

AFRO-BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICA TODAY

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Abstract

By Afro-biblical hermeneutics, we mean biblical interpretations done in Africa especially by African instituted Churches. These hermeneutical works are typically African in character in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously borrow heavily from African religious heritage, in their dialogue with the gospel of Christ. The paper sets out to demonstrate that the Biblical hermeneutics in Kenya and Africa at large was largely shaped and/or inspired by biblical translation. That is upon the Bible being translated into the local/indigenous languages, Africans began to re-interpret it in their 'relevant fashions, a phenomenon which contrasted the missionary approaches. Second, biblical translations also gave rise to the birth of African independent/instituted Churches, whose hermeneutical standpoints largely speaks for the entire 'Biblical hermeneutics in Africa today.'

Introduction

The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation defines hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation or the art of understanding any written text.³ According to Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta, the word hermeneutics is derived from a Greek word meaning 'interpretation,' 'translation' or 'explanation.'⁴ Therefore, biblical hermeneutics is the art or technique of interpreting the biblical text in order to understand its original context and then find its contemporary meaning. Nthamburi and Waruta further notes that "unless an African is enabled to understand scripture in his/her own cultural patterns, the scripture will not only lose its validity but its authoritative relevance as well."⁵ Certainly, the scripture can only be understood in relation to the total life of a people in any given society.⁶ Cnaan Banana of Zimbabwe raises fears of the possibility of 'distorted hermeneutics.' He builds his case for a 'distorted hermeneutics' when he gives an example of South Africa where one race discriminated against the other by twisting its biblical hermeneutics. He also cites the case of patriarchal systems which relegates women to a second class status by warping Bible to suit intended interests however faulty.⁷ This therefore means that with such defective hermeneutical tools, the interpretation will obviously be problematic. To this end, a careful interpretation of scriptures in Africa has to be given a special attention.

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3 R. J. Coggins & J. L. Houlden. *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM press, 1990), 283.

4 Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta 1997. "Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches," in Hannah W. Kinoti & John M. Waliggo eds. *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton), 40.

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

Afro-Biblical Hermeneutics from a Historical Perspective

Since the 1920s the African Instituted Churches (AICs) have vigorously engaged in biblical hermeneutics. In turn, they have been greatly influenced by the need to preserve some aspects of African religiosity and to uphold scriptural authority. In attempting to account for their emergences, it is critical to appreciate that the AICs, in general, were born as a consequence of social, political, economic and cultural upheavals experienced in the missionary Churches. An example is among the Kikuyu people in the 1920's - following the colonialisation and Christianization of Kenya.⁸ The colonizers added insult to injury by forcing Africans to become labourers in their own farms. But, what made the matters worse were the missionaries suppressing and abolishing most of Kikuyu customs.⁹ For example, "the protestant Churches led by the Church of Scotland Mission demanded of their followers to abstain from traditional practices like dance, divination, polygamy and female circumcision."¹⁰ In particular, the issue of female circumcision became a major source of conflict between the missionaries and some Kikuyu Christians and non-Christians. The missionaries demanded that the Kikuyu Christian to sign a loyalty declaration that he/she wished to disassociate him/herself with the practice of female circumcision. The declaration read thus: "I reaffirm my vows to the Church of Christ and wish to disassociate myself with the practice of girl circumcision which I hereby renounce again."¹¹ Those who refused to sign it were threatened with excommunication. This drove the African Christians to desire to have their own Churches where they could study the Bible and interpret it contextually.

Coincidentally, the translation of the Bible into local languages, soon after the introduction of Christianity in Kikuyu land, played a big role in the development of Afro-biblical hermeneutics. Interestingly, the pioneer Protestant missionary in East Africa, the Rev. Dr. Ludwig Krapf, a German working with Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the 19th century CE, used translation of the Bible or portions of it as one of his major methodologies in his protestant education. Specifically, his approaches included: the translation of the Bible into Ethiopian (or local) languages, teaching Hebrew to young Ethiopians (read locals), and setting up small schools to enable Ethiopians (read locals) to study the Scriptures in order to come to a more Bible-based form of Christianity. Krapf's methodology of first learning the language of the locals before engaging his mission with them is clearly evident in every region of Eastern Africa where he visited. An illustration on this: On his arrival in Mombasa Kenya in 1844, after leaving Pemba and Zanzibar, 1842-43, Krapf began his education mission, of his protestant ministry, with a passion to study Swahili, which is the trading language of over 130, 000 people living in the East and Central Africa. He also learned other East African Coast languages such as the Nyika (also called Duruma). And due to his vast knowledge of the Arabic language, the Arab Sheiks and Wanyika Chiefs helped him.¹² In turn, his interests in studying the local languages helped him to avoid ethnocentricisms, which characterised most of the 19th Century European missionaries.

8 Nahason Ndungu 1997. "The Bible in an African Independent Church," in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo eds. *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Action, 1997), 58-59.

9 Ibid 59

10 Ibid

11 E. N. Wanyoike, *An African Pastor* (Nairobi; East African Publishing House, 1974), 98.

12 See Ype Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2002), 72.

Thus, right from the initial stages of planting Christianity in East Africa, missionaries placed importance on studying African languages and translating scriptures into vernaculars. An example of Krapf's first version of Genesis translated in 1844 and published in the first volume of Proceedings of the American Oriental Society in 1851, reads:

1. *Genesis 1:1-5 Mooanzo alioomba Mooigniazimoongo oowingo na n'te*
2. *Yalikooa n'te aina oozoore na toopoo; yalikooa keeza katika shimo na roorkhoo ya Mooigniazimoongoo yali ikipepea katika madjee*
3. *Alinena Mooigniazimoongo; iwa nooroo kooa ikawa nooroo*
4. *Akaona Mooigniazimoongo, nooroo kooa endjema, akapambanooa baina ya nooroo na keeza*
5. *Akaita Mooigniazimoongo, nooroo m'taka, na keeza oosikoo. Yalikooa magribee na soobookhee sikio modija*

Krapf's problem with translation is that he adopted the typically English writing *oo* for the *u* sound, which would have been written *u* in the German as in modern Swahili. Nevertheless, these translations, most of which were sent to Bombay for printing – as it was cheaper, were used in literacy classes long before the more polished documents were prepared.¹³ This drives us to wonder: Did the AICs borrow their translation methodology from the 19th century European missionaries without acknowledging it? Are the AICs original in their translation methodology in their biblical hermeneutics?

Nevertheless, the Bible Translation as a methodology in Biblical hermeneutics is not new in Africa. For traditions have it that the first translation of the Bible took place in Africa when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria in the third century BCE. This translation is referred to as the Septuagint (LXX), a name given after its seventy Jewish translators. Since then, an attempt at translating the Bible into over 2, 100 distinct languages and dialects has been attempted. In any case, with over 2000 distinct languages, Africa accounts for nearly 27% of the world's languages (totalling 7, 010).¹⁴ To this end, John Mbiti avers that the translation of the Bible in Africa unlocks the written knowledge tremendously, if not magically, as it has great impact on the people.¹⁵ For at this stage, the chief direct contact with Christian thought becomes exclusively the Bible in one's mother tongue. Thus, following the first introduction of the Christian message, "nothing is more decisive as a watershed than publication of the scripture in a local language."¹⁶

David Barrett demonstrates the importance of biblical translation in promoting afro-biblical hermeneutics when he says:

It is impossible to over estimate the importance of the Bible in African society. The portions of it that are first translated are in most cases the first printed literature in vernacular language...Through these scriptures, God, Africans perceived, was addressing them in the vernacular in which was enshrined the soul of their people...

13 For details, see *Rabai to Mumias: A Short History of Church of the Province of Kenya 1844-1944* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1994), 1-17.

14 See John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22-23.

15 John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 23.

16 Ibid 24.

The vernacular scriptures therefore provided an independent standard of reference that African Christians were quick to seize on.¹⁷

John Mbiti appears to echo David B. Barrett when he explains the importance of Bible translation in enhancing Biblical hermeneutics and says, thus:

When the translation is first published, especially that of the New Testament and more so of the whole Bible, the Church in that particular language area experiences its own Pentecost. The Church is born afresh; it receives the Pentecostal tongues of fire. As in Acts 2, the local Christians now for the first time 'hear each of us in his [or her] own language... We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God' (Acts 2:6-11). The Spirit of God unlocks ears and people hear the Word of God, speaking to them in its most persuasive form. Local Christians cannot remain the same after that.¹⁸

In Kenya, the Bible translation also coincided with the conflict between the protestant missions and some Kikuyu¹⁹ Christians and non-Christians over traditional customs such as dance, polygamy, and female circumcision which the missionaries condemned. As a result the learned Kikuyu (*athomi*) turned to the Bible and used it in defending their customs.²⁰ John Karanja builds on this when he says that the Kikuyu Christians showed considerable latitude in interpreting and applying the Bible from the time the Scriptures were availed to them in their vernacular. He goes on to point out that although the text of the Bible was fixed, its interpretation was not. For indeed, *athomi* used the Bible creatively to serve their pastoral, political and cultural needs. Likewise, Pastors used it to promote morality and giving to the Church; while politicians used it to create tribal consciousness; apologists for Kikuyu culture used it to affirm their own religion and cultural heritage.²¹

Kenyatta builds on this further when he notes that:

The African faced with these problems and seeing how his [her] institutions have been shattered looked again in the *book of books* [Bible]. There he[she] found polygamy sanctioned by the personal practice of great biblical charactersBut he was shocked to find the missionary again condemning him[her] as a sinner for fulfilling that which is sanctioned in the *Ibuku ria Ngai* (the Bible).²²

As much as we would like to support Kenyatta in condemning the missionaries for their behaviour, we also beg to differ with him in his biblical interpretation on polygamy. No wonder he ended up being a polygamist! Certainly, the Old Testament's polygamists should not be emulated and the Bible should have been re-interpreted with regard to polygamy among the Kikuyu customary beliefs and practices. In Genesis, Adam was given only one wife by God, so was Noah. The first person to be associated with polygamy was Abraham who was forced to sleep with his Housemaid, Hagar (Gen 18:4) and did not marry her. After Sarah died (Gen 25:11), Abraham married another wife called Keturah (Gen 25:11). Jacob became polygamist after he was short-changed by his uncle Laban (Gen 29).

17 David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 127.

18 Ibid 26.

19 "Kikuyu" is the anglicised form of the proper name and pronunciation of Gikuyu. By 2006, they totalled about ten million, equal to about 30% of Kenya's total population. They reside around the slopes of Mount Kenya in the Central Province of Kenya. They cultivate the fertile central highlands and are also the most economically active ethnic group in Kenya. As one of the Bantu linguistic group, they are closely related to the Kamba, Embu, Mbeere and Ameru people who also live around the slopes of Mount Kenya.

20 Op cit 60

21 John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1999), 129.

22 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1978), 272.

These marriages were full of problems; as such, this drives us to presuppose that it is for this reason that Jesus said, "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law" (Mark 10:5). In as much as we do not advocate a retention of polygamy in the Africa of the twenty-first century, we must critically appreciate that, the missionaries did not take time to study some cultural elements in African heritage, especially with regard to polygamous families. As a matter of fact, such families were denied certain Church privileges which were ironically given to 'worse' characters such as practitioners of serial marriages or 'civilized divorcees.' Had the missionaries studied the whole philosophy behind polygamy in Africa, they would have solved it comprehensively, and as a result, it wouldn't have spilled over to the 21st century before it was 'solved.' To this end, it is critical to appreciate that to date; the Anglican Church of Kenya and other mainline Churches continues to discriminate polygamists, even though they currently constitute a tiny minority. In particular, they are, for instance, denied 'normal' Church membership, the right to partake the holy Eucharist, and the right to have their infants baptized among others. In some cases, they are advised to 'divorce' all 'the other wives' except one before they can be treated as 'Christians.' Such advices tend to ignore children born out of such marriages as a factor, the communal aspect of African culture and above all, the gospel of love that Jesus imparted to the world which was once wrought. Why would one, for instance, want to punish an innocent child born from a polygamous family, deny him/her baptism among other privileges and yet Jesus died for such? In short, such biblical hermeneutics are a product of 'holier-than-thou attitude' which is contrary to the gospel of Christ (Mark 12:28-31). Why should the missionaries and mission Churches today continue to 'advocate' for divorce and serial monogamy in the name of divorce and remarriage? As a matter of fact, cases are known of people who have been married to more than ten different wives, in form of serial marriages. That is 'divorce and remarry' kind of life, yet the Churches have always accommodated them, as 'clean.' This tempts one to feel like advising that, it is better to keep the two or more wives rather than marry, divorce and later remarry. While none of the two is ideal for us, as monogamy is the ideal way, it is worthwhile to recall that the former Anglican Archbishop of Kenya David Gitari (1997-2002) advocated for the polygamists' recognition as communicants in Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in the 1988 session.²³

Turning back to the afro-biblical hermeneutical crisis, one wonder: Why did the mainline Churches (or the Church of the missionaries) condemn the whole custom of circumcision including the significant role of counselling and the mark of moving from the stage of childhood to maturity? Possibly, the single major problem could have been the nature of operation. For one would wonder, for instance, in condemning the African dances as heathen: where is dancing condemned in the Bible (*cf* Psalms 150)? David though a famous King danced with all his might (2 Samuel: 6:14). Africans always danced with a good motive and glorified God through it. The Africans always turned to the Bible for guidance in teachings and practices. A good example is the *Akurinu* Independent Church followers. In their ecclesiological standpoint, they believe the Holy Spirit interprets the scriptures. They are known for not cutting their hairs or beards (Num:6:5-7:1 Sam:1:11-13), discouraging wearing red clothes (Deut 27:26), removing their shoes in Church (Ex 3:4-7), observing ritual cleanliness after child delivery (Lev:12:1-8), rejecting of modern medicine (Jer 46:11-12, Hosea 5:13-14), wearing of white robes and turbans (Lev 8:9-14, Ex 29:6-7), raising of hands during prayers (1 King 8:22-23, 1 Tim 2:8-9). Yet such could

23 Archbishop David Gitari reported in the synod in Kirinyaga, Anglican Diocese.

wonder: why not just rely on the Bible for guidance rather than relying on the 'missionary commandments'?

Historically, the *Akurinu* Independent Church, which is found mainly in Kikuyu dominated areas of Central and Eastern Kenya, emerged in 1927 soon after the New Testament was translated into the local language (the Kikuyu). Their Church, which began as a mere movement, was energized by the completion of the translation of the Old Testament in 1951. Characteristically, the founders of the Church had unique experiences prior to the formation of their Church. For example, Joseph Ng'ang'a one of the founders is said to have spent three years (1926-1929) in seclusion, studying the Bible without Bible commentary, Bible instructors, Concordances, Bible dictionaries etc; while John Mung'ara spent one year in a store reading the Bible. After these experiences, they emerged as astounding and inspiring preachers, who relied on the Holy Spirit for guidance in their discourses. As such, they did not need to attend theological classes. To an extent, they discouraged high academic leanings. Thus afro-biblical hermeneutics as demonstrated by the *Akurinu* Churches, just as with most of the African Instituted Churches did not have to bog itself down with the quest for higher theological training as the Holy Spirit is the right teacher of all times. And due to their spontaneity, which proceeds from African religious heritage, they continue to draw huge crowds as the locals identify with their unsophisticated theology – the 'theology of the Holy Spirit' which is not diluted or corrupted by 'wisdom of men.'²⁴

Although the *Akurinu* Church members quote extensively from the Old Testament, a book that easily identifies with African culture, we however note some problems with their afro-biblical hermeneutics; for they are largely interpreted out of context. That is why it is very important readers of the Bible use biblical-critical methods in biblical hermeneutics in Africa and elsewhere. For instance, non-cutting of hair and beard was a practice in Judaism at that time; historical criticism could help to investigate why they were doing so. In the analysis, the biblical-critical methods of reading the Bible will establish that the practice, which was there long time ago, has been overtaken by events. Surely, why keep dirty hair and beards when one can trim them to a manageable size? What is so spiritual with the hair and beards? What is wrong with wearing red clothes? In any case, Anglican Bishops wear purple (which is close to red) clerical shirts! Again, Moses' removal of shoes was symbolic; for it meant that before the presence of God, he remained spiritually naked. God knew everything in his heart. Further, rejecting modern medicine can be seen as suicidal, as it is God who has empowered people with special knowledge and wisdom to invent medicine. Certainly, God created medicinal plants that produce medicine. In any case, a good doctor will admit that his or her role is to treat but healing belongs to God.

Of great interest in the afro-biblical hermeneutics is the indigenization of African ecclesiology, especially with regard to Kimbanguist Church of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this, the Church has endeavored to capture the African ethos of wholeness. For example, sickness is not only a physical but also spiritual issue. The healing message thus is a central idea among the Kimanguists, just as it is among other independent churches. For indeed, Africans look to religion for the solution to every life problem, including health. To many Africans, evil and sufferings is associated with Satan or bad

24 For details, see Nahashon Ndungu, "The Bible in an African Independent Church," in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo eds 1997. *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton, 1997), 58 - 67.

spirits. Evil may come about through the curse, evil eye, malicious spirits or abuse of mystical power. There are however, possible diseases and calamities that are attributed to bad spirits. Such bad spirits may cause famine, plague, small pox, mental illnesses or even barrenness. For Simon Kimbangu, the Church founder, therefore, it was easy to convince his adherents that the devil is the prime cause of diseases, physical and mental problems. Faith is therefore a necessary component of healing sessions.

Another element that comes out clearly in afro-biblical hermeneutics in Kimbanguist Church is seen in the mode and practice of prayer. Here, their prayers follow the African religious heritage where the whole concept of prayer is taken very seriously, as it is interpreted to mean communication with God. The African attitude to prayer is one of great humility and submission. Further, the Kimbanguists remove their shoes for the entire duration of prayer. To them, one cannot go to holy place with shoes on (Ex 3:5). Men are advised to take off their watches, bracelets and hats while women are asked to cover their heads with cloth (1 Cor.11: 4f). For them, the most suitable position of prayer is a kneeling (down) position with the hands with eyes closed. Pockets are emptied of money and all other objects show human vulnerability (that which can be damaged). One should be disciplined as an attitude of showing the humility of the worshipper to God. Human sinfulness has to be eradicated to avoid it blocking our communication with God. Above all the community members must live up to the African concepts of hospitality by living in good fellowship with one another as they intercede for one another. This community includes the living and the living dead.

Concerning raising hands up during prayers, among the Akurinu Church, we would argue that it is okay, though there are many physical positions for prayers prescribed in the Bible. For instance, sitting while praying (2 Sam 7:18, Neh1:4), kneeling while praying (Luke 22:41, Eph 3:14), standing while praying (1 King 8:22, Isa 1:26, Mk 11:25), lying prostrate while praying (2 Cor 20:18, Gen 24:52 Num 20:6) and praying with arms outstretched (Ex 9:29, Isa1:15, 1 King 8:54, 2 Cor 6:13).

Another aspect of indigenization is with respect to the Eucharist in the Kimbanguist Independent Church. Currently, the Church boasts of having over 7 million adherents in the vast Great Lakes Region. The Church that began in 1921 in the Democratic Republic of Congo spread to the neighboring countries namely Congo, Angola, Rwanda and Burundi. It celebrated its first Eucharist April 1971, during the 50th anniversary that commemorated the beginning of Kimbangu's ministry. 350,000 pilgrims converged at N'kamba²⁵ (their New Jerusalem), for the occasion. The Eucharist elements consist of African food. The bread is made out of the mixture of potatoes, maize and bananas which is a common African dish, while Wine is made out of honey diluted in water. The mixture of maize, potatoes and bananas symbolizes the body of Christ which is formed of people of all races. Honey is traditionally used by Africans on very important occasions such as the pouring of libation. Its usage therefore shows that this is an important event in the life of community. Even though afro-biblical hermeneutics, as seen in the indigenization or inculturation of AICs, is a welcome development in theologizing today, it has often been viewed as too extreme.

²⁵ N'kamba is the rural home village of Simon Kimbangu who founded the Church in 1921. It is also the place where he began his ministry. Again, eyewitnesses say that they experience a great healing power of God through Kimbangu. The miracles that he performed made him very popular.

To this end, Obeng perceptively says that, "The purpose of biblical criticism is to aid interpretation." It is unfortunate that some people believe that the Bible does not have any error. However, "Textural criticism had led to the discovery of errors as well as variants in the texts of the Bible."²⁶ As such, it should address questions such as: Who wrote the story of creation and where was he standing as he/she observed? It is only by using historical-criticism that we can unveil such concerns. Other concerns would include: Why do we have two accounts of creation and *prima facie* different dating of the crucifixion in the synoptic Gospels and John? A reading of the parallel passages like Mark 10:35 and Mat 20:20, Mt 8:5 and Luke 7:3 reveal a number of differences.²⁷ God or the Holy Spirit could not have dictated different things to the evangelists to write down.

Nevertheless, afro-biblical hermeneutics cannot be ignored despite some faults, for clearly, archaeological discourses give evidence, for instance, that the Bible is comprised of pagan wisdom literature such as from Egypt. The book of proverbs has borrowed a lot from the sayings of the Egyptian Amen-em-ope and in Psalm 104 looks very close to the Egyptian hymn to the sun-god, Aton. The stories found in Gen 1-11 seem to be drawn with modifications from the common traditions of the Near East.²⁸ The Mosaic Law also borrowed a lot from the law codes of Sumerians and Akkadians²⁹ and the same thing happened to the New Testament. The Bible being the word of God simply means that God is dealing with his people and the continual saving Grace is at work.

However, God reveals Godself through created realities and human culture. The same God revealed himself in Hebrew culture. God does the same in other cultures, and African culture is not exceptional. The Bible is the Word of God written by persons using perishable tools and then passed from one generation to the other and then translated into local languages. In the process, the scrolls got damaged and scribes made mistakes. □

Second, the Bible arose from Hebrew and Hellenistic cultures distant from Africa. The languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are difficult to understand. The idioms used are foreign to the Africans.³⁰ The solution is to study these languages and use the hermeneutical methods to come up with the best interpretation. It is good to search who wrote the book and when, are there any mistakes, the meaning of the original passages in the recipients' cultural contexts and then apply it to the African situation.³¹

Certainly, interpretation of scripture is not an easy exercise. For different Churches and individuals get different results. In fact, that is why we have got so many denominations and each denomination takes her interpretation to be the best and expects her followers to adhere to the specific teachings. Many in Africa are searching for spiritual solutions for physical problems like economic hardships, political turmoil, social unrest and supernatural problems. It is for this that many Christians in the Pentecostal Churches, especially in modern Kenya, have become easy prey to prosperity gospel. The *Sunday*

26 The Practices and supporting biblical references are found in the constitutions of the *Akurinu* Church.

27 Emmanuel Adow Obeng 1997. "The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting the Scriptures in Africa" in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo eds. *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton, 1997), 14.

28 Ibid

29 Ibid 16

30 Sunday Nation 31st August 2008

31 Obeng, 17

Nation newspaper had a full page on the account of the way pastors steal from their own followers in the name of God using the scripture.³² To this end, the idea of seed planting has been misused to mean enriching the pastors in exchange of blessings which at times do not come by. The Mainline Churches' leaders also create unimaginable doctrines to suit their selfish desires. The Episcopal Church of America is a good example on the issue of homosexuality. African bishops are known for abuse of office and other kinds of corruption well supported with scriptures – a pointer that a new biblical hermeneutics in Africa is needed.

Emmanuel Obeng calls this simplistic Biblicism which is often charged with an overdose of emotionalism.³³ This is usually introduced to Africans by foreign preachers who have little knowledge of the Bible but have a lot of zeal, enthusiasm and goodwill. They share their ignorance and multiply errors that lead Christians astray. It is even worse when the African preachers ape them. Certainly, a person is worse when he/she pretends what he is not.

Inadequacies in Biblical Translation & Way Forward

As can be deduced above, Biblical translation is a process and result of biblical interpretation. For a good translation to be achieved Biblical criticism must be used. The way foreign missionaries did the translation left a lot to be desired. Richard Gehman noted that,

one veteran missionary who himself was a missionary kid doubts that early missionaries ever consulted with the Africans on the meaning of their culture. Missionaries therefore frequently misjudged the meaning of the culture because they did not take time to investigate and learn.³⁴

This is what led to inadequacies in the vernacular translations. In fact this is what caused conflict between Kikuyu Christians and the missionary over the issue of female circumcision, as noted above. For indeed, the Kikuyu readers insisted that the word '*muiritu*'³⁵ for Virgin Mary in Luke 1:27 meant that they were right to circumcise women. Uncircumcised woman was not '*muiritu*' but '*Kirigu*' who was always treated with contempt. John Karanja attempts to show the inadequacies in Biblical translations when he says that three words were tried for 'Holy Spirit': *muoyo* (the spirit of a living being), *ngoma* (departed spirit) and *kiiruru* (a shadow). As a result, the early 20th century translators found all the three suggestions unsuitable and *Roho*, a Swahili word with a Semitic root, was adopted. In the nature of things, the 'Holy Spirit' was rendered as *Roho Mutheru* (literally meaning, Clean Spirit).³⁶ In view of this, the protestant missionary desire to prevent syncretism overrode the need to convey the message in the local language.

Secondly, the Africans have got many dialects within a very small geographical area. The temptation is for the interpreter to want to choose a specific dialect for translation and expect others from different dialects to use it. We have often experienced cases where we have always come across unfamiliar words in the Kikuyu Bible because the translator used Kiambu-Kikuyu or Murang'a-Kikuyu dialect which is different from dialect from Nyeri

32 R. J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1987), 32.

33 Obeng, 21

34 R. J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1987), 32.

35 Mature circumcised young woman ready for marriage

36 John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith: Kikuyu Anglican Christianity, 1900-1945* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1999), 134.

or accented Kirinyaga-Kikuyu. Thus, even if one has one ethnic group, we should never fail to take cognisance of the fact that being one ethnic group does not mean that the dialects are the same. Therefore meaningful translation of scripture requires people who “combine a good command of their own language and culture with a thorough knowledge of biblical sciences and language.”³⁷ Mbiti in his support for translation wrote,

[Africans] in their own language the Bible becomes at once a living book. But in their own language the Bible becomes at once a living book, very different from other books. They see in their own language that between them and the Christian message there is no longer the authoritative missionary transmitter or other transmitter of that message as essential intermediary. Instead, they have full access to the Word of God in their own language, without intermediary, without foreign accents and without grammatical errors, speaking with full force and full authority.³⁸

Therefore, a critical study of the Bible requires application of methods such as historical criticism, textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and tradition-historical criticism. The theologian should also look at the background, date, destination, integrity and authorship. These will help the reader to understand the Bible to the extent of appreciating the ways in which the writers communicated to their original audiences and still to the current context. The African theologians other than translating the Bible need to write commentaries of the Bible and other supplementary materials and then translate them in local languages to enhance easier understanding by the lay Bible readers.

CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted to offer a general survey of afro-biblical hermeneutics in Africa today; where it has attempted to demonstrate that the African Instituted Churches (AICs) which have been active since the 1920s have been instrumental in inspiring biblical hermeneutics in Africa. Interestingly, their influence on this goes beyond their spheres and extends to the mainline Churches. On the whole, afro-biblical hermeneutics is characterized by common themes such as: quest for salvation, healing and wholeness; the reality of human condition of sin, alienation and curse; God's promise to restore the broken relationships and harmony; the desire to know how to relate to the spirit world, to God, to spirits, and demons; the importance of initiation rites such as baptism, marriage and death; hope for the hopeless; morality; and ancestrology among others. The paper has also attempted to demonstrate the importance of translation in afro-biblical hermeneutics in Africa today. As a matter of fact, the beginning of biblical translation in Africa in the 19th century can be seen as the beginning of biblical hermeneutics in Africa, as we know it today. Towards the end, the paper has called for prudence in biblical hermeneutics as some of these interpretations can be distorted, especially when some African Instituted Churches ignore biblical exegesis. As such, any biblical hermeneutics needs to recognize the settings of any given text of the bible, the occupations of the people, their cultures and their worldviews. Similarly, we need to consider our own social-cultural setting in order to make the text meaningful to others. For example, when looking at polygamy in both the Old Testament and the traditional African society, we need to consider our contemporary society and ask ourselves whether polygamous marriages are any longer relevant in the light of globalization. Certainly, afro-biblical hermeneutics is an attempt at contextualization of the gospel in Africa.

37 Obeng, 21

38 J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford university press, 1986), 26.

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