

Africentric Hermeneutics: Methodology towards Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study centres on Africentric Hermeneutics, a methodology projected towards decolonizing biblical studies in Africa. In an academic reading of the Bible in Africa, Western and Africa methods of reading exist side by side. However, Africa readings of the Bible are contextual and because of the wide diversity of the social, economic, political and religious contexts of the continent, a large variety of reading methods and strategies have been developed in recent years. These have been identified as liberation hermeneutics; Africa-in-the-Bible studies, Black Studies, post-modern feminist studies, enculturation hermeneutics and vernacular hermeneutics. These approaches were efforts made to decolonize biblical studies in Africa. However, the main thrust of this paper is to show that in the task of decolonizing the Bible in Africa, or Africentric reading of the Bible in Africa is the most viable interpretative option, hence the application of this methodology. The study discovers that many scholars and Bible translators/editors have used Africentric methodology in placing Africa and Africans in the right perspective. Finally after presenting the steps on how Africentric reading can be achieved, the papers advocates an Africentric approach to the study of the Bible while at the same time recommends that Africentrism should taught as a course in Africa Universities.

Keywords: *Africentric Hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics, Biblical Studies, Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The search for a dynamic methodology to biblical studies in Africa, which is both theologically legitimate and contextually imperative has been the preoccupation of Africa scholarship for some decades now (Manus, 2002). This has led several scholars to propose different methods of hermeneutical approaches to the study of the Bible in Africa. The various researches were undertaken as a result of the need to develop African ways of reading the Bible in all ramifications and to produce new important tools and resource for the study of the Bible in Africa. This work considers Africentrism as another

viable methodological option open to mobilizing Africa religio-cultural values and understanding in the interpretation of biblical texts to meet the need of Africa Christians. Africentrism has become a fascinating subject to many people especially the African Americans who intent to find out their cultural heritage in the African continent. It has also been of great interest to many African biblical scholars, as it speaks of the *sitz im leben* of the Africans/African Americans. Njeza (1997) is right when she predicts over a decade ago that Africentrism would have profound implication for further direction of theology in Africa. The main thrust of this study is the task of decolonizing the Bible in Africa. Africentric hermeneutics or Africentric reading of the Bible is one of the most variable studies of African culture and hermeneutics and this study demonstrates practically how this methodology can be followed.

The Conception of Africentrism

The word “Africentric” now used instead of “Afrocentric” has a wide range of meaning among African Americans and this is because of its more appropriate etymological connection to its root, “Africa”. The scholar who originated the term is Asante (1988), a Professor and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia, United States of America. The actual terms he used are “Afrocentric and Afrocentricity”. Africentrism is therefore, a derivative term from the *sitz im leben* of the African Americans (and now embracing all Africans) in their holistic plan to deconstruct the stronghold of western interpretation of classical history. It has claim to universality, reconstruction and development dimension of African world, culture, religion, heritage, either in the continent or in the Diaspora from the stand point of Africa as subject rather than object. It is a distinctive Africa ideological and philosophical construct which carries along with it African sense of worth, self-respect and empowerment (Idamahare, 2005). According Asante (1988:3),

Afrocentricity resembles the black man, speaks to him, looks like him and wants for him what he wants for himself. Afrocentricity is pro-African and consistent in its belief that technology belongs to the world. It is African genius, and African value created, reconstructed and derived from our history and experience in our best interest. Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of African in post modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif and our ethos exemplifying our collective will.

Asante (1988) asserts that Africentrism is a dynamic theory, not a system of thought but a philosophical and theological perspective. He argues that Africans have been moved off the social, political, philosophical, religious and economic

terms in most discourse in the West. Consequently, the achievement of Africans and other culture are denied, suppressed or denigrated (Robert, 1990). This is the view, expressed by both pan-Africanists, Cheikh Anto Diop, Marthins Benat (Njeza, 1997). Africentrists are concerned with the reinterpretation of Eurocentric writings concerning early Africans in Africa and in America (Pato, 1998). Africentricism is a complex concept which means a lot of things to different people.

Africentrism is more than wearing African garment or dancing to percussive African music. It involves more than a cultural revival. It requires a new perspective of life, a cultural conversion. It leads to a new life and world view of African peoples. Africentrism builds upon self respect and empowerment, aspect of black consciousness - black power movement, the emphasis on blackness that gave rise to classical Africa history in Europe and especially Egypt (Robert 1990:1-2).

Africentrism seeks to place Africa at the centre of world history and our existential realities, so that concept, standard and values are considered in the interpretation of this history in reality. Thus, African antiquity and pre-colonial Africa especially with regards to ancient Egypt save as the framework of this ideology. It seeks to reverse the Western model world history by reclaiming Egypt as a representative of African civilization and challenging the hegemony of Greece. It fosters the true ideological notion of African unity – a culture rooted both in Africans native tradition in the continent and in Diaspora. On the final analysis, Africentrism focuses its attention on the blacks struggle to grapple with what is called ‘modern civilization’ or “Modernization” globalization and technological age (Njeza, 1997). The concept of Africentrism is, therefore, very useful in the enhancement of the African sense of worth, self esteem and dignity as a people among other groups. The concept can be employed inclusively as well as exclusively to affirm African heritage and solidarity without the denigration of other cultures.

As Adamo (2005:4) remarks:

I must say that this approach (Africentrism) does not deny or degrade other people’s approach to biblical studies. To put it in another way it does not negate Eurocentrism except where Eurocentrism to biblical studies attempts to claim universalism to the exclusion of Africentrism.

In the Religious circle, Africentrism stimulates the Africans and African Americans to seek and hear God in the language of their ancestors. Asante (1988) argues that if your God cannot speak in your own language, then he is not your God. Pilgrimages should be to the holy place of the ancestors in the

Africa and not in Mecca or Jerusalem. That is not to say that, Africentrism does advocate hatred for other religions or cultures rather the people of African descent should first of all cling to their African heritage before consideration of others. Africentism, according to Asante (1988), is concerned with black man's religion because it is the most powerful tool of mind control ever created. The Christian church is a veritable change in the society, and African Americans had taken a creative use of the Bible from an Africentric perspective. The Black church is the product of the psycho-social and spiritual survival of the conditions perpetuated in the estates or plantation owned by slave holders and it is within the Black Church or what we call "the Church in the bush" that African liberation hermeneutics began (Konoli, 1997).

Idamarbare (2005) indicates that the black theology which emerged from the black church on the one hand was a by-product of the life experiences of transplanted Africans in North America and the contemporary African American experience caused by their oppression, discrimination, economic and political sufferings, on the other hand. African theology is borne out of the desire to relate the Christian faith to religio-cultural traditions of Africa. It was a theological expression of the quest for African identity in neo-colonial Africa. Thus, Black and African theologies though different in terms of their history, focus and method, yet as Nijeza (1997) has advocated, Black and African theologies should surrender their differences in favour of complementary partnership for the sake of the total interest of the Africans. The result of this complementary partnership would be the reconstruction of an authentically African Christianity and theology, which represent the total interest of the indigenous people of Africa.

Meaning of Africentric Biblical Hermeneutics

Admittedly, various methods have been employed to interpret the biblical interpreters have developed their own unique interpretative tradition based on ancient, recent and contemporary scholarship. But several and recent hermeneutical approaches have been identified. This among others are enculturation hermeneutics, folklorising approach, reading the Bible is the power of God, post-colonial hermeneutics, liberation studies, evaluative studies (Robert, 1983) and post modern feminist studies. The task of this study is not to examine all these interpretative methods; but to examine Africentric Hermeneutics as a methodology projected towards decolonizing biblical studies in Africa. Africentric hermeneutics, like any of the above named Black biblical hermeneutics of the oppressed people of the third world is contextual hermeneutics. It is re-reading of the scripture or text premeditatedly with the view of Africa culture and heritage at the center. The purpose is not only to

understand the Bible and God in the African American experience and African culture but also with the hope to break the Western hermeneutics hegemony and the ideology stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical exegetes had long enjoyed. It is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and the African world-view, history, culture and life experience with the purpose to reject the superintending tendencies of Western intellectual tradition and at the same time correct the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa, Africans and Africa Americans have been subjected.

Africentric biblical hermeneutics embraces much of Blacks studies, Black theology and biblical interpretation based upon the meaning of blackness as applied to religious experience. It goes back to ancient Egypt and Ethiopia rather than Egypt in the early African kingdoms. It sees Egypt as the fountainhead of western civilization and insists that Egypt belongs to Black Africa: the symbol and representation of African civilization. Its perspective into biblical hermeneutics reveals biblical persons and places that can be traced back to Africa in the period before and after Christ. Clearly, their discoveries have help to affirm the Black Man's kinship with ancient and noble people in classical Africa. Thus, Africentric readings of the Bible, enhances the Black Man's cultural roots and empowers his life and faith at the same time (Ukpong, 2002).

Recent Studies in African Biblical Studies

Present studies in African Biblical studies across the continent can be employed in mobilizing African cultural values and understanding not only to meet the need of African Christians, but also in the colonizing the Bible in Africa. This method and strategies are, of course, in contradiction to the classical ways of reading the bible, which Ukpong (2002) has designed as "intellectualist". These may be identified as follows:

Inculturation Hermeneutics: This is the contextual hermeneutical methodology which seeks to make any community of ordinary people in their socio-cultural context the subject of interpretation of the Bible. This theory, propounded by Ukpong (2002) involves three elements: the used of people's socio-cultural resources as hermeneutical tools for the reading; the used of the socio-cultural context and world view of the people as the perspective and background against which the reading is made and the use of African conceptual frame of reference in the reading. In this interpretative paradigm, the readings of the ordinary people (or marginalized) are seen as what is essential in the production of the meaning of the text. Ukpong's (2002) inculturation hermeneutics corroborate in some respects with the researchers of the African feminist scholars (Kanyoro, 2001), who encouraged reading with grassroots and subaltern non-academic women with the aim to counteract the dominance

of Western oriented method which are elitist and sometimes irrelevant to the African situation while at the same time bringing into focus feminist methods of resistance that emanate from non-academic readers.

Folklorising Approach: This involves the appropriation of indigenous non-biblical materials such as African narrative, folktales and poetry for reconstructing biblical texts, thus revealing the meaning of the text to the African readers. According to Manus (2002), “in Folklorising a Bible text, I am propounding a method of reading the Bible so that people especially Africans and other Third World Christians can understand the stories or narratives of the Bible in the light of the manner in which they are told or narrated”. The above Hermeneutical Approach, here again, corroborates in certain aspects with the story telling methods and interpretations of Abbeys’s (2001) “I am the Woman” and Masenya’s (2001) “Eastern and Northern Sotho Stories”. The latter narratives used by the feminist writers did not only articulate the oppression of women, but also their right to empowerment against the shackles of patriarchy and imperialism. In a credit to Musa Dube (2005), reading biblical stories with African cultural folktales can be a form of cultural hermeneutics.

Reading the Bible as the power of God: In “Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches”, Adamo (2005) probes into how the African Indigenous churches - Cherubim and Seraphim Churches, Celestial Church of Christ, Church of the Lord Aladura and Christ Apostolic Church have mobilized their cultural resources and values to open up the text of the Bible. In reading, re-reading and interpreting the Bible against the background of African world view, culture, traditions and life experiences, these indigenous churches discovered the potent power embedded in the Bible which they felt the missionaries were hiding.

The Western way of reading the Bible has not helped to understand the Bible in this social context. Africans began to search the Bible consistently with their own eyes in order to discover how they could solve their problems. In the process, they found the book of Psalms very helpful in the times of distress, joy, confusion and danger unlike the Western readers who approached with assumptions dominated by modernist and rationalist values. Thus, the Psalms identified and classified into protective, curative or therapeutic and success were used with other natural materials to solve all kinds of evil that plague the African Christians (Adamo, 2005). Thus, Mauleke (2001) is right to have stressed the need to consider carefully the packages of the Bible in African and Gerald West proposing “Unpacking the package of the Bible that is the Bible of African Scholarship” in order to understand the true nature of the Bible as a book of potential powers both for good and bad (Dube, 2001).

Post-Colonial Feminist Reading of Colonial Bible: This approach by African feminist scholars is vividly illustrated in collaborative efforts of African women theologians simply called “the Circle” in which they produced a volume “Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible” in 2001. It is fundamentally an insight and perception into issues of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and globalization which have shaped African Women’s lives and their interpretation of the biblical texts. The “Book” challenges the imperialism of historical and contemporary times, exposing the impact on African lives and its link with patriarchy. It seeks to create awareness for women empowerment against the shackles of patriarchy and imperialism at various levels while at the same time offering post-colonial feminist strategies of resistance. It suggests new Hermeneutics Methods of reading the Bible, provides other canonical text that deserved to be read and heard outside the Bible and rejects the imposition of impact culture and methods of reading. Without doubt, African Biblical studies is contextual and because of the wide diversity of the social, economic, political and religious contexts of the continent, a large variety of reading methods have been developed in last few years (Ukpong, 2002). Some of these methods are Vernacular Liberation Hermeneutics, Africa and African Presence in the Bible Studies, Evaluative Studies among others.

Africentric Approach to Decolonizing Biblical Studies

Africentric biblical approach is basically an attempt to re-read the Bible from a premeditated Africentric perspective, and in so doing, break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that the classical Western scholars have superimposed on the Africans. Thus, Africans and Blacks are put in the Bible by amplifying the voice of those Blacks who were already there and by raising their profile and visibility. One example is Prophet Zephaniah, who being the son of Cush (Zeph. 1:1), must have been a black. Lucius of Cyrene and Simeon who is called Niger must have been blacks.

Jesus Christ and his early family have also been identified as Blacks given the nativity in African reading (Yorke, 1997). Matthean account says that the Holy Family had to become refugees in Egypt, Africa (Matt. 2:7), to escape King Herod’s assassination plan. The ploy is instructive; it is not only to be seen as a clear fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy that “out of Egypt (Africa) have I called my son” but according to Felder, that the Holy Family (including Jesus Christ) was more chocolate brown (African American), Kikuyu-like, Fanti-like or Trinidadian) in complexion than White or Caucasian since a Caucasian family trying to hide in Black Africa would be unlikely (Yorke, 1997). We can give several passages of the Bible in Africentric reading. Among the

Black/African personalities who have elicited much debate throughout the biblical scholarly community is the Ethiopian Eunuch of Act 8. Munick (1967) argues that commentators have no problem locating the provenance of this reputable royal official as “Nubia territory between Aswan and Khartoum”. Moreover, Johnson (1992) and Pervo (1987) indicate that the importance of this location to first-century readers comes from the “Hellenistic Fascination” with exotic, yet Eurocentric scholars who prefer to play down the role of Africans discuss whether the Ethiopian was a Jew or Gentile, rather than his African identity or official status in an African government (Heisey, 1998).

Recent studies have helped to dispel the Eurocentric sentiment on the Ethiopian passage from Acts 8:26-40. Martin (1987), an African-American scholar points out that the “ethnographic identity of the official as a recognizable Black African from Nubia” plays a role in Lukan narratives. That is, the ‘conversion of an Ethiopian Eunuch’ provides a graphic illustration and symbol of the diverse persons who will constitute the Church of the “Risen Christ”. She argues further that the geographical understanding of the time would lead readers of the account to believe that “the Gospel had reached the end of the earth” and hence fulfill the prophetic statement at the beginning of Act 1:8 (Martins, 1987).

Adamo (2001) arguing for the ethnographic identity of the Ethiopia Eunuch contends that the narrative emphasizes two main issues: he was an “Ethiopia” and a “Eunuch” which means he was an African official of high social standing; he was a minister in charge of the treasures of the Meroitic Candace, through a visitor of some distinction from a far away foreign land of Africa. According to him, perhaps Luke picks him and singles him out as a result of the importance attached to the Africans in the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman proverbial thinking of Africans as wealthy, wise and militarily might. Another good example of an Africentric reading of the Bible has been vividly provided by “*African Culture heritage Topical Bible*” which offers a list of twenty biblical characters of African heritage including Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham (Gen. 16), Aseneth, Joseph’s Egyptians wife (Gen. 41:45), Ebed-Melech, Jeremiah’s rescuer (Jer.38), and Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus (Mt.27:32) and parallel passages (Heisey, 1997).

The editors of the “*African Heritage Study Bible*” include in its introductory notes that “in biblical times, Africa included much of what European maps have come to call the Middle East (Heisey, 1997). The Notes to this Bible also argue for an African location of the Garden of Eden in the text and used conspicuous printing to draw attention of its readers to it. Africentric readings of Genesis 2:8-14 corroborates with Yorke’s strong suggestion that the Garden of Eden is located on Obiadah in Israel but in Africa since the text

indicates that the two of the rivers of Eden actually in Cush or Ethiopia and so on (Yorke, 1997). As far as we are concerned, the 1992 Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD) which provides several significant intersections between Biblical Studies and African Studies is an example of Africentric approach to the study of the Bible. First, it includes several articles focusing on the background information of the history of African regions cited in the Bible. These articles traced Egyptian history from the prehistoric times to the Greco-Roman period. There were brief references to Ethiopia, and put (possibly Libya or Somalia). Secondly, important articles were written on the African languages used in the early translations of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The study reveals that with the original texts in Hebrew and Greek, the first biblical translations were made into three languages in Africa: Greek (from Hebrew), Coptic a descendant of Egyptian-and Latins and that the Latin version which survived in Africa was the oldest (Heisey, 1997).

Achieving Africentric Reading

An Africentric reading of the Bible can be achieved by following the four steps indicated below:

Step one: Select a biblical passage or text, either in the Old or New Testament, digest it and see how it addresses an African community or audience.

Step Two: Search for an African historical, social or religious life experience that fits into African context so as to be able to relate it to the African situation. In other words, provide an Africa context to which the Bible can be related. This could be in form of a narrative, poetry, prose, folklore, myths, custom, tradition, visual arts, legend, music, ritual, dance, etc., and engage in a comparative reading of the Bible and the African feature, thereby locating the African centrality of the text. It is the characteristics or features that will serve as the hermeneutical tools and resources for the interpretation of the biblical text.

Step Three: Investigate ways of writing in which the passage/text has been superimposed by biased Western scholars in their interpretation of the text, delete or expunge the same, giving it a new interpretation that suits the African situation or a universally accepted interpretation.

Step Four: Reflect on the interpretation to see that it does not denigrate the culture of other people because Africentrism or Africentric perspective is not the denigration of Western culture.

CONCLUSION

We may concede with the statement of Njeza (1999) that it has become fashionable in certain circle of contemporary discourse to talk about Africentrism. At the socio-political level, the debate is centred on the concept of African Renaissance, whereas the religio-theological dimensions of the discourse are concerned with African Christianity. The point being articulated here is that several scholars of African descent have engaged themselves in biblical/theological studies either consciously or unconsciously from an Africentric perspective with a focus to correct the erroneous writings of the Eurocentric scholars and to place Africa and Africans in their proper perspectives. Africentric interpretation is not a “fallacy” neither is it simple “Europe turned down” as Appiah (1997) claims.

That obviously is a misunderstanding of Africentrism. It is not a reaction against Eurocentric but rather against Eurocentric racialism and its claims to pretensions superiority (Njeza, 1998). The goal of Africentrism in its essence is to promote a more authentic view of Africa as a continent, the African culture and peoples of African descent. Africentrism is African-centred approach aimed at decolonizing any biased writing/opinion against peoples of African descent. It is not surprising therefore that many African Americans and Africans at home are embracing the concept of Africentrism because it is African. It has its roots in Africa, it is central of African existence. There is, no doubt, that a proper understanding of the Africentric approach will lead to a new African perspective of life, a cultural revival, a proper understanding of African history, African biblical hermeneutics, African consciousness and self-empowerment of the black race, promotion of African learning and intellectualism, promotion of religion with African centrality and the promotion of ideologies (whether religious, political, historical or economical) that would enhance African/African American standard of living.

This study, therefore, strongly purposes that Africentrism should be taught as a major course in African universities especially in the departments of Religious Studies, History and African Studies. The reason, of course, is obvious: Africentrism has become the new model for interpreting classical and modern history, African cultural studies and African biblical hermeneutics. Certainly, it will have very profound implications for future direction and long term impact on the generality of Africans in these various fields of learning.

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