

Review of Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, “Biblical Exegesis in African Context”



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OVERVIEW OF BOOK

The book has nine chapters plus an introduction and concluding remarks with a foreword by Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh (PhD). Its content can be divided into two thematic parts. The first part, covering chs. 1–5 (pp. 1–42) is described variously as “elements of biblical interpretation” (p. xv), “foundational principles” (p. xv), and “basic elements of Biblical Exegesis” (p. 41). The authors signal this division by indicating in the “Introduction” (pp. xv-xvi) that “Most of the chapters examine elements of biblical interpretation 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” (p. xv). This is further specified in the conclusion of ch. 5 “Literary Analysis” where the authors conclude that “This chapter has brought to an end our discussions on the basic elements of Biblical Exegesis. Most of the things discussed in the chapters that follow are applications of these elements” (p. 41). Accordingly, it is to be taken that chs. 6–9 (pp. 43–108) form the second thematic part of the book dealing with African biblical interpretation. Yet the place of ch. 6 “Socio-Rhetorical Biblical Interpretation” (pp. 43–58) is initially confusing because, while it is considered as part of the “elements of biblical interpretation” (p. xv) in the introduction and in the concluding remarks (p. 109), the ending of ch. 5 quoted shortly above indicates that those basic exegetical elements end with literary analysis and the subsequent chapters starting with ch. 5 are the application of these elements. The needed structural clarity here is missing and the reader is left to figure it out by him/herself in light of the remarks in the introduction and conclusion.

That established, Amevenku and Boaheng variously submit as the overarching aim of the book as “proposing an exegetical method by which African Christians can interpret Scriptures for the contemporary (African) society” (p. xv). This is specified in a subsequent paragraph as, “We have written this book as our modest attempt to help Africans to appreciate God’s word within their own cultural settings” (p. xv). Clearly, this aim suggests from the outset that even though the book is about exegesis, it is hermeneutically oriented. The authors express this point by indicating that “... all the chapters come together to form the complete hermeneutical framework for interpreting Scriptures for an African setting” (p. xv).

In terms of content, ch. 1 “What is Biblical Exegesis” (pp. 1–5) defines exegesis and distinguishes it from hermeneutics (p. 1). The exegetical task, while it is rightly defined as an investigation of a text to discover its meaning as its author intended it in its original context, is conceived as one that should have hermeneutical implications. Consequently, Amevenku and Boaheng argue that “The original meaning of a text remains non-beneficial to the exegete or a potential consumer unless it is applied to the contemporary world ...” (p. 2).

Chapter 2 “Textual Analysis” (pp. 7–15) discusses, as the first element of exegesis, textual analysis by which they actually mean textual criticism which “refers to the process of arriving at the original text” (p. 7). Moreover, the chapter discusses what the task of textual criticism entails (pp. 11), provides guidelines for determining the original text (pp. 12–13), shows how to determine the limits of a text (pp. 13–14), and ends with the need for the exegete to translate the text from its original language where possible (pp. 14–15). The challenge with the chapter is one of terminology. The use of “textual analysis” and “textual criticism” (p. 7) interchangeably can be potentially confusing, especially for readers for whom textual analysis implies analysing the text that has already been reconstructed through textual criticism. Another terminological confusion is considering “textual variant,” “critical editions of the Greek New Testament,” and “text types” (pp. 8-9) as the same. For instance, “Textus Receptus,” “The Majority Text or Byzantine text-type,” and “modern critical texts (for instance *Novum Testamentum Graece*)” are presented as “Major New Testament textual variants” (pp. 8–9). Unless “textual variants” is not used in the technical sense, the list presented is rather, technically stated, (critical) editions (i.e. *Textus Receptus* and *Novum Testamentum Graece*) and text types (Majority Text/Byzantine text-type).

Chapter 3 “Contextual analysis” (pp. 17–24) discusses various contexts that should be analysed as part of exegesis. They are historical (pp. 17–18), social (pp. 18–20), literary (pp. 20–23), and rhetorical contexts. The rhetorical context is only stated and not discussed.

Following contextual analysis is ch. 4 “Grammatical Analysis (pp. 25–29) which ends the first part of the book. It involves word study (pp. 25–27); morphological analysis (pp. 27–28), parts of speech (p. 28), and syntax (pp. 28–29). In ch. 3 one of the contextual analytical areas was literary.

In Chapter 5 “Literary Analysis” (pp. 31–42), it becomes a substantive subject for discussion. Its job is the identification of the general and specific genres of a biblical text and its exegetical implications (p. 31). Amevenku and Boaheng state the purpose of this chapter as equipping “the exegete with special exegetical principles related to specific genres of Scripture” (p. 31). Various genres of the Bible discussed are OT narratives (pp. 31–32), OT Laws (pp. 32–33), Psalms (p. 34), Prophecy (pp. 34–35), the Gospels (pp. 35–36), Acts of the Apostles (pp. 36–38), Epistles (pp. 38–40), and the Apocalypse (pp. 40–41). In discussing OT narratives as a literary genre, it is not clear why the authors reference John 21:25 instead of an OT narrative text (p. 32). Moreover, one of the principles provided for interpreting prophecy (which the context should be understood as OT prophecy) is that it “must be Christo-centric as all prophecies point to Jesus Christ one way or the other” (p. 34). This raises critical questions in light of OT exegetical research where OT texts are to be considered in light of their own merit instead of interpreted in light of the NT. It seems, however, that the hermeneutical orientation of the book influences this conception of the OT and thus the principle suggested.

Part two of the book opens with ch. 6 “Socio-Rhetorical Biblical Interpretation” (pp. 43–58). It is considered as combining social scientific methods and rhetorical approaches in interpreting biblical texts (p. 43). The chapter gives a historical overview of the approach (pp. 43–46) presenting Vernon K. Robbins as the one who gave birth to the approach (p. 46). Socio-rhetorical criticism is said to operate from five perspectives considered as “textures” namely, inner texture (pp. 47–49), intertexture (pp. 49–51), social and cultural texture (pp. 51–55), ideological texture (pp. 55–56), and sacred and theological texture (pp. 56–57). As already indicated, it is not clear whether this chapter should really be considered as part of the first or second sections of the book. In terms of content, this chapter structurally belongs to the first part of the book.

Consequently, the second part properly begins with ch. 7 “African Biblical Studies (ABS)” (pp. 59–78). The authors' central thesis in this chapter is formulated as follows: “The main contention of

this chapter is that Africans will better understand and apply God's word to their lives if they read the Scriptures in an African way" (p. 59). The chapter then defines the discipline of ABS (pp. 59–63) and examines its historical trajectory (pp. 63–73). A special feature of the chapter is the discussion of Elizabeth Mburu's four-legged stool hermeneutical model (pp. 73–77). "The four-legged-stool hermeneutical model proposes that African hermeneutics must involve four major players which form the legs of the four-legged stool" (p. 73). Amevenku and Boaheng explain their choice of this model for discussion in this chapter as, "We find her four-legged-stool hermeneutical model as a suitable model for the African context and so we have decided to summarise her thought for our readers" (p. 73).

Another highlight of the book comes in ch. 8 "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics" which "discusses issues related to this developing method of Biblical Hermeneutics" (p. 79). Mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) has received increased scholarly attention, especially in Ghanaian biblical studies as an approach to biblical hermeneutics that has mother-tongue Scriptures as its research objects. This chapter thus discusses key contributors to MTBH featuring Kwesi Dickson, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh, and John David Kwabena Ekem (pp. 79–83). Additionally, the elements of mother-tongue biblical studies receive attention (pp. 83–89). The elements are stated as the study of mother tongue and ancient biblical languages and translations (pp. 83–86); development of mother tongue Bible study aids (pp. 86–87); and interpretive creativity, innovation and relevance (pp. 87–89). The authors draw these elements from the professorial inaugural lecture of Ekem who presented "an eight-fold agenda for MTBH" (p. 82). If the authors credit Ekem "for setting the agenda for this developing area of study" (p. 83), they equally acknowledge J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor for "propos[ing] a nine-step methodology for MTBH" (p. 89). Amevenku and Boaheng, however, synthesises Kuwornu-Adjaottor's nine-step-methodology and "propose a five-fold methodology comprising an identification of the problem; exegetical study of the text (or word study); comparative study of the mother-tongue translation of the text/word; the search for a culturally appropriate rendition and a proposal for appropriate mother-tongue translation" (p. 90). One of the strengths of the chapter is that the authors illustrate how the proposed methodology can be used. This is done using Matt 25:15 as a case study (pp. 90–96).

The second part of the book ends with ch. 9 "Women and Church Leadership in Africa: Exegetical Insights from two Pauline Texts" (pp. 99–108). It provides the authors' perspective on the thorny issue of women and church leadership in African Christianity. They thus argue, "The present authors are of the view that a holistic understanding of the overall teaching of the Bible regarding Christian ministry will grant women the opportunity to perform every ministerial role in any capacity that the Holy Spirit calls them to work" (p. 99). They substantiate their position by examining what they submit as two texts usually used to limit women's participation in church leadership in African Christianity - 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 3:1–7 (pp. 99). They attack the sole reliance on these texts in discussions on this topic and argue that "The discussion ought to involve the entire biblical data on the subject beyond the two texts" (p. 99). In respect of 1 Cor 14:34–35, they conclude that Paul was referring to "married women alone" and not all women (p. 101), "Thus Paul's directive to women was made in the context of prohibiting a wife from critiquing her husband's message, since such exercise was disgraceful" (p. 101). Analysing 1 Tim 3:1–7, Amevenku and Boaheng conclude that the text is not intended for universal application because it was "... clearly addressing a local, pressing issue, and in a patriarchal context too" (p. 104). In line with their position of considering "the entire biblical data" (p. 99) in this discussion, they add to their analysis of the two texts examples of instances of women leaders in the Old and New Testaments (pp. 104–106). They conclude the chapter by noting traditional stereotypes that feed into limiting women in church leadership (pp. 106–108) and the need "to change these stereotypes against African women through responsible exegesis" (p. 108).

The entire book is rounded up with a two-and-half paged "Concluding Remarks" (pp. 109–111) wherein the overarching aim of the volume is recapitulated as "The study set out to develop an exegetical approach by which African Christians can understand and apply Scripture passages to their lives" (p. 109). Underscoring the hermeneutical orientation of the book as initially noted, they indicate

that “If by reading this book, one is better equipped to interpret and apply the word of God to his/her life, our purpose of writing this book would have been achieved” (p. 109). They clarify their proposed exegetical approach for Africa as follows, “The exegetical approach we consider African involves four elements that interact, including, the text, the context of the text, the reading community, and the context of the reading community” (p. 109). This in principle implies, “The meaning of a text is obtained through the process of a community in a particular *socio-cultural context* reading *it* in relation to its *socio-historical context*” (p. 109). This requires that “conventional approaches” which are discussed in chs. 1–6 and considered Western, are used to discover intended meanings of biblical texts and subsequently “arrive at applications based on the African worldview” (p. 109). They see “African Academic institutions” as having “a huge role to play in developing and popularising African readings of the Bible” (p. 110). This will involve developing and teaching courses that “promote African ways of reading the Bible” (p. 110) such as “African Biblical Exegesis, African Presence in the Bible.” (p. 110). Importantly, the authors implore that African reading of the Bible should “prioritise the participation of ordinary/common people; that is non-elite” (p. 110). The concluding remarks further recommend—which is worth noting—further study of mother-tongue Scriptures, research into ways of translating “cultural idioms, proper names (places, peoples), units of measures (weights, length, heights), figurative language (metaphor, simile) and poetic literature, ... empirical study of the use of mother tongue scriptures in major African communities ...” (p. 111).

CONCLUSION

In all, the book is a welcome addition to materials available on teaching critical biblical interpretation that makes the message of the Bible relevant to the diverse contexts of Africa. Daniel N. A. Aryeh has identified as strengths of the book in the foreword, its accessibility to both scholars and non-scholars, presentation of various methods of biblical interpretation, outlining principles for interpreting various biblical genres, etc. To this should be added Amevenku and Boaheng’s insistence on the need for the application of historical-critical exegetical methods to arrive at an informed understanding of biblical texts and subsequently grounding hermeneutical implications thereupon. This is a much-needed emphasis in African biblical studies because the sacral status of the Bible as “the word of God” can easily lead to misguided and irresponsible interpretations that produce damaging results in application. Connected to this is the authors’ address of the question of the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical exegesis (p. 4) where they diffuse the wrong impression in some sections of African Christianity that having the Holy Spirit excludes any need for formal training in biblical interpretation. This is a germane contextual issue in African Christianity and the authors have demonstrated awareness of the issues within the context in which they are writing. Additionally, the review questions that end each chapter make the book a good fit for the teaching and learning contexts.

All the strengths notwithstanding, the overall hermeneutical orientation of the book tilt the balance more towards hermeneutical application than exegesis. Moreover, the attempt to present in one volume an exegetical method for both the Old and New Testament challenges the ability to treat the issues raised as sharply and detailed as possible. The hope of the book to better equip interpreters to exegete and apply the word of God effectively in Africa, could better be served in a two-volume work dedicated, for example, to “Old Testament Exegesis in African Contexts” and “New Testament Exegesis in African Contexts” respectively. Finally, it is fair to assess that, taken as a whole, the book does not present any new exegetical approach suitable for the African contexts that have not really been discussed or suggested by earlier studies and scholars in Africa. Yet one should commend the effort to bring issues in the existing discussion into such an innovative and usefully simplified form that can aid teaching and learning in biblical studies in Africa.

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