dialogical Exegesis of Romans 3:2a, *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* (30) 2007:75-93. (9)----, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in Some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation*. Accra: SonLife Press, 2008.(10)----, *Krataa a Pôôl Kyerewee Dze Kɛmaa Faelimôn: Ne Nkyerkyeremu Fi Griik Kasa Mu Kô Mfantse Kasa Mu*. (A Commentary on Paul's Letter to Philemon Based on the Greek Text in Fante) Accra: SonLife Press. 2009.
- (b) (1) J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Are Sins Forgiven or Loaned? Translations and Interpretations of Matthew 6:12 by Some Dangme Scholars," *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. University of Ibadan Publication, XLII/2, December 2010: 67-81. (2) ----, "A comparative study of Matthew 6:12 and its parallel in some Ghanaian mother-tongue translations of the Bible; in *Proceedings of International Conference on Research and Development*, Vol. 3, No. 4, ed., Freda M. Nekang, Accra: Pan-African Book Company, 2010:62-66. (3) ----, "Interpretations of *mias gunaikos andra* (1Tim. 3:2a) in some Ghanaian

mother-tongue translations of the Bible,” *Journal of African Biblical Studies*, Ghana Association of Biblical Exegetes (GABES) Publication. Vol.3, January 2011, ISSN 0855-773X, 43-61. (4) -----, “A Comparative Study of Mark 1:12 in Some Ghanaian Mother-tongue Translations of the Bible,” *Journal of Arts and Culture* Volume 6, (1) November 2011, Duncan Science Company Publication, ISSN: 2006 - 1145: 67-73. (5) E. N. B. Anum & J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “New Testament Concepts of Forgiveness in the Gospels in the Context of the Dangme Translation and Usage,” *American Journal of Biblical Theology*, Vol. 12 (25), 2011: 1-19.

- (c) P. T. Laryea, “Reading Acts 14:8-17 and 17:22-31 in Gã: A Critical Examination of the Issues, Meanings and Interpretations Arising from the Exegesis in the Mother Tongue.” *Journal of African Christian Thought* Volume 5, Number 1, June 2002: 35-43.

Theses in the Area of Mother-Tongue Biblical Studies

The following are Master of Theology theses in the area of Mother-Tongue Biblical Studies, supervised by J. D. K. Ekem, Director of the Institute of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

1. 2006, J.E.T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, *Some Translation and Exegetical Problems in the Dangme New Testament*.
2. 2007, Frederick Amevenku, *An Ewe Interpretation of the use of ‘Logos’ in John’s Gospel: A case for Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics*.
3. 2008, Seth Kissi, *An Akan View of Jesus: Exegetical Exploration into Hebrews 1:1-14 in the light of Insights from Akan Mother-Tongue*.
4. 2009, Frimpong Wiafe, *Syntactical Analysis, Morphology and Theology of Genesis 1:1-10, 26-31: Implications for Asante-Twi Mother—Tongue Hermeneutics*.
5. 2009, John Fosu, *Paul’s response to the abuse of Spiritual gifts in the Corinthian Church (1Corinthians 12-14): Lessons for the Ghanaian context*.
6. 2012, J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, *Mother-Tongue Bibles, Resources for African Biblical Studies*, PhD Thesis (by Publication) submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

CONCLUSION

There are other methodologies which I have not mentioned; an example being the Inculturation Approach to Biblical Studies – critiquing the Ghanaian socio-political and cultural context, using the Bible. In that sense the study is limited. However, in this paper I have argued that Biblical Studies in Ghana has taken a new turn. The mother-tongue Bibles have enough problems that call for academic engagement. The publications cited prove the point. I recommend this new trend to the Departments of Religious Studies in Universities and Theological Seminaries in Africa. The usage of this methodology will in no doubt add to biblical scholarship worldwide.

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