Theological Impact of Culture on Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract

African theologians over the centuries have ensured that Christianity in Africa maintain its identity and still remain faithful to the holistic message of the scripture. This is because theological impact of culture on Biblical Hermeneutics cannot be overemphasized. Since culture and theology are intertwined and influences each other, can there be any attempt to engage in Bible Hermeneutics devoid of cultural influences. This paper argues that no theology is without the element of culture because theology transforms culture and culture shapes theology. Thus, the influence of African culture on the interpretation of the Bible within African Christianity is examined. The paper finds out that theology has significance impact on Biblical interpretation in developing African hermeneutical method and formulation of African Christian Theology.

INTRODUCTION

The burden placed before African theologians is how Christianity in Africa can retain and maintain the identity of African and remain faithful to the preaching of Biblical message. This is pertinent because culture influences religious practices in one way or the other. The history cannot forget great theologians like, Balaji Idowu, John Inbiti, Yususf Obaje, Osadoloh Imasogie with their unceasing effort in making Christianity relevance to African Christian.

In the view of Amevenku, he opined that the strength, capacity and the relevance of Christianity in Africa rest on the interpretive analysis of the scripture that empower the Africans to read and apply the world of God to their life situation. In addition, the real practice of Christianity in an African context rest importantly on how Africans interprets the message of the Gospel and make it part of their lifestyle. This is essential because the understanding and scriptural interpretation reflect one's cultural milieu and worldview.

Ogbonnaya affirms that, it is possible that culture may influence the transformation and reformation of religion and provide religion with socio-cultural beliefs upon which religious meaning becomes apparent.³ Therefore, since culture and religion are related and have one or other influence on each other, can any struggle to engage in Biblical hermeneutics be devoid of

¹Amevenku Frederick, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2021), 10-15.

²Amevenku, 16.

³ Ogbonnaya Joseph, *African Perspectives on Culture and World Christianity* (Newcastle: Cambridge School Publishing, 2017), 8.

cultural influence? If we need Bible relevance to Africa and provide answers to their challenges of lives, to what extent can we contextualize the scripture without the interference of cultural bias? This paper will examine the theological impact of African culture on the scriptural interpretation within African Christianity.

OVERVIEW OF THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

Etymologically, theology derived from the Greek language: theos (God) ("discourse" or "reason") which means discourse or reason concerning God.⁴ Theology is teaching about God, His concern, thoughts and plans for humanity. Paul Tiillch defines theology as the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.⁵ In the view of Millard J. Erickson, he defines theology as, "the discipline that strives to give holistic statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the scriptures, placed in the context of culture generally and related to issues of life.⁶ He mentioned five key areas of the task of doing theology as follows: theology is biblical: its takes it sources from Canonical books of the Bible (Old and New Testament); theology is systematic: it drawn from the Bible and also relates it with various portions to another and create a harmony in various teachings to form a whole; "theology relates to the issues of general culture"; theology is contemporary: it deals with timeless issues and also use language, thought and concepts that are relevant to the modern issues; theology is practical: it pertains to living.

The word "culture" generally refers to the way of life of a particular people that entails their economic, social and political activities passed from one generation to another. On this note, culture refers to the way of life, beliefs, societal view, language, behavior, dress, ritual, norms and rite of passage. In the view of Aniol, he said culture is: the total attitude, behaviors, custom, and belief that distinguishes one particular group of people from another. It is also refers to as symbol of identification. Culture is also amplifier through language, material objects, institutions, ritual, and form of art from one generation to another. In the definition of Bacon "he defines culture as the bundle of knowledge and manner derived by an individual. It could be described as the custom shared, worth, value, and belief that distinguishes a particular group of people passed from one generation to another. In order to authenticate the definition of culture John S. Mbiti defines

The word culture covers many things, such as the way people live, behave and act, and their physical as well as their intellectual achievements. Culture shows itself in art art and literature, dance, music and drama, in the style of building houses and of people's clothing,

⁴Emiola Nihinlola, *Thelogy Under the Mango Tree* (Lagos: Fine Print&Manufacturing Limited, 2013), 1.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1 (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1951), 5.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

⁷ Waweru, Humphrey, *The Bible and African Culture Mapping Transactional Inroads* (Kenya: Zapf Chancery, 2011), 6-7.

⁸ Aniol, Scott, *Towards a Biblical Understanding of Culture* (The Artist Theologian), 40-56.

⁹Bacon David, Culture and Human Worldview (London: SAGE Publication, 2003), 62.

in social organization and political systems, in religion, ethics, moral and philosophy, in the customs and institutions of the people, in their values and laws, and in their economic life.¹⁰

Theology is never built in an isolation. It must consider culture for effectiveness. Emiola Nihinlola quotes from Paul Tillich which says "Theology is never done in a vacuum; every theologian begins with certain presuppositions.¹¹ It will be a danger to engage the task of theology without culture. It creates barriers to the effectiveness in propagating the message of the gospel. Theology and culture are intertwined, like plant and soil, attempt to separate them leads to distorted or diminished theology. Therefore, theological impact of culture on biblical hermeneutics cannot be overemphasized in which this paper will mention few.

Cultural Worldview: The Bible did not exist in a vacuum but was written in a context, and understanding the cultural worldview of the Bible is important for proper interpretation in an African context. African theologians have highlighted the need to approach the Bible with a hermeneutic that considers the Ancient Near Eastern context and the reader's contemporary African context. Gerald West poses that contextual Bible study is a critical tool in Africa, where readers engage the text through their lived experiences of poverty, oppression, and liberation.¹² Theology Transforms Culture: Theology transforms culture, and improving and revolutionizing societies as recorded in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John Chapter 4., breaking

societies as recorded in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John Chapter 4., breaking cultural and societal barriers. In the view of Timothy keller, "Theology is not just about understanding God, but about shaping culture" Theology contextualizes to accommodate divers' cultures, effectively reaching out with the gospel within the unique contexts. Also, culture reflects theological values when cultures are transformed by theology, they illustrate, represent and express theological values, fulfilling God's purposes. Colinelius Plantinga poses that, "Culture reflects God's creative purposes, and is a manifestation of His wisdom" Theology and culture are interrelated, considering their cultural contexts is paramount for effective theologizing.

Theology Refines Culture: Theology refines culture in essence is that it modifying the elements that contradict biblical teachings, gives room for Christian to partake in and enrich their cultural heritage without compromising their faith. The treatment of the birth right of first born in some Eastern Nigerian culture is so challenging. Forcing the male child to undergo a certain ritual before having access to his birth right. The purpose of the ritual is to ascertain that child belong to that family. In this regards, theological institution can serve as an intermediary by educating the communities on the efficacy of biblical values and human rights. Wright poses that, "Christian

¹⁰ John. S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1986), 7.

¹¹ Emiola Nihinlola, *Theology Under the Mango Tree* (Lagos: Fine Print&Manufacturing Limited, 2013), 15

¹² Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Mode of Reading the Bible in the South Africa Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1995)10.

¹³Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Cantered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 2012), 75.

¹⁴Cornelius Plantinga, Not the Way it's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)

theology reforms culture by challenging societal norms and promoting equality"¹⁵ Therefore, In Africa, theological impact of culture on biblical hermeneutic is essential for sound biblical interpretation. John Mbiti poses that Christianity in Africa must resonate with the people's cultural heritage. In the view of Mbiti, African spirituality is deeply rooted in communal values, rituals, and oral traditions and these must be considered when interpreting the scripture.

MEANING OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Emiola Nihinlola define Biblical hermeneutics as the art or theory of interpretation to derive or give meaning or understanding to a biblical text. According to M. L. Y. Chan, he presented hermeneutics as a discipline. Hermeneutics is concerned with studying the phenomenon, theories and methods entailed in the interpretation of both texts and other aesthetic objects. In this new era, hermeneutics has gone beyond describing rules for proper interpretation but more to presented holistic theory of human understanding that can hasten biblical texts, the contemporary meaningfulness and possible truth. Therefore, is there any need for African to engage in the process of Bible interpretation that is cognizance of African worldview, identity and experience?

In addition, the theological impact of culture on Biblical Hermeneutics cannot be overemphasized, this is because every interpretation is contextual, relevant to a particular world view. Imasogie affirms the essential task before the African Christian Theologians is to build a Christian, Biblical and African theology. He further explain that there is need for theology to be purely Christian and truly African in expression. Such a theology will be faithful to the scripture and relevant to the present generation and generation to come. He further argued that, every theology presupposes that the theologian must be aware of the cultural influences that shape him and equip him with the conceptual tools. In order to authenticate this, he presented the following presupposition such as incarnational, contextual approach to theology as a balance between emphasis on the authority of biblical revelation and the need to reckon with the receiving audience of that revelation.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright. *The Early Christian Mission Vol. 1 of Christian Origins and the God* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2007)

¹⁶ Emiola Nihinlola, *Theology for Living* (Ogbomoso: Kingdom Impact Publishing Unit, 2001), 37-39.

¹⁷M. L. Y. Chan, "Hermeneutics," Global Dictionary of Theology, (London: Zondervan Publication, 2008), 379.

¹⁸Soulen, Richard, *Afrocetric Biblical Interpretation" Handbook of Biblical Criticism 4th ed.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2011), 161.

¹⁹ Osadolor Imasogie, *Guideline for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1983), 43.

²⁰ Imasogie, 43-44

²¹ Jackson Lekan Oshagbemi, (Presupposition in the Methodologies of Christian African Theology and Missiology, MTh. Seminar Paper, Ogbomoso: The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000),6.

NECESSITY FOR AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS

The necessity for African hermeneutics has remained a pivotal position of many African scholars who are actually part of the African setting witnessing the inherent necessity for its development. This writer affirms the need for this methodology that can be properly understood in the long existing agitation by many African scholars. It was discovered that, African hermeneutics was champion by Kato's speech at the World Council of Churches, Nairobi Assembly and Africa in 1976.

Also, how the Christianity is presented to the African are so alien in context. The presentation of the of Christianity by the Western missionary did not adequately give room for self-expression in worship. It condemned some practices in African context such as using the drum. On this template, African theologian clamor for the need for Christian messages presented in Africa must be conscious of African cultural worldview, philosophy, and religion.

This is very important since the holistic message of God captured in the scripture was given in cultural worldview. It is evident that, God related and spoke directly with the people of Israel, who are the primary recipient of the Biblical events, with the context of their understanding and cultural experience. So, the Biblical interpretation cannot be separated from its cultural and historical background.

In the view of Lamin Sanneh, he observes that Christianity was born in a cross-cultural milieu. ²² As a result, the African community needs to live the word in their cultural milieu. How they live their lives will eventually lead to new revelation of the gospel message and this will help African Christians overcome the problem of syncretism.

Furthermore, the biblical revelation is an important factor contributing to every ramification of growth of Christianity in Africa. If African Christian will be relevance and retain its original place in global Christianity. There is an urgent need for African scholars to engage with Bible in their various languages, approach theology in their languages and proposed or develop theological and educational enlightenments and agendas in their languages for the benefits of their people. 24

Some scholars like John Mbiti, Andrew Walls, Bediako and others discloses that Geneva, Rome, Athens Paris, London, or New York should not be regarded as Church's universality but in Lagos. This is because the Church has demonstrated extraordinary physical and spiritual commitment in the face of several challenges. He further argued that Christianity in the global South, especially Africa, remains subtle. It is a giant standing on a clay legs. It primary are of exposed centers on the weakness of its theological education. We must note the failure of Carthaginian Christian community, the church in Africa before its destruction in the fourth century was due to their incapability to develop the faith of its own culture. So, the church in Africa needs

²² Lamin Sanneh

²³ EZeogu Ernest, *Bible and Culture in African Christianity* (M. D Publisher), 344.

²⁴Mojola Aloo, *Bible Translation and Christian Theological Education in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Studies in Global Christianity, 2013), 489.

²⁵ Gatwa Tharcisse, *The Cross-Cultural Mission: An Agenda for Theological Education in Africa* (Isabel: Oxford, 2013), 15.

to develop holistic and sound theological hermeneutics methodologies that will be real to the holistic message of the Bible and African philosophy and worldview.

Soulen views the need for Afrocentric hermeneutics which refers to the systematic approach to the scripture that seek to recover the rightful place of Africa, its peoples, and its culture within the biblical tradition itself, and to draw attention to and correct misrepresentations of that place that have accrued over centuries in Western interpretational tradition.²⁶

As earlier discussed, theological interpretation in African was done mainly from the cultural view point of Western. A sifted occurred after when many African theologians like Bolaji Idowu, Osadoloh Imasogie, Mbiti, Yusuf Obaje started the process of developing methodologies of interpretation to contextualize the Bible in a unique dialogue with divers' cultures that dominate the African context. Their primary task is to make the message of the word of God life for contemporary audience. The basic presupposition on which the interpretation and theologizing of Bible in an African context is centered on threefold. According to him, the three aspects of interpretation are origin, text, and reader, "the interpreter begins with the text, leading to the questions of history, structure, and relation to the reader.²⁷

In the view of West Gerald, he said all interpretations of the Bible are contextual. Readers always brings their questions and concerns to their reading of the Bible. The context used to bring direction to the reading practice. The most important context we bring to the Bible is our theological context. What we belief about God and the world play a vital role in interpreting the Bible and what we find there. The contexts of our theology have uniquely influenced Biblical interpretation over the centuries, that modern bible scholars could be said to have arisen as a response to this theological dominance. Instead of reading the Bible from a theological context, modern Bible scholars reads the Bible from historical context. And this has prompted the Bible students to investigates the history surrounding the text: its author and the recipients of the message.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BIBLE AND AFRICAN CULTURE

As it is earlier affirmed that, the Bible is presented in Jewish cultural milieu. And message of the Bible is passed to us through the channel of the Jewish people. Thus, the assumptions and motives of the Jews preserved the Bible for us. The Hebrew Scripture has concrete sources in the Canaanite Palestine cultural practices. The world of the New Testament has also been acknowledged to be a replica of the Greco-Roman civilization. Many issues in the New Testament are best understood from a good knowledge of the Greco-Roman worldviews and cultural practices.²⁹

²⁶Soulen, 17.

²⁷ Nihinlola, 41.

²⁸West Gerald, "Contextuality" The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture (Sawyer: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 399-400.

²⁹ Ntreh B. A. *The Bible, Culture Identity and Mission; A Biblical Appraisal" in The Bible, Cultural, Identity, and Mission* (Cambridge: Scholars Publishing, 2016), 10.

There is different perspective to the interpretation of the scripture among various cultures. To sum, the Bible is seen as an oppressive instrument used in the history to alienate and dehumanize. Some have used the Bible to provide a foundation for the discrimination and oppression of minorities. The message of the Bible for the church, is a transformative instrument, very paramount to the life and work of the church. We cannot separate culture from the Bible, if the Bible will make sense and relevance to our context.

Scholars have developed and employed several methods to explain their perception of the relationship between the Bible and culture. The exclusivism model believes there is one religion and, by extension, one culture. All other religion and cultures, except the western religion and culture, are regarded as false. It is inclined to convert others into one's religion or culture. In another word, the inclusivism model in their views seen Bible and the African culture possessing elements of truth unique to the different traditions. This view accepted other religion and cultures. It has respect and tolerance for other religions and cultures. Inclusivism appears to have it weakness to the tolerance of other religion and cultures, with this there is need for another approach.

Another model proposed by Netland is Pluralism, which willingly and genuinely accepts other cultures. This model allows for tolerance of both the Bible and the African culture. It authenticated that the Bible and African culture are equally legitimate way of life.³¹ Although, this opinion is not true because there are African cultural practices that negate the Bible. Nevertheless, its affirmation that the Bible and African cultures are tantamount way of life is far from the truth. Not all African worldview is following teaching of the Bible.

In the view of Ogbonnaya, he condemned the missionary's negative effect over the African Christians' cultures. The missionary picture African culture as nonentity. Their action has given room for syncretism and inability to stand firm in their professed faith.³² On the arrival of the European missionaries to Africa, they did not find time to understudy and value the African culture. They pasted African as uncivilized people. They equated culture to civilization and started the work of the mission to make African civilized. As a result of this, there was an imposition of western culture on African culture. This process of civilizing Africans brought about in balancing between African societies and Western societies. It is obvious that the interaction of African culture with Christianity has had a vital impact on the Africa ways of life. This has brought about African to adopt aspects of European culture while at the same time maintain some African traditional practices.

An attempt was made in the past to develop the dialogue between the African culture and the Bible, and this has brought about the formation of African Independent Churches (AIC). The goal of this organization is to be autonomous and practice Christianity in their own way. This clarifies that African do not transact with the Bible empty-handed separate from their experiences

³⁰ Ntreh. 11-12.

³¹ Ntren, 14.

³² Ogbonnaya, 16.

of reality, both religion-culturally and socio-politically.³³ It has been observed that the issue of dialogue between the Bible and culture cannot be overemphasized in integrating Christianity in Africa. It has also been observed that African prefer to interpret the message of the Bible from their cultural perspectives. So, culture and the Bible cannot be separated. African should allow the message of the Bible to transform and renew their culture.

THEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF CULTURAL IMPACT ON BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICA

Here we look at the way in which African culture has influence Bible Interpretation:

a. Development of an African Hermeneutical Methodologies

- African scholars in their agitation to engage in the theology and Biblical interpretation that addresses the problem of African in their context. This was approach with various hermeneutical methods such as inculturation and contextualization, Liberation
 - Theology, Theology of Reconstruction, Intercultural Hermeneutics and Integrated Hermeneutics. According to Loba-Mkole, he said that inculturation and liberation theology surface as the foundational templates and constitute the driving force of African scholars.³⁴ Each of the hermeneutical approach adopted in Africa has its foundation from the diverse experience of the Africans.
 - For example, liberation theology came as a result of African struggle for independence. This was characterized by re-reading the account in the book of Exodus for liberation in the struggle for independence. As a result, African seen themselves as been oppressed, exploited in which they need deliverer. A reconstruction theology comes from reading the book of Ezra-Nehemiah to rebuild what the colonial have destroyed.
- b. Renewed interest in African Theological Scholarship
 Biblical interpretation was made mainly from the western perspective. From the middle
 of 1960s, African theologians have been calling for Christian theologies that will bear
 the distinct stamp of African culture or meditation. Many African scholars began to
 develop diverse methods of interpretation to contextualize the message of the Bible in
 such a way that it will address the problem of the African. Two of these scholars were
 E. Bolaji Idowu and Edward Fasole. This trend continues as many African scholars
 joined this good work. In 1982 Yusuf Obaje appeared to blaze a trail by formulating
 specifically an African Christian theology of the church as a Theocentric community.
- c. Integrating of Christianity in Africa

 This process has produced great result in an attempt to make African worship God in their culture. Mixture of Christianity with African culture has reduced gradually (Syncretism). African people now can see Christianity as their religion and no more the western religion. Cultural dressing, the use of drum, singing, dancing are welcome in the worship. Africans are free now to express themselves in the mood of worship through clapping, dancing, singing and shouting.

³³ Waweru Humphrey, *The Bible and African Culture Mapping Transactional*, Introads (Kenya: Sapf Chancery, 2011),49-50.

³⁴Loba-Mkole, Rise of Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa (HTS: T. S Publishing, 2008), 548

d. Formulation of African Christian Theology

African scholars have noticed the need to develop a theology that will respect Africans' views. Ayegboyin observed that, Western theologians cannot provide answers to many African questions. A typical African theology must address the problem of poverty, corruption, deliverance, healing, sexuality and spiritism subjects. The central perspective of the Africans beliefs the realities of the spirit world, while Western theology regards demons as mere superstition. With this experience, Africans deduced the need for a theology that responds to their needs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the need for African theological hermeneutics that will consider African worldview and philosophy. It has been observed that the theological influence of culture cannot be separated from scriptural interpretation in any culture. Our scriptural interpretation reveals our worldview, cultural orientation, and philosophy. It is obvious that African culture has positively influenced the Biblical interpretation in many ways. For example, it has developed the African Hermeneutics methods, renewed interest in African Theological scholarship, influenced the integration of Christianity in Africa and help in formulation of African Christian Theology. These has greatly impacted the formulation of theology that addresses the Africans' needs.

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