ABSTRACT

Biblical Studies is an academic discipline in the sense that it involves a rigorous scientific study of the Bible that leads to a systematic evolution of new knowledge criticized by academic departments or faculties in universities and colleges, and in academic journals where such researches are published. Over the past few centuries have been categorised into three broad areas. First, there are those that locate the meaning of the text in the world behind the text; second, those that locate the meaning of the text in the world within the text; and third, those that locate the meaning of the given text in world in front of the text. The third category which is the newest is oriented towards the reader(s) or reading community and the part they play in the communication process. The readers bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings. This third category has created space for African Biblical Studies, with one of its offshoots being Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics. In this paper, the author discusses how Biblical Studies have been done over the centuries, and gives a step-by-step approach to how Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics is carried out.
Key words: Biblical Studies, African Biblical Studies, Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, Historical critical method, Exegesis.
INTRODUCTION

Biblical Studies is the study of “a collection of various, and in some cases independent, disciplines clustering around a collection of texts known as the Bible whose precise limits…are still a matter of disagreement among various branches of Christian churches.” Biblical Studies can also be defined as the academic discipline or field of study of the Judeo-Christian Bible and related texts. It seeks to determine the meaning of the biblical books or given passages, especially as intended by the biblical writers for their addressees. It is an academic discipline in the sense that it involves a rigorous scientific study of the bible that leads to a systematic evolution of new knowledge criticized by academic departments or faculties in universities and colleges, and in academic journals where such researches are published. How has biblical studies been done over the centuries? Are there new approaches to biblical studies?

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1 The literary world into which Christianity came was quiet sophisticated. There was literature that goes back as far as the fourth century BC, to the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Canaan. Texts from these areas are helpful for understanding biblical history and literature. An example of such literature is the Apocrypha, a set of fifteen books included in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek version of the Old Testament. These books which are accepted as authoritative by Roman Catholics are not accepted as Scripture by Evangelicals.

BIBLICAL STUDIES METHODOLOGIES

Biblical Studies over the past few centuries have been categorized into three broad areas. First, there are those that locate the meaning of the text in the world behind the text; second, those that locate the meaning of the text in the world within the text; and third, those that locate the meaning of the given text in world in front of the text.\(^3\) The first group which is the oldest and most dominant focuses on issues of history – the writer’s intended meaning, the historical authenticity and the historical circumstances of the text. The second category concentrates on the text in a way that suggest that authentic meaning is derived from the text and not outside the text. The third category which is the newest is oriented towards the reader(s) or reading community and the part they play in the communication process. The readers bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings.

(i) **The world behind the text**

This category is made up of the Historical Critical Methodologies. These include: Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, Historical Criticism, and Tradition Criticism, all of which are Higher Criticism\(^4\) approaches to Biblical Studies.

(a) **Source Criticism**

This methodology attempts to move behind biblical texts to posit hypotheses regarding materials that the biblical authors might have used in composing their documents. For example in 1Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul quotes from an early Christian liturgy, and he appears to incorporate a Christian hymn into his letter to

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\(^4\) Higher criticism is an approach to the Bible that treats it exclusively as a flawed human book. Scholars who use this approach apply the canon of reason to the investigation of the biblical text, using a number of distinguishable but interrelated methods.
the Philippians.⁵ The authors of the four Gospels also appear to have possessed some written materials about Jesus that they drew upon when writing their books.⁶ Source critics try to identify these materials, and sometimes they even attempt to reconstruct them. Source criticism and the rest of the methods that follow are applied to the Gospels and Acts. A source critic asks the question, what sources were available to the evangelists when they wrote their gospels?⁷

(b) **Form Criticism**

The discipline of form criticism seeks to classify different materials found in the Bible according to literary genre or type (“form”) and to draw conclusions relevant to interpretation based on these classifications. Different types of material can be discerned: genealogies, parables, miracle stories, speeches, hymns, creeds, proverbs, and many more. Form critics usually identify the *Sitz im Leben* (“setting in life”) that each of these types of literature would have served in the biblical text. A form critic asks the question, what forms of material were available to the evangelists, and how were they used in the earliest church?⁸

(c) **Redaction Criticism**

This methodology which is usually used mainly in Gospel studies, tries to determine the particular intentions of New Testament authors by analyzing how they arranged and edited their source materials. Redaction Criticism typically involves two methods: (1) *composition analysis*, which looks at how various units

⁵ See Phil. 2:6-11.
⁶ See Like 1:1.
are arranged within a particular book – the order or placement of individual units, the sequence of material, the overall organization of the book; (2) emendation analysis, which looks at the alterations that the Gospel author probably made in his source material – additions, omissions, and other changes that reveal the author’s priorities and preferences. A redaction critic asks, what theological and sociological purposes lie behind the evangelists’ selection and expression of Jesus’ material in the gospels?9

(d) Text Criticism

Text critics analyze the various manuscripts of the New Testament that have been preserved over the centuries, comparing them, dating them, and employing various techniques to determine which are the most reliable. Their goal is to reconstruct what the original manuscripts probably said, noting also “variant readings” when one or more of the copies that have been made over the years say something different. Significant variant readings are sometimes noted in footnotes in English Bibles. A text critic asks, what variations exist in the manuscripts of the gospel texts, and which has the greatest claim to be correct?10

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9Originally, redaction criticism was restricted to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but it has been applied to other areas of scripture. Norman Perrin in his book “What is Redaction Criticism?” states, “The prime requisite of redaction criticism is the ability to trace the form and content of material used by the author concerned or in some way to determine the nature and extent of his activity in collecting and creating, as well as in arranging, editing, and composing,” p. 2. For a discussion see, N. Perrin, What is Redaction Criticism? Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.

10 See the footnote to Matt. 10:3 in the NRSV, which notes that the disciple of Jesus called “Thaddaeus” is referred to as “Lebbaeus” in some manuscripts. For a discussion, see (1) E. Wurthwein, The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica. rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. This book gives a readable introduction to the major texts of the OT, with special attention to the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, the Peshitta, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Also helpful is the chapter that discusses the theological significance of textual criticism. (2) B. M. Metzger, The text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration. 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. It covers virtually all the areas of the field, but gives special attention to ways in which ancient manuscripts were produced and transmitted, the major witnesses (version and manuscripts) to the NT text, the various causes of errors in the transmission of the text, and the basic criteria for evaluating variant readings.
(e) **Historical Criticism**

The term historical criticism refers to the ways in which historians might use the Bible to learn about history. Historians (whether they are Christians or not) view Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, and other figures of the Bible, and they understand Judaism and Christianity as important significant developments in human history. Thus they use the Bible as a resource for understanding the lives and circumstances of these people and for reconstructing the events that transpired concerning them. A historical critic asks, how much do the gospels tell us about Jesus and about the churches for which they were written?\(^\text{11}\)

(ii) **The world within the text**

Locating what the text meant in the world within the text uses exegesis – a careful systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. Exegesis requires knowledge of many things – the biblical languages\(^\text{12}\); the Jewish, Semitic and Greco-Roman backgrounds\(^\text{13}\); how to determine the original text when early copies

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(produced by hand) have differing readings\textsuperscript{14}; the use of primary sources and tools such as good Bible dictionaries and commentaries.

The first stage in doing exegesis of a text is to consider the larger context within which a text is found. In Scripture a text provides a situation behind the text. Two areas worth considering are the historical context, and the literary context. As Osborn puts it, “The historical context provides the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth meaning of the passage.”\textsuperscript{15} Under the historical context one studies introductory material on the biblical book in order to determine the situation to which the book was addressed. The historical context which differs from book to book has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his readers; that is the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting; and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. Information on the historical context of a book can be found from several sources, including, good Bible commentaries, encyclopedia and dictionaries.\textsuperscript{16}

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In academic study, scholars consider the Bible as literature which has literary forms. Crucial to the understanding of the Bible as literature is the concept of genre.\(^{17}\) The literary context essentially means two things. First, words only have meaning in sentences; and second, that biblical sentences for most part only have clear meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. The literary context uses the inductive approach in order to trace the thought development of a book. Fee and Stuart give some important contextual questions that an exegete should constantly ask over every sentence and every paragraph – “What is the point?” The exegete must try to trace the author’s train of thought, to find out what the author is saying and why he or she says it right here. Having made that point, what is the author saying next, and why? The question may vary from genre to genre, but it is always the crucial question.\(^{18}\) Another important question to be asked by the exegete is that which relates to the content of the text. Content has to do with the meanings of words,\(^{19}\) the grammatical relationships in sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts (hand written copies) differ from one another. It also includes a number of the items under “historical context,” for example, the meaning of denarius (Matt 20:2), or a Sabbath day’s journey (Acts 1:12) or “high places (Eph.1:3).

Fee outlines eight basic rules for New Testament exegesis:

1. Survey the historical context in general.
2. Confirm the limits of the passage.

\(^{17}\)There are narratives, poetry, prophecies, parables, epistles, apocalyptic literature in the Bible.
3. Become thoroughly acquainted with your paragraph or pericope.
4. Analyse sentence structures and syntactical relationships.
5. Establish the text.
6. Analyse the grammar.
7. Analyse significant words.
8. Research the historical-cultural background.20

In short, Biblical exegesis involves the examination of a particular text of Scripture in order to interpret it properly. Good biblical exegesis is commanded in Scripture. “Study [be diligent] to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). What this verse means is that we must handle the Word of God properly, through diligent study. If we do not, we have reason to be ashamed. In doing biblical exegesis, we follow the grammatical principle; the literal principle; the historical principle; the synthesis principle; and the practical principle.21

(iii) The world in front of the text

As mentioned earlier, the use of this methodology creates space for Bible readers to bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings. This methodology which is reader-centered is based on the presupposition that “once the text leaves the hands of the author, the author’s intention and entire matrix of originating circumstances lose any claim of being constitutive of meaning.”22 It runs contrary to the position of formalist critics, who claim that a text itself has autonomy, and provides the objective standard of

21 Exegesis also means “exposition or explanation.” In that sense the following is helpful. F. E. Gaebelen, & J. D. Douglas, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979. The commentary stresses the basic meaning of passages by focusing on the significance of the original language (primarily in terms of lexicography, but also with some concern for grammatical structure and syntax) historical background, and relation to other biblical passages.
meaning. Those who use this method swing the pendulum of interpretive emphasis to the
direction of the reader’s role in the construction of meaning. The methodology finds support in
what Mulrain says about biblical interpretation; that it has never been without references to or
dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns, or social location of the interpreter.\textsuperscript{23}
What Mulrain means is that, there is no individual interpreter who is completely detached from
his or her environment, experience and culture. Thus an African biblical scholar born and raised
in an African environment, will not throw his or her culture, thought patterns and experiences
away when doing biblical studies. The scholar will engage in this adventure in a way that is
unique to his or her African culture and experience, and different from that of Western
scholars.\textsuperscript{24} This does not however mean that the scholar is biased.\textsuperscript{25}

**African Biblical Studies**

As mentioned above, “the world in front of the text” approach has opened the way for new
approaches in Biblical Studies. Thus, there is African Biblical Studies, which David Adamo
defines as, Biblical interpretation that makes “African social-cultural context a subject of
interpretation.”\textsuperscript{26} Generally, African Biblical Studies is contextual since interpretation is always

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\textsuperscript{23} G. Mulrain, “Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context,” *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, 1999: 117-121
\textsuperscript{24} See Donald Keesey, “Reader-Response Criticism: Audience as Context,” in *Contexts for Criticism*, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed.; ed.
Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2004, for a number of articles on the interpretations of some
biblical texts from the African perspective.
also (1) David T. Adamo, “Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches,” Eugene, Oregon:
Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” The Bible in A World Context, An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics,
done in a particular context. Specifically, it analyzes the biblical text from the perspective of African world-view and culture. It is the rereading of the Christian Scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective, with the aim of not only understanding the Bible and God in the African experience and culture, but also to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed. African Biblical Studies is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-view, culture, and life experience with the aim of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected.

Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics

One of the offshoots of African Biblical Studies is Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics which is the scholarly engagement of the indigenous language translations of the Bible in order to understand what they say and mean to the readers. Its proponent is John D. K. Ekem who says

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29 Yorke, ibid.

30 A mother-tongue is the medium of our innermost feelings and thought (R.F. Amonoo, Language and Nationhood: Reflections on Language Situations with Particular Reference to Ghana – The J. B. Danquah Memorial Lectures Series 19, February 1986, Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1989). It is that native language into which one is born and in which one grows up (B.Y. Quarshie, “Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context – The Challenge of Mother-tongue Scriptures,” Journal of African Christian Thought Volume 5, Number 1, June 2002: 7). It is a person’s first language as compared to other languages one might learn later in life, for instance, at school. A mother-tongue is not the same as a vernacular which is the common language of a region or group, no matter how naturally a person may be well vexed in such a language and its usage. Rather, the mother-tongue is a person’s own native and indigenous language, very much intertwined with a person’s identity; it confirms and affirms who a person is, where one comes from and ones sense of identity. A mother-tongue is a repository of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insight, science, theology and philosophy. It is in the mother-tongue that one thinks and dreams, before translating ones thoughts to other languages (Kwame Bediako, Religion, Culture and Language: An Appreciation of the Intellectual Legacy of Dr. J.B. Danquah – J. B. Danquah Memorial Lectures, Series 37, February 2004. Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2006:37).
that “The varied mother tongues of Africa have a lot to offer by way of biblical interpretation in Ghanaian/African languages as viable material for interpretation, study Bibles and commentaries.”

Ekem’s point is that, the mother-tongue Bibles have issues which need interpretations and as such a person who wants to engage himself or herself in this adventure must of a necessity include formal exegesis that reflects a dynamic encounter between Christian and traditional African world-views, both of which continue to exert a powerful impact on communities. Mother-tongue biblical interpretation uses the mother-tongue Bibles - the translations of the Bible into such languages into which people are born and nurtured. Mother-


32 The Bible translation agencies in Ghana are the Bible Society of Ghana (BSG), The International Bible Society (IBS), and The Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT). The BSG has translated and published the Bible in Asante-Twi, Akuapem-Twi, Ga, Mfante, Ewe and Dangme, and has translated and published the Bible in Dagbani and Nzema. The New Testament has been translated into Esaheie and Daglaaere. The Old Testament projects in these languages are ongoing. Revision projects on some of the older versions are underway. [www.biblesociety-ghana.org/what-we-do](http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/what-we-do); accessed 15/10/2011. Interview with E.K Boateng, an Asante-Twi Bible revision team member at the Bible Society of Ghana, Kumasi Office on 20/10/2011. The GILLBT has translated and published the Bible in five Northern Ghana mother-tongues – Konkomba, Tampulma, Bimoba, Farefare and Chumburung. It has also translated and published the New Testament in twenty-five languages. [http://www.gillbt.org](http://www.gillbt.org); accessed 15/12/2011.
tongue Bibles give Ghanaians/Africans the opportunity to interpret Scripture from their own world-view.\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{A methodology for Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics}\textsuperscript{34}

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

\begin{enumerate}
\item Identify a Biblical text which you think has been wrongly translated into your mother-
tongue.
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2. Discuss why the translation is problematic in your culture.

3. State and explain the methodology you will use, and the proponents.

4. Do a study (an exegesis) of that text, using Bible Study resources – Dictionaries, Commentaries, Encyclopaedias, Word Study helps, etc.

5. Find out what scholars have said about the text, how they interpret it and reasons for their interpretations.

6. Discuss the usage of the concept in your language/culture; interview indigenous speakers of your mother-tongue for deeper insights into the concept you are researching. Use local terminologies in your writing and explain them in English.

7. Compare the text in your mother-tongue with other Ghanaian translations you can read and understand.

8. Analyze the mother tongue-translations; what do they mean? How are the meanings of the text similar to that of the Hebrew/Greek? How are they different? What might have accounted for the differences in translation?

9. Come out with a new translation of the text that fits into your culture.\(^{35}\)

CONCLUSION

Biblical Studies, an academic field of study of the Judeo-Christian Bible and related texts has employed varied methods over the years. In recent years especially in Ghana, a new methodology has evolved – mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics approach. This approach which is eclectic in nature, borrows from the fields of Biblical Studies, Bible Translation Studies, and

Language Studies – Biblical Languages: Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koinē Greek, and Indigenous African/Ghanaian Languages. In this paper, the author has given an outline of how Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics is carried out.
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