

# **Biblical Exegesis in African Context**

**Frederick Mawusi Amevenku**

Senior Lecturer, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon-Accra & Research  
Associate, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

**Isaac Boaheng**

Research Fellow, University of Free State, South Africa

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# Foreword

...εἶπεν ἄρά γε γινώσκεις ἃ ἀναγινώσκεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πῶς γὰρ ἂν ὀνομάμην ἐὰν μὴ τις ὀδηγήσει με; παρεκάλεισέν τε τὸν Φίλιππον ἀναβάντα καθίσαι σὺν αὐτῷ. (Acts 8:30b-31, “...do you really understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him”). I believe the words of the author of Acts 8:30b-31 attempted to show the significance of understanding Scripture passages and the agony of reading without understanding in context. How can one interpret Scripture without learning the art and science of biblical interpretation in context? In this monograph, Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng contribute to the solution to the problem of lack of adequate biblical interpretation materials for the African context.

Generally, there are many books concerning biblical interpretation. The challenge is that they often do not consider the African situation concerning the role of the Bible in religio-cultural and social issues. Africans interpret Scripture within their context. In other words, the African person’s experiences are brought to bear on the interpretive process/spiral.<sup>1</sup> Peter Nyende asserted that Africans read/interpret the Bible circumstantially. They approach the Bible with existential problems seeking solutions.<sup>2</sup> “...the Bible is not a book on the same level with books on the economy, geography or, agriculture, but a divine book which can be used [interpreted] to cause desirable change by those who subscribe to its tenets.”<sup>3</sup> However, George Ossom-Batsa argued that, until the 1960s, biblical interpretation in Ghana was performed according to western conventions, which do not adequately consider the African worldview.<sup>4</sup> It implies that although there were many activities in Africa in the first century concerning biblical interpretation—such as the continent being referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, “Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John D. K. Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical,” *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 4/2 (2017):182–210.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Nyende, “Addressing Ethnicity Via Biblical Studies: A Task of African Biblical Scholarship,” *Neotestamentica*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2010): 122-139.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, “Inductive Biblical Interpretation and Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Proposal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Ministries in Ghana Today,” *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 3/2(2016):140-60.

<sup>4</sup> George Ossom-Batsa, “African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91–104.

the cradle of biblical interpretation/translation<sup>5</sup>—the African worldview was not critically taken in the interpretation process.

Rev. Dr Frederick M. Amevenku and Rev. Isaac Boaheng have identified and agreed with other scholars on the critical issue of biblical interpretation in the African context and decided to contribute to the solution in this monograph because there can hardly be a universalist approach to biblical interpretation. J. N. K. Mugambi offers that “[h]ermeneutics, as a critical discipline, should help us to distinguish between the essential message of the gospel and the cultural gap in which it must necessarily be clothed from time to time and from place to place.”<sup>6</sup> Amevenku and Boaheng discuss ways, means, and principles for interpreting the Bible in order to make it more relevant in the African context.

The uniqueness of the book *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* is that: (i) the language used is plain, simple, and well paragraphed so that non-theologically educated clergy and individuals can understand and apply the principles for interpreting any genre in the Bible. It avoids the many technical jargons that accompany books on biblical interpretation and limits it to a few experts in the field; (ii) the authors bring together various methods and approaches to biblical interpretation such as African Biblical Studies and Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, propounded by African scholars, and Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation propounded by a non-African with the traditional textual, literary, contextual, and grammatical analysis in one volume. The book does not limit the discussion of issues to African scholars only. The adoption of Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation for the African context is insightful. The discussion of issues is very critical, so new and revised modes are suggested;<sup>7</sup> (iii) the principles for interpreting various genres of the Bible signify the uniqueness of interpreting each genre distinctively. The book has the potential of guiding and motivating students (both graduates and undergraduates) into areas of biblical interpretation they would like to specialize in; and (iv) the last chapter serves as an example of what was discussed in previous chapters and how it can be applied to interpreting Pauline passages. The book demonstrates the use of the Greek text, the way it

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<sup>5</sup> John D. K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): the Historical, Linguistic, and Theological Settings of the Gã, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe Bibles* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 2.

<sup>6</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, “Foundation for the African Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, ed. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2001), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2021), 82-84.



resonates in the *Akan* and *Ewe* contexts of Ghana/Africa, and how the message can be appropriated. It agrees with Aloo Osotsi Mojola's proposition that African biblical scholars should be able to use their native languages, history and culture, and the biblical languages in interpreting the Bible.<sup>8</sup> This would motivate students and the clergy to study their native/mother-tongue languages along with the study of the biblical languages.

The book contributes to solving one of the problems of biblical interpretation/studies in the African context identified by Emmanuel A. Obeng as the lack of reference materials that resonate with the African context.<sup>9</sup> Although the book can be used by other groups that share a similar ethos with the African context, no doubt, the monograph critically considers the African worldview concerning the use of the Bible and how its appropriate interpretation can help solve African challenges.

The exercise at the end of each chapter emphasizes the fact that it is a textbook that can be used to teach biblical interpretation in Seminaries, Departments of Religious Studies, and Bible Schools in Africa. The exercises would help the reader attempt to recall the main points of the issues discussed in the chapter.

Rev. Dr Amevenku and Rev. Boaheng have thoroughly examined the complex issue of biblical interpretation in the African context. They have given attention to acute details for biblical interpretation in the African context. The treatments of issues are characterized by a strong sense of making the Bible speak to existential issues in Africa through appropriate interpretation. As African Christianity continues to be very significant in the study of the faith, this book is timely. It is indispensable for persons who seek to interpret the Bible and make it more significant to Africans in their context. Rev. Dr Amevenku and Rev. Boaheng have fulfilled one of the elements of "righteousness" in academia by writing this book. It is our duty to read and apply the principles.

**Rev. Dr Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, PhD**

Acting Rector  
Perez University College

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<sup>8</sup> Aloo Osotsi Mojola, "Outstanding Challenges for Contemporary Bible Translation and Interpretation in Africa," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10 (2007): 31–37.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel A. Obeng, "Emerging Concerns for Biblical Scholarship in Ghana," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, ed. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 31–41.



# Preface

How can the Church in Africa affirm its uniqueness (in terms of the African identity and experiences) and at the same time remain faithful to the gospel message? The answer to this question is critical in African Christianity because of the many struggles African converts go through in remaining African and Christian at the same time. *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* has been published to guide African readers on how they can interpret the Bible within the socio-cultural context of Africa and apply it appropriately to their lives.

The book is organized into eight chapters, the first serving as a general introduction to the subject matter. After explaining exegesis and hermeneutics, the chapter sets the agenda for the rest of the book. The next chapter briefly discusses textual criticism, the task of determining the originality of a biblical text. It is argued that exegesis based on a wrong text is bound to be faulty and hence the exegete's first concern should be to determine the original text. Another important thing this chapter does is to equip the reader to determine the limits of a chosen text and provide a workable translation.

In chapter three, we consider issues related to the context of the text. Two types of contexts, namely, historical and literary contexts are discussed. After a critical examination of the various aspects of what constitutes context, the chapter concludes that contextual analysis is an indispensable tool in biblical exegesis. The study then moves on to examine the role grammar plays in one's understanding of scripture. Four aspects of grammatical analysis, namely, lexicology (the meaning of words), morphology (the form of words), grammatical function of words (parts of speech), and syntax (the relationships of words) are examined.

The book then proceeds to present and comment on various literary forms present in the Bible, prominent among them being, Narrative, Law, Poetry, Prophecy, Wisdom Literature, Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles and Revelation. It is noted that apart from general principles of exegesis, various literary genres require specific principles that must be mastered and applied. We dedicate the next chapter to discussions on socio-rhetorical interpretation, a recently developed interpretative grid which makes use of data from various fields such as linguistics (inner texture), literary comparative studies (intertexture), social and historical studies (social and cultural texture), ideological studies (ideological texture) and theology (theological/sacred texture) to analyze a text.

The next two chapters of the book explain matters solely related to the context of Africa. This part is intended to equip readers to interpret the Bible from African cultural perspectives and then apply the gospel message meaningfully to the life of African Christians. Chapter seven deals with the emergence and historical development of African Biblical Studies, (ABS), noting its relevance and how Africans can benefit from it. The main contention of the chapter is that Africans will better understand and apply God's word to their lives if they read the scriptures in an African way. The eighth chapter looks at how African languages can be used in deriving meaning of scripture and applying it to real-life situations. Here, the book considers the historical development of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (MTBH), the major contributors to this method as well as the principles involved in the approach. The authors contribute to the development of MTBH by developing a methodological framework for the mother-tongue approach.

The last chapter addresses the issue of the role of women in African Christianity. The question of the legitimacy of women leadership in the Christian Church is of major concern in the African society because of patriarchal dominance in Africa. The chapter contends that God calls all manner of people into Christian ministry therefore women must be given equal opportunity as men to perform any role for which God has called them.

We have the conviction that God wants us to use this book to help equip Christians, especially those faced with African realities, to better understand and apply God's word. This book is written in such a way as to facilitate use by both ordinary readers as well as scholars. Each chapter ends with self-assessment questions that enable the reader to have a deep reflection on what was covered in the chapter in question.

**Frederick Mawusi Amevenku**

**Isaac Boaheng**

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We are extremely grateful to our families, friends and colleagues in the various institutions in which we serve for the impact of their interactions and help to the process of writing this book. We thank Rev. Dr. Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh for writing a foreword to the book. Prof. Aloo O. Mojola and Prof. JDK Ekem are appreciated for their mentoring role in our academic careers. To the staff of Vernon Press, we say God richly bless you. Amen!

## **Dedication**

We dedicate this book to all African biblical scholars.



# Introduction

Africa has been credited for contributing remarkably to global Christianity in the 21st century. Africans have embraced Christianity in such a way that the Christian gospel no longer sounds foreign to Africans as it was in the past. Yet, the African Church still battles with the question of how best the gospel message can be rendered more meaningfully and practically to Africans. Since the survival of Christianity and the practice of authentic Christian values in Africa depend greatly on how Africans accept the gospel and make it part of their existence, African theologians continue to make efforts to contextualize the Christian faith meaningfully and relevantly to the African continent. A key question in the discussion is: How can the Church in Africa affirm its uniqueness (in terms of the African identity and experiences) and at the same time remain faithful to the gospel message? In other words, how can African converts remain both Christians and Africans at the same time?

Over the years various African scholars have grappled with these questions and yet have not reached a consensus. Issues such as polygamy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, use of alcohol, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, cohabitation, and the like continue to exercise African theologians. However, in most cases, the approach used is based on Western frameworks. The need for exegetical framework that equips the Africans to read and apply the Bible to their life situation therefore remains with us. This study contributes to the discussion by proposing an exegetical method by which African Christians can interpret Scriptures for the contemporary (African) society (in terms of existential issues such as abject poverty, hunger, ethnic tensions, child abuse, corrupt leadership, war, terrible illnesses and all sorts of unpleasant realities).

We have written this book as our modest attempt to help Africans to appreciate God's word within their own cultural settings. Each chapter can be studied on its own. However, all the chapters come together to form the complete hermeneutical framework for interpreting Scriptures for an African setting. Most of the chapters examine elements of biblical interpretation that have been developed through Western scholarship. Some of them include textual analysis, socio-rhetorical interpretation, contextual analysis and others. We believe that these elements serve as foundational principles upon which African biblical interpretation can be built. We therefore considered these elements and later focused on African peculiarities. One of the key contributions of this volume is our attempt to provide a hermeneutical framework for African Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics. This area of research has been discussed by many African scholars without a well-

developed methodology. The methodology provided in this study and the applications given under each aspect of the methodology will serve as a foundation for African biblical interpretation.



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