

THESIS ABSTRACT

Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies

Adventist University of Africa

Theological Seminary

Title: AN ADVENTIST RESPONSE TO ELIZABETH MBURU'S
AFRICAN HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES.

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This thesis investigated a Seventh-day Adventist perspective on Elizabeth Mburu's principles of African Hermeneutics, as presented in her model of African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH). Mburu advocates for grounding biblical interpretation within the African cultural context, employing a four-legged stool analogy that balances the biblical text, the African situation, theological contemplation, and community application. While acknowledging the significance of interpretation that is sensitive to context, this study evaluates Mburu's methodology through the lens of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, the generally understood approach to Adventist hermeneutics particularly focusing on the role of Scripture as the ultimate authority and the Adventist comprehension of mission.

The research performed a comparative theological examination, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to discern areas of agreement, conflict, and possibly a

workable approach towards bible interpretation. The findings indicate that, although Mburu's model provides valuable perspectives for enhancing biblical interpretation in African settings, an Adventist response necessitates a more precise protection of sola scriptura and a historical grammatical viewpoint. The thesis advocates for a hermeneutic that can be practiced by an African yet distinctly Adventist, with the aim of empowering the church in Africa to uphold biblical truth while engaging meaningfully with its cultural circumstances.

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies

by

Collen Mapa

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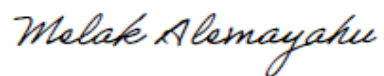
Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies

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To Denise my supportive wife, and to our lovely daughters,

Oratile and Niyara, may God continue to keep you for me.

To the church of God who delight in interpreting the

Bible correctly, and preaching it effectively,

this is your paper.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Hermeneutics is the methodology of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics explores how we read, understand, and interpret biblical texts written in a time, culture, and context different from ours.¹ Hermeneutics is “the theory of interpretation...a specific area which concerns the interpretation, understanding, and appropriation of Biblical texts.”² It plays a crucial role in shaping religious beliefs and practices. The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology posits that “hermeneutics is thus the science of the interpretive process which begins with the determination of the original meaning of the text (exegesis) and leads to the elucidation of its sense for the modern readers (exposition, paraphrase, sermon).”³ This description of the word brings a vital contribution to the world of interpretation that the goal of the practice of hermeneutics is not only to find the meaning of the text but to bring the sense of the meaning of the text to the modern reader.

¹ Frank Hasel, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies volume 3 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 1.

² Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*, The Master Reference Collection (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 293.

³ Alan Richardson and John Stephen Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 250.

African Biblical Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is “the principle of interpretation of the Bible for transformation in Africa.”⁴ It arose in the 20th century and has taken shape within the academic, cosmopolitan, and governing power. Since its formalized and historicized inception in the early 1930s, with its primary and fundamental goal of making Africa not just the context for interpretation but also an invaluable resource in biblical interpretation, African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH) has traveled a richly contested road.⁵ It promotes a reading of the Bible from an African point of view, and consequently, reshapes ideas according to indigenous customs and local needs.⁶ African Hermeneutics concentrates on the cultural and social context of the Africans in the interpretation of the Bible.

One of the proponents of African Hermeneutics, Elizabeth Mburu, submitted the concept of the four-legged stool.⁷ These four legs are the principles of hermeneutics that an African hermeneutic must follow in order to arrive at the meaning of the text that speaks to an African mind. The first leg speaks on the parallels to the African context, the second has to do with considering the theological context of the text. The next leg is about looking at the literary context and the last leg demands a consideration on the historical and cultural context of the text under study. Mburu asserts that the seat of the stool is the final part of interpretation: application. She also suggests that “when we begin our process of interpretation, we

⁴ David T Adamo, *What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?* Black Theology, Vol. 13, 1 April 2015 (South Africa: University of Stellenbosch), 62, accessed 17 May, 2023. <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail>.

⁵ Madipoane Masenya and Kenneth N. Ngwa, *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from Our Pots and Our Calabashes* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 1., accessed 5 May, 2023.

⁶ Gezina G. de Villiers, *African Biblical Hermeneutics and the Book of Ruth: Some Observations*, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42.1 (2021): 2, accessed 11 May, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2371>.

⁷ Elizabeth W. Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle, UK: HippoBooks, 2019), 65.

must always begin with leg 1 (the African context) because that's what we know, and having that firmly in place will enable us to move from the known to the unknown.”⁸

The Adventist perspective on hermeneutics, on the other hand, sets the study of the context of the text as the point of departure. Commenting on the hermeneutical process, Mueller says,

Investigate the context... the historical context consists of the political, cultural, religious, and social situation when a biblical book was written and to which the text was addressed. The Bible itself, as well as archeology, geography, and history, throw light on the historical context. To isolate texts and disregard the context may lead to a distorted meaning.⁹

This stage leads to many others that follow when the hermeneutic has determined the original meaning of the text.

The historical-grammatical approach as employed by the Adventist Church focuses on the world of the author. Hasel has this to say; “thus, the exclusive criterion for an adequate theological understanding of Christian doctrine comes from the text of Scripture as perceived through a careful historical-grammatical analysis.”¹⁰ Terry asserts that

In distinction from all the above-mentioned methods of interpretation, we may name the Grammatico-historical method (also known as the Historical-Biblical method) as the method which commends itself to the judgement and conscience of Christian scholars. Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intend to convey.¹¹

⁸ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 66.

⁹ Ekkhardt Mueller, “Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies volume 3, edited by Frank Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 218.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ Milton Spenser Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2014, 70. (I do not see this book in your earlier citations. Therefore, provide all the details).

In the same vein, Hyde says “The text should be studied in its context by means of the historico-grammatical method, which takes into consideration the conditions of the times and the people to whom the scriptures were first written.”¹² It is this method that comes close to finding the meaning of the text as intended by the author. The method allows the text to give its meaning, instead of the reader suggesting a meaning to the text. In this way, the interpreter does not read meaning into the text but allows the text to bring out its own meaning.

Statement of the Problem

It appears that there is a divergence of opinion between Adventist hermeneutical practices and African hermeneutical practices, as advocated by Elizabeth Mburu, when it comes to the world which must be considered first when looking at the Scriptures. Is it the world of the author, the world of the text, or the world in front of the text? Which world must the reader consider? Is an integration of methodologies a possibility?¹³ With these supposed complexities between Adventist hermeneutics and African Biblical Hermeneutics, it is of great importance to ask: What is the best way of approaching biblical hermeneutics between the two supposed views that is, looking at the context of the text first or that of the reader?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to give a critique, which is an analysis and evaluation of the hermeneutical principles advocated by Mburu in light of the Adventist biblical hermeneutical principles. Points of divergence and also points of

¹² Olsen V. Norskov, “*Hermeneutical Principles and Biblical Authority in Reformation and Postreformation Eras*,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Gordon M. Hyde (Washington D.C.: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), 57.

¹³ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

compatibility have been highlighted so that an Adventist theologian who is an African can practice hermeneutics properly and contextually. A critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the African Biblical Hermeneutical approach were determined in the light of their impact on the missional practices of Adventism.

Significance of the Study

The emergence of African theology has necessitated the birth of methodologies on how to interpret the Bible using African lenses, to which Mburu has added her voice. It is of paramount importance to know the impact of her submissions to the global mission of the Adventist church since the Adventist church has its own set of hermeneutical principles, and that the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs are based on how Adventists interpret the Bible. To add to that, the African theologian is faced with a choice to make considering the emergence of African hermeneutics. It is vital for an African theologian to know which method to employ in the field of hermeneutics in Africa.

Delimitations

In as much as there are a number of hermeneutical approaches proposed by some African scholars and theologians, this study focused on Mburu's hermeneutical procedures in light of the Adventist perspective.

Definition of Terms

African: This word is used to refer to an individual who has his/her roots in Africa, regardless of which part of the world he/she could be living in.

Culture: a set of rules and beliefs that one acquires through contact with those who have experience with the culture.

Hermeneutics: this is the interpretation of the meaning of a text to the contemporary reader which is concluded by the application of the meaning in the reader's everyday life. Exegesis is also included in the process of carrying out hermeneutics since it involves stages that are followed to discover the meaning of the text.

Methodology

The methodology involved a combination of literature review, evaluation of findings, and a critical analysis of the information collected to better understand the differences and similarities between the Adventist perspective of practicing hermeneutics and the hermeneutical procedures submitted by Mburu under the branch of African hermeneutics. Both primary and secondary sources were consulted in this work.

Biography: Elizabeth Mburu

Dr. Elizabeth W. Mburu (born in 1968) is a prominent Kenyan theologian and biblical scholar recognized for her work in contextual theology and African hermeneutics.

Mburu obtained a Master of Divinity from the Nairobi International School of Theology (currently International Leadership University). She later pursued a Master of Sacred Theology at Northwest Baptist Seminary (now known as Corban University) and achieved her Ph.D. in New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) in 2008. Her dissertation, titled "Qumran and the Origins of Johannine Language and Symbolism," was subsequently published as her debut book. She made history as the first woman to earn a Ph.D. from SEBTS.

Academic and Professional Career

Mburu has held teaching positions at Montreat College in the United States and currently acts as an associate professor of New Testament and Greek at Africa International University, Pan Africa Christian University, and International Leadership University in Nairobi. Additionally, she is an extraordinary professor at Northwest University in South Africa.

In her capacity as the Regional Coordinator for Langham Literature in Anglophone Africa, Mburu oversees and promotes theological publications throughout the continent. She evaluates curricula for the Association of Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) and is a member of the editorial boards for several journals, including the South African Baptist Journal of Theology, *Conspectus Journal*, and the Pan Africa Christian University Journal.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Views on the Matter

The subject is on the point of departure that an exegete must begin from when looking at a text. Mburu suggests that the reader's context be put into consideration as the first port of call in the formulation of a theology or the finding of the meaning of the text. This standpoint has writers who subscribe to it and their literature will be discussed below.

There are, however, other two opinions on the subject matter. The Adventist perspective requires that one looks at the world of the text first, while there is another that seeks to strike a balance between the world of the text and that of the reader. This literature review looked at these sections separately; firstly, the writings in support of Mburu's opinion; secondly, the ones in support of the Adventist perspective, and third, the ones that seek to pull the two approaches together to the middle ground.

Africanist Views: The World of the Reader

Contextualization has pushed some theologians to vouch for the approach of looking at the Bible from an African perspective. The goal is to find an African meaning in the Bible, thus ensuring that "the world of the Bible is seen from an African perspective that enables scholars to construct a hermeneutics to which everyday Africans can relate."¹ In the attempt to find what is African in a text and the

¹ de Villiers, *African Biblical Hermeneutics*, 3.

meaning of the text to the African people, Adamo submits that “the analysis of the Biblical text is done from the perspective of the African worldview and culture.”²

One major challenge in Africa is that there is an overabundance of cultures, one differing widely from another. Looking at Africa as a whole complicates the whole hermeneutical process because there can be different cultures in one country.

Zimbabwe, for example, will bring before the hermeneutic the Shona culture, the Ndebele culture, and the Tonga culture. If each of these cultures is going to look at the Bible in its own way, this may pose theological challenges. Mbiti comes close to giving the number of tribes that are found in Africa when he says “We speak of African traditional religions in plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system.”³ This means a thousand hermeneutical approaches in the attempt to approach Biblical interpretation in the way every tribe would appreciate.

Emmet Weir also supports the view of looking at the context of the reader to arrive at the meaning of the text. He asserts that the “meaning of a Biblical text is disclosed not only in reflection upon it but also in concrete social action based upon it.”⁴ His view borders on looking at the world of the reader in search of the meaning of the text.

Adamo also expresses concern on what he terms the lack of relevance of approaching the text from its *sitz em leben* (*a setting in life in which a text or passage was formulated*) by arguing that “though all these methods mentioned above are

² David T. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies*. (Eugene, Abbreviation: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2001): 8, accessed 10 May 2023.

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, (1969; repr., Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1989), 1.

⁴ Emmett Weir, “The Bible and Marx,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 35.

honest attempts by Eurocentric scholars to understand the Bible in their Eurocentric worldview or culture, they do not adequately meet the needs of the African people.”⁵ He mentions the lack of meeting the needs of the African reader and confines other methods of study as only allowing those who designed the methodology to arrive at the meaning that speaks only to their context and not to other people’s. The purpose for which this approach is being promulgated is to understand biblical texts in the light of African tradition and situation to arrive at authentic Christianity that is both African and Biblical.

In the same vein, Ukachukwu Manus presents the subject of the interpreter’s presuppositions when he observes that one cannot run away from the influence of life’s situations in the way these situations affect how one looks at a text. He goes on to say “it is therefore necessary to probe into our own context before we can fully interpret the text.”⁶ There is no need to wait for the text to tell us what it wants to convey but one can be finding parallels to the African context in the text for ease of application. Writing towards an understanding of Africa in interpreting the Bible, Mugambi and Guy stipulate that “instead of starting with a text and interpreting it, start with a topic and search the scriptures for guidance on it.”⁷ This does not allow the exegete to arrive at the virgin meaning of the text but arrives at a meaning corrupted by the presuppositions of the hermeneutic.

To this end, Gerhard Maier asks a crucial question: “what should we think of a method which has to bring with it such a conclusive judgment and result before it

⁵ David T. Adamo, “African Biblical Studies: Illusions, Realities and Challenges,” *In Die Skriflig* 50.1 (2016): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.1972>.

⁶ Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches*, Biblical Studies in African Scholarship Series (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2003), 38.

⁷ J. N. Kanyua Mugambi and Michael R. Guy, *Contextual Theology across Cultures* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2009), 151.

begins to unlock the subject selected for consideration?”⁸ In agreement with Maier, Kevin Vanhoozer is convinced that looking at the world of the reader first is thinking that “we have got the correct meaning before we have made the appropriate effort to recover it.”⁹ It is claiming to know prematurely. Vanhoozer, commenting on the approach that some African scholars are advocating for, posits that “the context of the reader (the world ‘in front of’ the text) tends to be a higher priority than the context of the text (the world ‘behind’ the text).”¹⁰

Frederick Tiffany and Sharon Ringe also write on this subject speaking on first looking at the world of the reader. “The journey of biblical interpretation begins at home, with attention to the immediate contemporary environment in which the biblical text is encountered.”¹¹ They argue that “it is the very nature of any recorded text that it does not remain confined to its original context. Once recorded, any text takes on a life on its own, such that its meaning or significance is no longer defined by or limited to the context of the recording.”¹² It is, however, needful to consider that there are theological principles that span across cultures and times and languages and distances to the extent that the meaning of the text will be very much as applicable to us as was to the original audience. The goal is to first arrive at the intended meaning which informs the contextualization of the message.

⁸ Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1st English ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 20–21.

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Craig L. Blomberg, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 408.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 47. (I did not see the first citation)

¹¹ Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 25.

¹² Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation*, 26. (I did not see the first citation)

Robert Traina lists what he terms erroneous kinds of interpretations. Among these is the historical approach which vouches for consideration of the historical cultural context of the text. He says, “there are those to whom the study of scripture is primarily the study of the history of peoples. Such an approach fails to realize that the Scriptures contain more than history; they involve history with spiritual implications and with a spiritual purpose.”¹³ He subscribes to the understanding that history is the means to an end. If it is the means to an end, then must the means be ignored? Can the end justify the means? If the means are ignored, how do we safely arrive at the end? The writer is persuaded that the end or goal of interpretation is as important as the means to get to it.

Adventist Views: The World Behind the Text

The Adventist perspective looks at the world of the author and the text as the departure point in the hermeneutical processes. A number of books have been written to this end supporting this notion. Emphasizing the need to look at the historical context of any text first, Hasel says “others ignore the historical context of Scripture and interpret the text by a loose association of certain aspects and words that are strung together, without allowing the Bible to actually define its meaning in its original, historical, and literary context.”¹⁴ The original meaning of any text is found by paying attention to the historical and literary context of the text. Ignoring the step of looking at the text’s historical context leaves a chance for the meaning of the text to be distorted. Analogously, Milton Terry, making remarks on the historical-grammatical approach of studying the Bible, asserts that “its fundamental principle is

¹³ Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 172.

¹⁴ Hasel, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 51.

to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intend to convey.”¹⁵

There is a risk of making conclusions that are not in the text when one allows the context of the reader to influence the exegetical process. Maier proposes that “the study of Scripture must follow a method that derives its philosophical conceptuality and procedures from Scripture itself. The Bible must remain the Master and the method the servant.”¹⁶ Different contexts create different results. The main goal of looking at a text in its historical context is to first bring out the meaning intended by the writer to the readers of the then world, then make an application of that meaning to the readers of today. If the exegete decides to ignore or places the world of the reader before the text, it is like putting the cart before the donkey. Neil Skjoldal shares the same sentiments in the quote; “any event interacts with its context, and different contexts may create very different outcomes for similar events.”¹⁷

Admittedly, there is no Biblical hermeneutic who comes to the Bible with his/her brain tabula rasa; without his/her preunderstandings of culture or life experience. These, however, have to be put on hold until the meaning of the text is brought out. Looking at the grammatical side of the historical-grammatical approach, another thing to note is that the meaning of words evolves. I will cite a story given by William Todd about the visit of the King of England to St. Paul’s site in London. The cathedral had been designed by one of the most highly esteemed architects, Sir Christopher Wren. Having arrived, the King remarked to say, the cathedral was both

¹⁵ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 70.

¹⁶ Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2001), 90.

¹⁷ Neil Skjoldal, "Reading the Historical Books: A Student’s Guide to Engaging the Biblical Text," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57.3 (2014): 17.

‘awful’ and ‘artificial.’ Such a comment would make anyone look away in shame in the world of today but then the word ‘awful’ meant ‘full of awe’ and the word ‘artificial’ meant ‘artistic in the superlative degree.’ Words evolve! The historical grammatical method allows the hermeneutic to go back as it were, to the then world, to find out what the words meant to the writer and the readers of the then world. This allows the text to share its original meaning.

William Tolar makes an emphatic statement when he mentions the vitality of the historical-grammatical method. He stamps that:

No element of interpretation is more important to an accurate understanding of the Bible than is the grammatical-historical method. It is the *sine qua non* for any valid understanding of God's Word. Without an honest, careful, intelligent use of grammatical and historical knowledge, there is little or no hope for a correct interpretation of documents written in foreign languages within several different ancient historical contexts. To fail to use proper grammatical rules or to ignore those historical contexts is most certainly to guarantee failure in understanding the writers' intended meanings.¹⁸

William Tolar employs phrases like ‘spiritual immorality’, ‘moral imperative’, integrity, and intellectual dishonesty in the individual who does not pay attention to the world behind the text as he or she performs hermeneutics. He upholds that “it is a moral imperative for the interpreter to do his or her best to understand the text correctly to discover the meaning placed there by the original author. Anything less is intellectually dishonest and spiritually immoral and unworthy of a person of integrity.”¹⁹ Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:15 admonishes Timothy to ‘handle accurately the word of truth.’ Tolar avows that “the grammatical-historical method helps us fulfill Paul's admonition to Timothy.”²⁰

¹⁸ William Tolar., "The Grammatical Historical Method," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 2nd ed, edited by Bruce Corley, Steve W. Lemke, Grant I. Lovejoy (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 55.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid., 77.

When interpreting the Bible, one has to be sure if the process is being done accurately and responsibly. The very first question, according to the Baker Bible Handbook, is to ask “what did this text mean to the biblical audience?” They continue to say, “We can’t know what it means for us without knowing what it meant for them. To answer this question properly, we need to consider two matters: *context* (both historical-cultural and literary) and *content*.”²¹ One can only make correct sense of the passage under study if the background information to the text is thoroughly looked at. Richard Davidson, speaking to a group of Catholic theologians, also mentioned the importance of studying the historical context of a text when he said: “...thus by precept and example Scripture underscores the importance of interpreting the biblical material in its literal, historical sense, including details of chronology, geography, and miraculous divine interventions in history.”²² Davidson adds on, in a chapter he wrote in the Handbook of Adventist Theology on Biblical interpretation: “In order to understand the Scriptures, we must first seek to determine what they meant in their original setting. We must see in what situation each teaching was launched—the historical background; who said what, to whom, and under what circumstances. When we grasp these things, it will be easier to apply the Bible message to current situations.”²³

According to Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical practices, the historical-grammatical approach, which asserts a different approach from that of Mburu,

²¹ J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 1064–1065.

²² Richard M. Davidson, *Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-Day Adventist Hermeneutics* (Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Andrews University Geneva, 2003), 15.

²³ Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series v. 12, edited by Raoul Dederen, Nancy J. Vyhmeister, George W. Reid, (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Pub. Association, 2000), 70.

presents itself as the one that brings out the original meaning of the text allowing the hermeneutic to understand what the text means before making an application of the meaning to the contemporary world.

Integration Views

Integration is an attempt at fusing the different hermeneutical approaches under discussion into one hermeneutical process. In the search for information on this section, the writer came across not many proponents of this notion. Tate tried to pull the three worlds together by first focusing on the merits and demerits of each. He then explains,

To this point, we have seen that author-centered approaches to meaning tend to neglect the world of the text and the world of the reader. Text-centered approaches, in claiming textual autonomy, downplay the boundaries imposed by the world of the author upon the text. Now we observe that reader-centered approaches generally find meaning in the interaction between the worlds of the text and the reader. The best we have here is the marriage of two worlds—the reader’s and the text’s or the author’s and the text’s.²⁴

Tate is positing the issue of the author-centered approach whose meaning neglects the world of the text and the reader. He is worried about the meaning that may not speak to the reader and thus may become insignificant. Mark Strauss gives a solution where the meaning of the author can be contemporized to speak to the reader by the use of “*contextualization*”: bringing the message back across the bridge and determining its significance for us today.”²⁵ The process of exegesis and contextualization bridges the gap that is created by time, culture, space, and language.

In his submission on a hermeneutical procedure, Ukachukwu Manus suggests that “there are three constituents of the text; namely, the text, the contemporary

²⁴ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 26.

²⁵ Mark L. Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times: Understanding and Applying God’s Word Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 211.

context, and the context of the text.”²⁶ He does not completely write off the context of the text but says that whatever subject or story under study must have the contemporary context and the context of the text agreeing. There is a similarity here between what Manus says and what Mburu suggests. They both suggest that the African exegete moves with both in the process of interpretation. Ukachukwu Manus recommends that one has to first figure out what African context the text under study fits into or applies to. Then, the hermeneutic studies the background of the text and sees to what extent it correlates with the African context figured out in the first stage. He continues to say “At this juncture, one must keep going back and forth to the text, experiential context and the context of the text a few times over to finally decide prima facie which contemporary experiential context fits in well with that of the text.”²⁷ This suggests that if the pericope under study does not speak to an African context it must be ignored or discarded. What if the meaning and application were going to speak to an African after following the historical-grammatical procedure? This means that the reader and the audience have missed out on the Word of God by prematurely trying to see whether the text speaks to an African mind by comparing contexts

An ‘Outing of Whiteness’

As a way of fighting against apartheid in South Africa, black theology was born. It came as a need to liberate the black person from white supremacy.²⁸ This quest for liberation from white supremacy led black theologians to suggest that there

²⁶ Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa*, 40.

²⁷ Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa*, 40.

²⁸ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 96.

would be no true freedom should they continue to interpret the Bible in the same way as it was interpreted by those who oppressed them. As a result, “it was with South African black theologians that a new biblical hermeneutics, which begins with a hermeneutic of suspicion, emerged on the African continent.”²⁹ Itumeleng Mosala committed himself to “develop a distinctive biblical hermeneutic of liberation for black theology.”³⁰ This was an attempt at decolonizing bible interpretation methods with the understanding that it is the kind of methodologies that had brought about white supremacy.

The attempt at ‘decolonizing’ the art of hermeneutics assumes a standpoint that claims that oppression and racial discrimination stretched to biblical study methodologies. The argument is that the Bible (theology) was used as a tool for oppression and it is through the same medium (the Bible) that liberation or reversal of the experiences of the blacks can be successfully wrought. Martey puts forward the submission that “the bone of contention between liberationists and inculturationists in this early period was therefore not limited to the issues of blackness and liberation; it also extended to the use of the Bible.”³¹ This effort was a way to get rid of anything that was ‘white.’

De Villiers seems to be writing in the understanding of freeing biblical studies from white domination when he observes that

By dismissing the Western intellectual ideas and concepts, African Biblical Hermeneutics can embark on a process that begins to ‘put back’ an African understanding of the bible in an African context to which Africans can relate within their own cultural experiences. The world of the Bible is seen from an

²⁹ Ibid., 105.

³⁰ Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (1989; repr., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 19.

³¹ Martey, *African Theology*, 106.

African perspective that enables scholars to construct a hermeneutics to which everyday Africans can relate.³²

The understanding could be that Biblical hermeneutics was infiltrated as well since the man who brought the Bible was the same who oppressed Africans.

Discussing the task of African Biblical Hermeneutics, David Tuesday Adamo declares that “colonialism is not limited to the partition of Africa and the eventual domination of the entire continent by the European nations; it includes the colonization of our thought and the entirety of our way of life.”³³ There may be white people who arm-twisted the word of God for their own earthly and temporal benefits, using the Bible to exploit Africans of their wealth and freedom, using the Bible as a force for oppression. This fact, however, must not blind the eyes of the Africans to the authenticity of the method of studying biblical texts in their original *sitz em leben*.

For a similar purpose, Anthony Oluwaseun Idamarhare wrote what he termed “Afrocentric Hermeneutics” which is “a methodology projected towards decolonizing biblical studies in Africa...with the hope to break the Western hermeneutics hegemony and the ideology stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical exegetes had long enjoyed.”³⁴ Idamarhare stipulated a procedure on how to achieve Afro-centric reading and this is in concert with the submissions of Mburu. In this procedure he clearly mentions that one must “search for an African historical, social or religious life experience that fits into African context so as to be able to relate it to the African situation.” This is the same as that of Mburu’s first leg of looking for parallels in the African context.

³² De Villiers, *African Biblical Hermeneutics*, 3.

³³ David Tuesday Adamo, “The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s),” *Old Testament Essays* 28.1 (2015): 4.

³⁴ Anthony O. Idamarhare, “Afrocentric Hermeneutics: Methodology towards Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Africa,” *Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria* 6 (2014): 4–5.

Interestingly, Idamarhare, as the next step, suggests that one has to “investigate ways of writing in which the passage/text has been superimposed by biased Western scholars in their interpretation of the text, *delete or expunge the same* (emphasis is mine), giving it a new interpretation that suits the African situation or a universally accepted interpretation.”³⁵ The hermeneutic has to go out of his or her way to find what European is in other interpretations and do away with it, instead of writing down his or her own findings.

³⁵ Ibid, 9.

CHAPTER 3

EVALUATION OF MBURU’S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Parallels to the African Context

Adventist hermeneutics holds that even while the Bible was created with a certain audience in mind, it can still be understood by people of all ages. For the good of all people, it was delivered once and for all. "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation because the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," it is important to keep in mind (2 Pet 1:21).¹

God was aware that the Bible would not be held in the hands of those who were directly impacted by God's word. Mburu says “Until quite recently, hermeneutics emphasized the historical context of the Bible and “paid little attention to the reader”² The Bible speaks to the current reader’s setting in meaning and application.

Steve Strauss highlights one of the dangers of wanting to study the Bible projecting the cultural setting of the reader ahead of the meaning of the Bible when he says “to suggest that theology varies according to cultural and historical contexts seems to introduce a dangerous element of relativism that contradicts the certainties

¹ King James Version

² Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 67.

and absoluteness of scripture.”³ When Paul said ‘all Scripture’ he was referring to the word of God written to different people in different times but he exhorted readers to understand this word. Strauss supports this idea by affirming that the Bible “Is God’s message for people of all contexts. In spite of a plethora of contextual preunderstandings that readers bring to the text, people from every culture and era can understand its essential message. Theology built on the message of Scripture will be both authoritative and relevant.”⁴

The subject of relevance is what is pushing some African theologians to advocate for the consideration of contemporary culture first, before looking at the world of the text and the author. The meaning of the message will always speak to people in different cultures. When the historical-grammatical approach is used properly and the meaning of the text is arrived at properly, then the application of that text will speak to the contemporary reader. Strauss speaks of the assumption of biblical writers that they understood the word of God to be written for everyone in different cultures: “God wrote scripture in such a way that people from all contexts can share the defining traits – and so understand the essential message that God communicates through His word.”⁵

Mburu’s hermeneutical concept of looking for parallels to the African context in the Bible is only proof of the fact that humanity, no matter how diverse our cultures and settings, shares certain commonalities like crying, dying, and disease, among others. These can help us to come to a common understanding of the vital message of

³ Steve Strauss, “The Role of Context in Shaping Theology,” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 13, edited by Gailyn VanRheenen (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 2006), 100.

⁴ Strauss, *Contextualization and Syncretism*, 101–102.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

the Bible. The word of God can be comprehended and practiced by people in different contexts once it has been allowed to bring out its meaning from the texts. Strauss emphasizes this point by indicating that “regardless of the theologian’s culture or historical context, theologizing must begin by seeking the meaning of the text.”⁶

Context plays a crucial role in understanding the message of the Bible. A person studying the Bible in a place where there is no hunger may overlook that aspect when reading a text that speaks of hunger in the Bible while someone who is in a place where hunger is the order of the day may quickly pick that idea and run with it. One may read about wars in the bible and overlook certain messages because he or she is coming from a peaceful background, while another may see everything in the war because of background. This, however, does not prove the fact that the context of the reader must take pre-eminence over the context of the writer because then, the real meaning of the text will have been polluted. The application or the figuring out of the theology in a text must be done when the meaning of the text has been understood. When the contemporary context is made superior to that of the text, the Bible may be forced to bring out a message that is alien to what was envisioned. The contemporary context must not become “the controlling paradigm that reshapes the message of Scripture into what it was never intended to say.”⁷

In giving an example of the African context having points of contact with the Bible, Mburu gives an example of Hebrews 12:1⁸, citing that the context speaks of the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ as people who are already dead. Africans look at death not as the end but as a continuation of life into another realm in which the dead are

⁶ Strauss, *Contextualization and Syncretism*, 110.

⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁸ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 69.

separated from the living, but they play a role in the lives of the living. The Bible does not teach that death is the end, it teaches that the dead are in a state of unconsciousness and they cannot be interacted with. Mburu explains this very well, she notes the difference because she knows what both Africanism and the Bible teach about death. The case would be different if it were someone else who was not aware of what the Bible says on the issue. Was this person going to take note of the point of divergence between the African context and the context of the text? This is a lacuna that needs addressing when hermeneutics is practiced by looking at the parallels between the context of the reader and that of the Bible. For the comparisons to be successful, this approach requires that the hermeneutic knows everything there is to learn from the Bible, which is a nearly impossible task. The historical-grammatical approach does not make such a demand since the hermeneutic is only extracting the meaning of the text from the text itself and its background.

It is an undeniable fact that no one approaches the Bible without any persuasions from background, language, space, and time but these must be suspended when doing hermeneutics. Strauss suggests that the idea of suspending preunderstandings is all pretense but these understandings must be subdued by what the Bible will be saying as the theologian studies the Bible. He posits that “rather than pretending they have eliminated these preunderstandings and are reading the text objectively; they should consciously test their understanding of the text against the subjective biases that they know they have.”⁹ Mburu, however, understands worldview as the framework that helps the hermeneutic to understand Scripture.

In other words, the understanding of Scripture is also informed by how the reader sees the world and is affected by it whereas in Adventist hermeneutics the

⁹ Strauss, *Contextualization and Syncretism*, 112.

worldview of the reader is put on hold, and is replaced by biblical presuppositions, and by doing so, the reader allows the Bible to speak without influencing its meaning. While the hermeneutic is putting aside his or her presuppositions, Mburu's first leg insists on bringing them onto the table. As she rightly admits, this is the moment when the reader's context "gets in the way of understanding the text."¹⁰ Looking for parallels to the African context is an attempt at asking the question; 'what does this text say to me?' Asking this question tends to move the interpreter into reader response hermeneutics. This approach elevates the reader to be the main contributor to the meaning of the text. Clinton Wahlen sums it up well when he opines that "rather than focusing on our personal situation, it would be better to first find out what the text actually does say and then accept this meaning and implement it into one's life and practice it."¹¹

Theological Context

The theological context or analysis seeks to find how a passage being exegeted fits into the "total pattern of God's revelation."¹² Since the Bible, in its entirety, was inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is not expected that certain portions can stand alone without a relationship to the whole canon. One passage of choice must have other passages that speak in concert with it. Mburu mentions a crucial point that the writer agrees with when she says that the Bible is "primarily a spiritual document."¹³ It was given for the benefit of mankind, to bring them closer to God and

¹⁰ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 67.

¹¹ Clinton Wahlen, "Variants, Versions, and the Trustworthiness of Scripture," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach, Biblical Research Institute Studies volume 3*, edited by Frank Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 67.

¹² Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 121.

¹³ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 71.

help them live a life that pleases their Maker. Padilla speaks to the same effect: “The Word of God was given to bring the lives of God’s people into conformity with the will of God.”¹⁴ However, the process of interpretation comes between the word of God and its application in the lives of the followers of God. It is in this process of interpretation that Mburu suggests that the step of the theological context be considered next after that of parallelism to the African context.

It is interesting to note that Mburu made use of historical information to arrive at the theological emphases of the book of Mark when she mentioned that “around that time the Roman emperors were beginning to insist that they be referred to as gods.”¹⁵ This information can be found after considering the historical and cultural context of a text. Following the order of her principles, the theologian has to figure out the theological emphases of a text or book before considering the historical context of the book, and yet historical information is needed to arrive at the theological emphases. It seems to be a denial of the fact that a proper understanding of the text is arrived at by considering the historical context first.

Mburu’s commentary on Mark 7:31-37 again emphasizes the need to first look at the historical context of the text before considering the context of the reader. She mentions that the Roman context is key to understanding this text and quotes Craig Alan Evans’ work when he stated that “it was generally believed that Roman emperors like Vespasian were divine and could heal.”¹⁶ Again, the historical context leg is brought to work together with the theological context leg to find the theological

¹⁴ Rene, C. Padilla, "The Interpreted Word: Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics," in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 297.

¹⁵ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 71.

¹⁶ C. A. Evans in Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 72.

meaning of the book or text. The stage of theological analysis has been put before that of looking at the literary context. By the time one gets to the stage where he/she must study a text according to its design, already there is theological formulation and yet it must also be informed by the literary context of the text. Mueller lists his suggested steps for Bible study¹⁷ and in his list, theological analysis comes just before the stage of applying the text, meaning that everything that must be looked into has been looked into before theological formulation. It is difficult to fathom how one can arrive at the theological understanding of a passage before looking at the historical-cultural and literary context.

Literary Context

A study of the literary context of a passage focuses on the literary genres or forms in the Bible. Tiffany and Ringe define the literary context as “the place and function of the passage in the biblical book in which it is found.”¹⁸

Literary genres include, among others, poetry, apocalyptic and prophetic literature, letters, history literature, narratives, and wisdom literature. The literary context also pays attention to *the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround the passage you are studying*. It has a bearing on the meaning of words and the message of the passage. It encompasses the immediate context that houses a text. Literary genres must be read as such, parables must be studied as parables, and narratives must be looked at as narratives. Any deviation from this strict adherence to the rules of study has the potential to distort the meaning of the text. Studying the literary genre helps in clarifying the meaning of the text even if the person who wrote it is no longer there. Stressing the importance of not ignoring the literary context, Muller declares

¹⁷ Hasel, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 234.

¹⁸ Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation*, 89.

that “when we take the literary context seriously, we are saying, “We want to hear what God is trying to say to us.”¹⁹

Another point of convergence with Mburu’s literary context analysis is that of considering the language, specifically paying attention to grammar, syntax, words, phrases, and paragraphs. The stage is positioned after theological formulations have been done. It is the positioning of this stage that is different from that of the Adventist hermeneutical/exegetical procedure.

Mburu makes similar submissions on the importance of considering the literary context of a text or passage when studying the Bible. She speaks of the literary genre and affirms that “literary genre function as a vital interpretive key in the hermeneutical process.” Borrowing from Hirsch, she remarks that games have rules that must be followed and that applying the rules of one game in a different game may result in confusion and disaster. By this, it is evident that she subscribes to the notion that “prose must be interpreted as prose, parables as parables, wisdom literature as wisdom literature.”

Mburu must be commended for her efforts in providing a holistic guide on African Hermeneutics. From the 6th to the 9th chapter of her book, she gave a practical guide on how to interpret stories, wisdom literature, songs, and letters. In this guide, she was applying her four-legged stool. The writer took a closer at the interpretation of stories to see how she applies the four-legged stool concept and then make a general overview of the other genres.

The Interpretation of Stories

The story of Ruth is cited as an example to show how to apply the four-legged stool. Mburu highlights family relationships, levirate marriage, suffering, and

¹⁹ Mueller, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 212.

barrenness as four parallels to the African context which are reflected in the story. This initial step has shown that this Hebrew story has some similarities with the African reality. If it is so, then there is the point of looking for points of contact when the text can speak to both the Africans and the Hebrews through similar life situations. The writer is convinced that Africa is accounted for in the Word of God. The great Inspirer knew that the Bible would one day fall into the hands of the African and that He facilitated the writing of the Holy Writ with everyone in mind, the African included.

The African is a human being, created and loved by God Himself. God would not allow Africans to exist while pushing them away from the benefits of salvation through the study of His word. Apart from Levirate marriages, the other three points of contact (family relationships, suffering, and barrenness) are found everywhere, even in developed countries. Family relationships are enthroned in every life, suffering is present (the homeless and the hungry are found even in developed parts of the world), and barrenness is a sad situation for any family regardless of color.

The role of presuppositions. In trying to understand why Mburu would suggest looking for parallels with the African context as the first hermeneutical step, the writer came to the supposed conclusion that the African exegete will be calling awareness to African preunderstandings²⁰ which must play a crucial role in the African hermeneutical processes. Giving, for example, the parallelism of levirate marriages that are prevalent in almost every African culture. This leans heavily on trying to replace, as it were, western presuppositions with African ones to the end that the Bible may speak to the Africans. This calls attention to the need to discuss

²⁰ The terms 'preunderstanding' and 'presupposition' are used interchangeably.

presuppositions and look at the presuppositions that the Adventist perspective propagates.

The process of biblical interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. The reader brings his or her own preunderstandings to the text. Ferguson describes presuppositions as “a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it.”²¹ William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard give three roles of preunderstandings: “colors or determines what we can see in a text; may turn out to be an *asset* – aiding or enabling what interpreters find in a text; may turn out to be a *culprit* – prohibiting or retarding what one is able to see.”²² These presuppositions can be found in *our prior experiences, conditioning, and training – political, social, cultural, psychological, and religious – in short, all our lives up to this point.*

Presuppositions: A closer look. Looking for parallels is a way of reminding the African readers of their own presuppositions as Mburu reasons that parallels to the African context help one in “identifying the theological and cultural contexts that are primary contributors to our own worldview, as well as any relevant features of our social, political, and geographical contexts.” It should be understood however that presuppositions “offer no more than a provisional way of finding a bridge or starting point toward further, more secure understanding. From the very first it is capable of correction and readjustment.”²³ Presuppositions must be tested against biblical teachings and if they are tangent to what the Bible says then they pose a risk of

²¹ Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1986), 6.

²² William Wade Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Third edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 228.

²³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009), 13.

functioning as a ‘culprit.’ One way of testing is suggested by Klein, et al when they say “one test of our preunderstandings is whether they correspond to the biblical data.” Take, for example, the African preunderstanding of levirate marriages: one may end up thinking that God has no problem with a married man taking his deceased brother’s wife since it is common ground with what the Jews would do since the Bible describes marriage as a heterosexual union between two people.

Mburu calls for the consideration of the context of the reader by putting the parallels to the African context as the first stage of the hermeneutical process. Pursuantly, Ukachukwu brings the context of the reader before that of the text in his procedures for intercultural hermeneutics. He stipulates that the context of interpretation to be considered first is “a brief analysis of the African context against which the story is to be reread or re-interpreted. The interpretation must be let to issue out of the critical resources of African social-cultural contexts, African perception of reality, African worldview and life experiences.”²⁴ He admits, however, that this approach shares commonalities with the historical-critical method and the reader-response method when he says that “one social characteristic of the methodology is that it shares with the historical-critical method a number of procedures in order to reach out to the historical social context of the text - a type of reader-response critical approach.” These two methods are tipped against the historical-grammatical method employed by hermeneutics from an Adventist perspective. Giving his thoughts on the historical-critical method (also known as higher criticism), Edward Andrews argues that “higher criticism (also known as the historical-critical method) is pseudo-scholarship and has done nothing more than weaken and demoralize people’s assurance in the Bible being the inspired and fully inerrant Word of God, and is

²⁴ Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa*, 44.

destructive in its very nature.” He also made mention of the reader-response criticism to be “harmful to the authoritative, inspired Word of God,”²⁵ as one of the many forms that make up higher criticism.

Seemingly, the presuppositions that an African exegete argues from are informed by life circumstances and experiences, but the Adventist perspective argues that “presuppositions are drawn from the Scriptures,”²⁶ allowing the Bible to inform the conceptual framework that the exegete brings to the text. Correspondingly, Hasel posits that “the interpreter’s preunderstanding must be derived from and remain under the control of the Bible itself.”²⁷ “Since presuppositions are involved in the process of interpretation, proper interpretation is impossible without proper presuppositions.” The Adventist perspective recommends the divine inspiration of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and the reliability of Scripture as biblical presuppositions that are proper for biblical interpretation.

General Overview

In all the examples that Mburu made use of, there are parallels to the African context. One wonders if the hermeneutical process continues when, in a text or passage that has been picked for exegesis, there are no parallels or if the passage is dropped since it does not speak to the African context. The historical-grammatical method comes in handy since it brings the meaning and application of the passage after all the procedures have been thoroughly followed. If it is the case that the

²⁵ Edward D Andrews, *A Basic Guide to Biblical Interpretation: Understanding the Correct Methods of Interpretation* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2001), 82.

²⁶ Kwabenar Donkor, “Presuppositions in Hermeneutics,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies volume 3, edited by Frank Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 10.

²⁷ Gerhard F Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Lincoln, Nebraska): Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 104.

passage is dropped, then there is a lot that African hermeneutics is making people lose by not being patient with the text to bring out its meaning which may be applicable to an African life or setting. It acts as a stumbling block to the truths hidden in the Bible that are good for the Africans.

Of note, is the movement from the reader to the text and back again as one interprets these different literary genres. There is a back-and-forth movement in the interpretation process. Tentative applications are listed just after the theological analysis, which may be disqualified by the literary and historical-cultural considerations of the passage since these two stages come after theological formulations and tentative applications. This methodology of “moving from reader to text then back again, was incomplete because it neglected to include other necessary factors instrumental for the development of doctrine, especially the hermeneutical significance of conflicting experiences of faith.”²⁸

Historical-Cultural Context

Mburu’s interpretation process and the Adventist process agree on what is considered when looking at the historical-cultural stage of biblical interpretation. She stipulates that “any interpretation must consider the historical-cultural context of the text.” The challenge is the placement of this stage, which comes after theological formulations have been done, while, on the other hand, the Adventist perspective does not reach an understanding of the text before considering both the literary and the historical-cultural stages.

The two stages, the literary and the historical cultural contexts are roped in to confirm what the theological analysis has already settled. Mburu relegates the

²⁸ William D. Kirkpatrick, “From Biblical Text to Theological Formulation,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 2nd ed., edited by Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman), 2002.

historical-cultural context to after the consideration of theological formulations but the Adventist perspective takes the historical-cultural aspect as part of the steps to theological formulations. Mueller lists the steps²⁹ that show that the contexts of the text, be it the historical or the literary context, are analyzed before the theological analysis is done, and after the theological analysis, the application is done.

In conformance with Kaiser, Davidson, in his seven-stage interpretation process,³⁰ lists consideration of the historical context as second to text translation, and the literary context as third. The stage of theological analysis is placed before the application stage. Between the theological analysis and the application stages, there are no more stages that have to do with context or literary analysis. From theological formulation, there is meaning and contemporary application.

Mburu states that “considering the apostate condition of Israel, it is likely that Elimelech himself had ceased to follow God’s ways.” The use of the word ‘likely’ suggests something with a degree of certainty but not certain. If theological formulation had been done after considering the literary and historical-cultural context, this could have been avoided. She could have arrived at two possible findings. Firstly, she could have substantiated her findings by quoting writers who speak on Bible backgrounds. For instance, the *Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* gives cultural information by positing that:

To modern Western readers, this seems fairly harmless, for we move around with regularity. But in the ancient world, it was rather unusual, and for Israelites living in the Promised Land, it was not proper at all. God had given the Israelites the land, and they were not supposed to move away from it.

²⁹ Mueller, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 217–20.

³⁰ Davidson, *Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh - day Adventist Hermeneutics*, 14–17.

Blessings for them were tied to the land. Thus, as soon as this family moves away from the land, terrible things happen – the men in the family die.³¹

Secondly, considering the literary context, focusing on the immediate and wider context, she could have found out that Elimelech was not the only one who left his homeland looking for greener pastures in the Bible. Abraham did it, and God did not reprimand him for that (Genesis 12:10). Isaac planned to escape hunger by going into Egypt and God stopped him from doing it, not on any law that should he do it he would suffer the consequences but on the promise of a blessing. Further, we find Jacob being instructed to go to Egypt (Genesis 46:3). In 2 Kings 8 we read of a woman who was advised by Elisha to find a hiding place till the famine would be over. She left with her household and stayed in the land of the Philistines for seven years, after which she came back and her land was restored to her. None of these people were punished. The fact that Elimelech and his sons died in a foreign land does not prove the sinfulness or apostasy of Elimelech. Mburu submits a theological standpoint that is based on suspicion because certain necessary steps have been placed where they are not as useful. Soon after looking for parallels to the African context, theological standpoints are made. Making a theological assertion before completing the stages of interpretation always poses a risk for the interpreter.

On the issue of rushing to making theological reflections, West has this to say: “furthermore, African biblical hermeneutics is inseparable from African theological hermeneutics, and so most African biblical scholars have found themselves being drawn into theological reflection before they have had time to process what they are doing with the Bible.”³²

³¹ Hays and Duvall, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*, 130. (Have you cited this source earlier?)

³² Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole and Ernst R. Wendland, *Interacting with Scriptures in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2005), 4.

Hermeneutics in Practice

In this subsection, exegetical procedures will be compared to further show the difference between the Adventist approach to hermeneutics and that proposed by Mburu. All the theories that have been discussed above will be illustrated by the comparison of the exegetical procedures.

Exegetical Procedures

In the previous chapter, Mburu's hermeneutical procedure was followed to understand how she applies the four-legged stool. The writer compared her stage-by-stage procedure with those of other writers, especially the Adventist procedure. These procedures were looked at concurrently because "at virtually every stage of an exegesis, you are using hermeneutical (interpretational) principles, whether implicitly or explicitly."³³ It is also crucial to understand that the term "hermeneutics" "ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis," and that it will later be employed when the meaning and application of the texts are discussed since "it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts."³⁴

Douglas Stuart defines exegesis as "a thorough, analytical study of a biblical passage done so as to arrive at a useful interpretation of the passage."³⁵ From this definition, one can tell that exegesis and hermeneutics cannot be separated. Exegesis leads to hermeneutics. It is safe to assert that exegesis determines the output of hermeneutics. How we get there determines what we will find. Proper exegesis results

³³ Douglas K. Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 149.

³⁴ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fourth edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 50.

³⁵ Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 1.

in proper hermeneutics, and in turn, proper application to a relevant audience. Commenting on the inseparability of, as well as the difference between, exegesis and hermeneutics, Daniel Patte affirms that “Exegesis aims at understanding the text in itself, while hermeneutic attempts to elucidate what the text means for the modern interpreter and the people of his culture. Exegesis and hermeneutics must be distinguished from each other despite the fact that the very function of exegesis is to lead to hermeneutics.”³⁶ In as much as exegesis and hermeneutics are different, these two, work hand in glove for a successful and true interpretation of any text.

In like-mindedness with Patte, Richard T. France propounds that exegesis is the “discovery of what the text means in itself, i.e., the original intention of the writer, and the meaning the passage would have held for the readers for whom it was first intended. This is exegesis proper. The further step of application of this original meaning to our situation is strictly a separate discipline.”³⁷ John Goldingay calls this separate discipline “exposition” as “perceiving its (*verse or passage*) significance today.”³⁸

There is no standardized methodology for the hermeneutics and exegesis exercises but there are patterns and commonalities that can be drawn when different submissions are compared. Fergusson validates this mental picture by sharing that

³⁶ Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* Guides to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Series (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 3.

³⁷ Richard T. France, “Exegesis in practice: Two Samples,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, edited by Ian Howard Marshall (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1977), 252.

³⁸ John Goldingay, “Expounding the New Testament.” In *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, edited by Ian Howard Marshall, Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1977), 351.

“consensus on a methodology, as with a guiding hermeneutical principle is not so easy to achieve.”³⁹

A few selected procedures will be compared to reveal the difference between African Biblical Hermeneutical procedures as stipulated by Mburu and her contemporaries and, the Adventist perspective of hermeneutical procedures and other secular writers.

Robert L Plummer submits a four-step procedure⁴⁰; consider the literary genre; consider the historical-cultural background of the text; consider the grammatical aspects of the passage; and finally, interpret. James Dunn sets forth a four-step process⁴¹: analyze the literary form; look at the background of the text and the cultural setting at the time the text was written, and then find the theological purpose of the book or passage. Fergusson⁴² begins with the context of the text (immediate and larger contexts), then moves on to the linguistic considerations (grammar and syntax), after which he looks at the culture and history of the time the text was written, and then he looks at the theological lessons of the passage.

Hasel proffered a longer method⁴³: The exegete begins by translating the text; then he/she goes on to determine the authorship of the book, the date when it was written, the place where it was written, the unity of the passage; then the historical

³⁹ Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1986), 67.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 101–106.

⁴¹ James D. G. Dunn, “Demythologizing – The Problem of Myth in the New Testament,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, edited by Ian Howard Marshall, Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1977), 226-229.

⁴² Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 67–76.

⁴³ Gerhard F Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Lincoln, NE: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 105–111.

context of the book; then the exegete performs syntactical and grammatical analysis; then looks for the theological unity of the passage with other sections of Scripture; lastly the application of the meaning to the contemporary reader. Almost in a similar fashion, Mueller gives an even longer process⁴⁴: invest time in reading the passage; invest time in prayer; read the text again, and also its context over and over again; find the best reading of the text since manuscripts may contain different readings. Mueller calls this “establishing the text.”⁴⁵ Next, is to translate the text; after which you investigate the context, differentiating between the historical and the literary context. Step seven is to “analyze the text.” Then, “perform theological analysis” which will lead to the application of “the text to life today.” A summary of the process is given in three simple steps: “exegesis; theology; and application.”⁴⁶

All the processes that have been discussed above, prioritize the literary and the historical-cultural considerations before the theological analysis is done, unlike Mburu’s procedure which, soon after figuring out parallels to the African context, spells out the theological analysis. This seems to be the approach of African Biblical Hermeneutics.

Idamarhare’s procedure is in harmony with that of Mburu. The first two steps of his process are all looking for how the African culture and the African community can be accommodated in the interpretation process. He lists the step of finding “how it (the selected passage) addresses the African community” soon after the first stage of selecting a passage. The next step is to “search for an African historical, social or religious life experience that fits into African context so as to be able to relate it to the

⁴⁴ Mueller, 217–22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 234.

African situation.” Then, “investigate ways of writing in which the passage/text has been superimposed by biased Western scholars in their interpretation of the text, delete or expunge the same, giving it a new interpretation that suits the African situation or a universally accepted interpretation.” The last step is to “reflect on the interpretation to see that it does not denigrate the culture of other people because Afrocentrism or Afrocentric perspective is not the denigration of Western culture.”⁴⁷ Idamarhare’s procedure is to call attention to the African culture, not necessarily how exegesis and hermeneutics are done.

It is safe to assert that African biblical hermeneutics advance the culture and context of the reader as more important than the historical background, the literal analysis as well as the grammatical analysis. It fosters “the social, cultural, rhetorical, and ideological modes of interpretation.”⁴⁸

An Attempt at Inculturation

Inculturation Defined

In the previous discussion on the comparisons of hermeneutical/exegetical procedures, the common element that has been realized in African Biblical hermeneutics is that there is a deliberate effort to ensure that the reader’s context or the African culture functions as a determinant in biblical interpretation. Some African theologians are advocating for a hermeneutics that moves from the local context of the African to the text. There seems to be a relationship between inculturation and the suggested approach to hermeneutics. This relationship will be useful in demonstrating the interpretive errors that may happen when the social-cultural context of the reader

⁴⁷ A. O. Idamarhare, “Africentric Hermeneutics: Methodology towards Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Africa,” *Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria* 6 (2014), 52.

⁴⁸ Mary N. Getui, Samuel Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin S. Ukpong, *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2001), 282.

is put first. Inculturation will be employed to reveal the dangers that lie in the path of the theologian who employs the culture-first approach which Mburu is a proponent of.

Firstly, the term inculturation is described, and then a look was taken at the hermeneutical approach that some proponents of inculturation follow. Lastly, the researcher highlighted some misinterpretations that have been born as a result of inculturation. Looking at the misinterpretations that may happen in inculturation provides a platform for a deeper analysis of Mburu's approach since the underlying hermeneutical understanding is the same.

Elom Dovlo outlines 'inculturation' as "a local process of making Christ and the Gospel message of salvation known and understood by people of different cultures, localities and time, *using the resources of their culture to promote meaning, acceptance and owning the gospel.*"⁴⁹ (italics mine for emphasis). In African Biblical Hermeneutics, culture is a crucial element as well as in inculturation. Inculturation promotes an interaction between culture and faith. Aylward Shorter has this to say about the definition of the term inculturation: "the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture or cultures."⁵⁰ Patrick Ryan went a step further and gave what he calls "components of inculturation." In these, he defines inculturation in the context of South Africa as "the study of how Christianity relates to and becomes embodied within the rich variety of cultures in South Africa."⁵¹ This

⁴⁹ Elom Dovlo, "African Culture and Emergent Church Forms in Ghana," *Exchange* 33.1 (2004): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543041172639>.

⁵⁰ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 11.

⁵¹ Patrick Ryan, *Inculturation in the South African Context*, The African Church 1, Inculturation 14 (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines, 2000), 6.

is an attempt at fully representing Christianity within the understanding of the receiving culture. Ryan advances another component of inculturation which is “the reformulation or re-expression of Christianity in terms of the receiving culture...to enable people to come to a real living contact with the person Jesus Christ.”⁵² This could be due to a misrepresentation of African culture by the missionaries who operated on an imperialist mindset. The idea of inculturation is to ensure that theology in Africa is “arrived at during the course of an attempt to relate the Christian faith to the life realities in Africa.”⁵³

Inculturation Hermeneutics and its Similarity to Mburu’s Principles of Hermeneutics

Writing on how Scripture must be interpreted in the book on the Anatomy of Inculturation, Laurenti Magesa admonishes that Scripture “must be interpreted in the context and language of African culture.”⁵⁴ Considering this definition, there is concordance between inculturation and the hermeneutical principles propagated by Mburu. It is commonplace in African theology to want the context of the reader to supersede that of the writer. Emmanuel Obeng states that “the African culture and its relevance for theology must dictate the kind of passages to be interpreted and how they should be interpreted rather than the situation in the Bible.”⁵⁵

⁵² Patrick Ryan, *Inculturation in the South African Context*, 7.

⁵³ Mangosuthu Buthelezi, “African Theology and Black Theology: A Search for a Theological Method” in *Relevant Theology For Africa*, edited by Hans-Jurgen Becken, (Durban, South Africa: Lutheran Publishing House, 1973), 19.

⁵⁴ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 145.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Adow Obeng, “The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting the Scriptures in Africa,” in *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, African Christianity Series, edited by H. W. Kinoti and John Mary Waliggo (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1997), 16.

Charles Nyamiti is one of the proponents of the culture-first hermeneutic and also of inculturation. It is fitting at this juncture to insert his hermeneutical procedure which is harmonious with that of Mburu:

I start by choosing the Christian mystery or topic as the subject of my study. After having chosen such a topic, I try to find out the appropriate African cultural item or theme which can be employed for theological elaboration of the Christian mystery. In principle, any African theme or category can—according to me—be employed for such purpose. Nevertheless, I usually limit myself to one or several African themes that appear to me as more relevant for theological or pastoral purposes.⁵⁶

Marcello Azevedo proposes a four-stage inculturation process which is engineered in a way that, while discarding certain components of the African culture that are not compatible with Christianity, the ones that are companionable and in sync with Christianity are retained. The idea is not to lose Africanness in the process of Christianization. He mentions that the second stage “serves to identify incompatibilities between the Gospel and a culture. Having identified where the culture and the Gospel are profoundly in tune, the inculturation process must detect and critically discern their incompatibilities...a dynamic conversation is initiated to select the cultural elements that are compatible or incompatible with the Gospel.”⁵⁷ There is no mention, however, of what must be done when the Gospel and culture collide. Inculturation does not entertain a missionary with “an imperialist attitude that wants to transmit not only the message of Christ but also its “Western” expression; in order to be Christian, the African must renounce his culture and become Westernized in his language, in his behavior, in his way of thinking and feeling, in his spiritual sensibility, etc.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach to African Theology,” *African Christian Studies* 7.4 (1991): 45.

⁵⁷ Vicente Carlos Kiaziku, *Culture and Inculturation: A Bantu Viewpoint* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009), 92.

⁵⁸ Kiaziku, *Culture and Inculturation*, 103.

Misinterpretation Examples

Given that the hermeneutical principles of Mburu are in tandem with those of inculturation hermeneutics as discussed above, it is needful to show some misinterpretations that may surface in the context of Christology since “the subject-matter of inculturation is Jesus Christ Himself...”⁵⁹ Stanley Grenz defines Christology as “the study of the identity and mission of Christ whom Christians proclaim is Jesus of Nazareth.”⁶⁰

Ancestor-ship of Christ. The search for the identity of Christ and his place in the African community has given birth to “the understanding of Jesus as one who occupies the highest rank in the ancestral hierarchy...”⁶¹ Placing Jesus in the line of ancestors, though he is accorded the highest rank, is inculturation that is incompatible with the Gospel since Jesus is the only way to the Father. The hierarchy suggests that below Christ there are other ancestors that Jesus communicates with, and that the way for Africans to get to Christ is still via the dead. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, commenting on Benezet Bujo’s understanding of the ancestor-ship of Christ remarks that “Bujo prefers to call his model “proto-ancestor,””⁶² meaning Christ is the first ancestor. If there is a first, then there are others that follow after the first. The culture of speaking to God through the ancestors, even though it is incompatible with the Gospel, is propagated and cannot be discarded, and yet the Bible forbids the practice

⁵⁹ Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 75.

⁶⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 245.

⁶¹ Deppington Jongimpi Papu, “The Role of Ancestors in African Christology: An Evaluation,” 2015, 33, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-role-of-ancestors-in-African-Christology%3A-an-Papu/2d6681fc19cf90d1bdf8d1141436c978914e8ab1>.

⁶² A. E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine from an African Perspective* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 75.

of necromancy, to list a few texts; Leviticus 19:26-31; Deuteronomy. 18:10-11; Isaiah 8:18-20.

Ancestors must be “pacified...to bestow blessings.”⁶³ If lower-level ancestors are the ones that bestow blessings that they have received from Christ to the people, then Christ gives these blessings to the dead, and the dead then send these blessings to the living. This is fertile ground for dualism and syncretism otherwise “spirits or ancestral spirits must be replaced by Christ Himself.”⁶⁴ A befitting summary on the issue of Christ as an ancestor is to say that Christ cannot be called an ancestor because ancestors are dead people who have no fellowship with the living and that “a gospel communicator, through the process of discipling, should teach new converts the proper view of the deceased; Christ should be presented as the only way to have true communion with the Godhead.”⁶⁵

Christology of healing. Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz describe Christ as the “Chief Diviner-Healer,” and go on to mention that there are “regular diviner-healers and local doctors” who can “save humans for a time.”⁶⁶ This shows that there are other diviner-healers to whom people go as stipulated that “people cure, but God heals.”⁶⁷ The word “diviner” is also used by Mugambi concerning ancestors; “if anything went wrong in the community, the diviner would be consulted, and if he attributed the misfortune to the breach of positive relations between the community

⁶³ Charles Salala, “The World of the Spirits: Basukuma Traditional Religion and Biblical Christianity,” in Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tienou, eds., *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 1. publ. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 134.

⁶⁴ Ngewa, Shaw, and Tienou, *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 138.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Joseph G. Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 87.

⁶⁷ Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 300.

and the ancestors, an offering would have to be made to appease and please them.”⁶⁸ This seems to be another reduction of Christ’s role and person, making him equal with the healers in an African setup since He also has to communicate with the dead. God gave a command that those who use divination must not be found among the people of God (Deut. 18:10, 14. Christ is listed among those who practice what was forbidden in the Scriptures.

Healer Christology has a way of equating Christ with traditional healers, putting them at the same level of importance. It asserts that “a traditional healer’s holistic healing act parallels Christ’s absolute cleansing of sin, and that there are parallels between the purity of a traditional healer and the sinlessness of Christ.”⁶⁹ Finding parallels between Christ and traditional healers seems to be linking well with Mburu’s first leg of finding parallels to the African context.

General Comments

Errors that have been looked at above shed some light on how the culture-first hermeneutic may cause misinterpretations especially when it is difficult for a particular group of people to divorce themselves from their tradition, or their religious and cultural heritage. It seems that these errors, among others, arose as a desire to show that the context of the reader is important and must not be ignored. This desire has led some African theologians to insert non-salvific information in books that have everything to do with the salvation of the Africans.

The comment of Hebrews 12 in the African Study Bible gives information that has no bearing on the salvation of the Africans: “One of the things Africans have

⁶⁸ J. N. Kanyua Mugambi and J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2002), 68.

⁶⁹ Clifford Sibanda, class notes for THST 618 Doctrine of Christ, Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, March 2024.

taken from Europeans and often outperformed them in is sports. African footballers have become stars in the European football leagues. East Africans have dominated distance-running events for decades.”⁷⁰ This is good but misplaced information, and not in the context of Hebrews 12. This is because there is always a need to look for parallels between what is in the Bible and the African context.

Summary of the Chapter

The comparison of hermeneutical procedures together with the similarities between inculturation hermeneutics and the hermeneutics proposed by Mburu played a crucial role in showing the pitfalls that bible interpreters can fall into when they choose to consider the socio-cultural context of the reader first, disregarding the context of the text itself. To avoid these dangers, the historical-grammatical approach must be employed in Bible interpretation.

⁷⁰ John Jusu, ed., *Africa Study Bible: New Living Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 1834.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLICATIONS OF MBURU'S HERMENEUTICAL PROCEDURES

In this chapter, the writer looked at the implications of Mburu's hermeneutical procedure, and, revealed how the gap between the reader and the context of the Bible can be bridged, to the extent that the need to bridge the gap by using the socio-cultural context of the reader can be addressed while still practicing proper hermeneutics. The writer also looked at the practicability of this write up for use by a general person.

Mission

The first step in Mburu's hermeneutical procedure (parallelism to the African context) leaves a loophole if inculturation and cultural heritage takes preeminence over the word of God. Certain cultural practices will continue to be the center of life for Africans regardless of their prohibition in the word of God. The veneration of ancestors will fight over the teaching that the dead do not know anything (Eccl. 9:4-6). Christ will be likened to traditional healers in purity of character and yet He stands alone as the only one who did not sin (Heb 4:15). Christ is at the center of Christianity, and if Christ has been reduced to be like mortals, African theology will have succeeded in its quest "to make Christianity African."¹

¹ Mutero, "African Theology," 43.

There is an interconnectedness between misinterpretation and misapplication. Once a passage of Scripture is misunderstood it can lead to a situation where bad theology is taught out of a good text. In some circumstances, Isaiah 4:1 has been abused to support polygamous marriages and yet ‘the woman’ in the text represents ‘a church.’ As practiced in Africa, Levirate marriages will be exalted over monogamous marriages as taught in the Bible. These practices, among others, oppose the successful movement of the gospel in Africa. If a certain individual is willing to spread the gospel, but he/she does not subscribe to levirate marriages or does not believe in ancestral veneration, he/she is not accepted in the community. It becomes a point of controversy and labeling when some refuse to participate in asking the ancestors for blessings like rain. The influence of that individual will be diluted by a seeming disregard for cultural heritage.

Mburu’s approach is in line with the idea of black emancipation but it leaves a lot to be desired since the approach may move one to apply the meaning of the Bible text without really getting to the bottom of its meaning by looking at its original context and also its original meaning to the then audience. The historical-grammatical approach, properly followed, will still bring out a meaning and application that speaks to the African in his or her context as Richard Davidson affirms; “the final goal of interpreting Scripture is to make practical application of each passage to the individual life. Christ and the New Testament apostles repeatedly drove home the message of the gospel contained in the Scriptures to bring the hearers or readers to salvation and an ever closer, personal relationship with God.”²

² Davidson, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 19.

Mark Powell submits that the goal of interpretation is to “disclose the message of the text.”³ The violation of the process through which the message is discovered leads to a distortion of the message that must be conveyed, and, in the process, the crippling of the mission since the mission is heavily dependent on the message. Mburu’s hermeneutical principles, especially the first two stages of determining the theological meaning of a passage before consulting the literary and historical-cultural context of the text and looking for parallels, are potentially harmful to the mission and proper conveyance of the message. The message that comes out of proper hermeneutics is designed to transform the hearers, if, however, the process of getting the message is twisted, then transformation will not become a reality and in this case, if certain cultural parallels are considered for theological formulations, then the message is diluted to the detriment of mission.

Adventist hermeneutics project an understanding that an interpreter who uses the historical-grammatical method is making efforts to understand the message of the text, not imposing the message on the text. It is the message of the text or from the text that must bring a change in the listener or reader’s life and this is the advancement of mission. When that message is diluted by resilient cultural heritages, it may not produce the desired effect on the lives of those who must be evangelized. The goal of theological interpretation is mission, otherwise, the practice of exegesis becomes a futile exercise.

The Bible itself is a missionary story of God on the move to reclaim His people who are lost in sin. It “narrates the story of God’s mission in and through His

³ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 68.

people for the sake of all nations and the whole of God's creation."⁴ Interpreting the Bible correctly is foundational to fulfilling the purposes of God for His creation as far as salvation is concerned. The Bible is best regarded as "a record, product, and tool of God's mission in and through His people."⁵ The Bible is the word of God. If rightly interpreted, God's mission in and through his people will be a success.

An Ancient Text for the Contemporary Person

Mburu's African Biblical Hermeneutics strives for relevance and contextualization of the text. The text must speak to the African mind in his/her context. The idea of putting literary and historical cultural considerations of the text is evidence of that fact. The Bible is God's word to us, and it is vitally significant to find out from the text what the author has to say to us and not what we want the author to say or what we want to hear. This is authorial intent and not reader response, and it can only be found out through the grammatical-historical approach, not putting the context of the reader first. Philip Payne argues convincingly: "ultimately God is the author of Scripture, and it is his intention alone that exhaustively determines its meaning."⁶ He continues to say: "The principle of *analogia Scripturae* assumes correctly that our primary task is to understand God's intention, not fundamentally the human authors' after all, the Bible is God's Word."⁷ It is God's word to us and His intention must not be diluted by putting cultural parallels to the study of God's word. Cultural practices must either be enthroned or dethroned in the light of the message

⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew, ed., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 173.

⁵ Goheen and Wright, Bartholomew, *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, 174.

⁶ Philip Barton Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, edited by Gregory Kimball Beale. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 70.

⁷ Beale, *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts*, 81.

from the word of God. Since the Bible is God's word to us, we want to hear from Him and the process through which we hear from Him must not be interrupted by looking for parallels and forming theological learning points before considering the literary and historical-cultural contexts of the text.

At this juncture, it is crucial to show the difference between meaning and application. According to Duvall and Hays, meaning is "what the author intended to communicate when he wrote the text," and, "in biblical interpretation, meaning is not determined by the reader."⁸ On the other hand, the application is "what the reader does with the meaning."⁹ Proper exegesis/hermeneutics extracts the meaning from the text, and the meaning is applied to the reader's contemporary life. Duvall and Hays list the stage to "discover a parallel situation in the contemporary context"¹⁰ after the meaning has been found out from the text. Mburu makes the stage of looking for parallels as the first in the hermeneutical process while the historical-grammatical approach makes it the last when applying the meaning of the text. The application stage is when the text speaks to the contemporary reader, not before figuring out what the text intends to say. Through application, the ancient text becomes relevant to the contemporary person.

Crossing Boundaries of Culture in Biblical Interpretation

Mburu's hermeneutical principles are a deliberate move towards making Bible interpretation relevant in the contemporary context of the reader. Cultural parallels from the onset of the interpretation process are meant to ensure that culture is not

⁸ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Journey into God's Word: Your Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 88.

⁹ Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word*, 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 91.

forgotten in the interpretation process. The Bible is not cultureless, neither is the interpreter. The question is: How does one ensure that culture or the contemporary context is not ignored?

Every exegete must understand that “even though these texts reflect the culture in which they were written, they communicate a message from God that transcends that ancient culture.”¹¹ The message that God intends to send to His people is found by bringing out the principle that is embedded in the text. As application closes the gap of time and space, the principle closes the gap of culture. “The task of the interpreter is to set the teaching free from its cultural bondage to determine a universal truth or principle.”¹² Robertson McQuilkin submits that the job that the exegete must do when he says that “the task of the interpreter is to set the teaching free from its cultural bondage to determine a universal truth or principle.”¹³ Through the use of principles, the text becomes applicable to the culture of any reader. The principle is further explained: “In essence, the theological principle is the same as the ‘theological message’ or the ‘main theological point’ of the passage.”¹⁴ In Mburu’s procedure, this theological message is discovered when the literary and historical-cultural contexts have not been considered yet.

Daniel Doriani shows that when applying Scriptures, the hermeneutic must bridge contexts, i.e., the context of the writer and that of the reader. “The great intellectual challenge to the application of Scripture is to bridge the gap between the

¹¹ Richard L. Schultz, *Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 106.

¹² Robertson, J. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Rev. and exp. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 316.

¹³ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, 316.

¹⁴ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, Third edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 44.

cultures of the Bible and current cultures.”¹⁵ He moves a step further to show how this can be done by suggesting a four-step process to cross the boundaries of cultures when applying the text. The exegete must, as the first step, “determine the original meaning.” Secondly, the principle that is embedded in the text must be found out. The next step is to “discover a similar situation today,” and finally, “compare the application with other Scriptures.”¹⁶

The focus of biblical interpretation is to first extract the meaning of the text using the historical-grammatical procedure. “The meaning of the Bible is not so tied up to ancient cultural contexts that its meaning is not understood in other contexts. The Bible in the text of the original languages and in the proper translations is of value for all people regardless of time and space.”¹⁷ Frank Hasel joins in elaborating on the task of the exegete:

The final goal of the interpreter is to convey the message of Scripture in such a way that it is heard by each person today in his/her cultural context. Basic to the question of contemporary context is the recognition that the original meaning of the text of Scripture determines its significance for us today. The elements of continuity between the world of the Bible and our world are much more significant than any changes. The Bible’s picture of humankind and its dilemma is not different from that of human beings in the modern world. The biblical diagnosis of the problems and their solutions remain true and vitally relevant today. Humanity still attempts to live his life apart from God and sits in judgment upon God’s word.¹⁸

¹⁵ Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub, 1996), 143.

¹⁶ Doriani, *Getting the Message*, 144–45.

¹⁷ Gerhard F Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 105.

¹⁸ Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today*, 111.

Speaking in concord with Hasel on the elements of continuity, Bediako affirms that “Scriptures show themselves to be continuously communicative.”¹⁹ Sam Oleka, commenting on how culture can be addressed in application stipulates that:

It is important for him (*the interpreter*) to remember that the divine word is addressed to both original readers and contemporary readers but in their different cultural situations. Being in the contemporary world, the African interpreter has to bridge the gaps between the ancient biblical world and his cultural world...as Africans, we must interpret the Bible within the African cultural context yet without doing violence to the biblical text; without impairing the meaning intended by the original author and understood by the original readers. With sound hermeneutical methods and principles, it is possible for Africans to save themselves and the entire Christian Church in Africa from falling into deep interpretative errors.”²⁰ (*parenthesis mine*)

It is possible to move out of the culture of the bible to that of the reader by using theological messages or principles. “The interpreter must bridge the gulf of explaining the cultural elements that are present in the text of Scripture, acknowledge his or her own cultural baggage as an interpreter, and then transcend both in order to communicate the original message of Scripture into the culture of the contemporary audience.”²¹ This notion is also supported by Duvall and Hays: “We move from the ancient world into the contemporary world” when we “identify the timeless theological messages or principles of the biblical text.”²² The deduction that can be made from the above submissions is that the theological message or the principle is the bridge that allows the exegete to do cross-cultural interpretation of any text in the

¹⁹ Gerald West, “Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa”, in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton, (London: SPCK, 2010), 20.

²⁰ Sam Oleka, “Interpreting and Applying the Bible in an African Context” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, edited by Ngewa, Shaw, and Tienou, 108.

²¹ Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 273.

²² J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2011), 1068.

contemporary context of the reader. When contexts have been bridged, the Bible will have spoken contemporarily.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

The Holy Spirit plays an important role in the entire process of hermeneutics. He is the one who was instrumental in the writing of the Scriptures, and the one to also help the exegete in interpreting the Scriptures. “God gave us His Word to communicate with us; he gives us His Spirit to help us understand what he has said.”²³ God has a message that He wants us to receive from His word. For us to get the proper message out of God’s word we need the activity of the Holy Spirit because “the Spirit of God is the only One who understands what is the mind of God as expressed in His written word, and it is only He who can make it known and enable us to understand it.”²⁴ In as much as interpreters can get the message from the texts, a realization that “the truths of the Bible go beyond the facts and information found in it. The basic meaning of the Bible is spiritual, and to get that meaning we must be taught by the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

Freedom from Colonization in Biblical Interpretation

The principle of putting culture first in Mburu’s hermeneutical procedure is the same as those of her contemporaries who are proponents for the decolonization of hermeneutics in Africa. It is a claim that African theologians were or are being Westernised in theological seminaries. This gives the impression that it is a response

²³ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 225.

²⁴ Samuel Oleka, *Interpreting and Applying the Bible in an African Context*, 110.

²⁵ T. Norton Sterrett, *How to Understand Your Bible*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 31.

to the history of oppression and black segregation. It is a call to approach the Bible from an Afrocentric standpoint. It is a drive towards liberation from Biblical interpretation methodologies that have been dominated by the Western world.

African Biblical Hermeneutics is intertwined with liberation. The idea is “to bring about transformation of the oppressive status quo.” These hermeneutical procedures must be seen as “the Christian intellectual revolution standing behind the African revolution directed toward the total emancipation of African society.”²⁶ White supremacy dominated Africans and it was from this supremacy that the Africans desired to be freed, however, the desire for freedom spilled over into the world of interpreting the Bible since it was the instrument that was used to drive the agenda of oppression, forcing African Biblical Hermeneutics into existence.

It is crucial at this point to highlight that there is a need to separate issues. The push for freedom from political, social, and economic domination, among others, must be commended. It must, however, be controlled so as not to affect the area of Biblical interpretation. Considering the contemporary culture of the reader is a move towards setting biblical interpretation procedures free from colonization and oppression but in the process the message, as it must come from the text, is distorted and in the bid of trying to correct one wrong, another wrong is created.

Looking at Mburu’s hermeneutical principles, one can readily identify practical challenges that affect the propagation of the gospel, pragmatic Christian lives and a readiness for people to prepare for the second coming of Jesus. Interpretation of the text must not be far removed from what the text can shore up. Infidelity to the text leads to distortion of the text that ultimately results in lives that

²⁶ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 55.

are contrary to the word of God, and in turn, a hinderance to the correct preaching of the word of God.

Another challenge posed by Mburu's hermeneutical approach is that of individualized interpretation that makes it difficult to have a unified understanding of the text since the meaning is fragmented and each interpretation applies to a particular individual. This ultimately makes it difficult for the hermeneutic to create basic interpretation principles. It then becomes hard to ascertain common ground.

To add on, when the understanding that all criteria of judgment are relative to situations that are involved and also the people that are involved is applied to Biblical hermeneutics, scholarly prowess suffers. Relativism is an enemy of hermeneutics because then all interpretations become valid. Adventism teaches that the dead do not know anything but with relativism, it will be difficult to do away with certain cultural practices that are contrary to the word of God like the veneration of the ancestors.

Practicability Application

This research will help the general populace to make a good choice on the method of Bible interpretation that minimizes errors. There is an interconnectedness between interpretation and proclamation. If interpretation is not done right, the message will also not be applied in a right manner.

To add on, since what has been interpreted is what is shared, proper bible interpretation propagates mission. People will be able to make decisions based on the proclamation of the true gospel.

Lastly, the common man will be able to find the link between one's own world and that of the text. The write up helps the preacher to apply the word of God to the contemporary person by highlighting the importance of preaching the principle and

not to be tied to the culture of the ancient or modern world. The preacher will be able to cross the cultural divide.

Contributions to African Biblical Hermeneutics

Elizabeth Mburu gave a comprehensive approach to studying the word of God applying her four-legged stool. She proceeded to give practical examples on how to use the stool when she wrote on how to interpret different types of genres as found in the books of the Bible. She wrote on how to interpret stories, wisdom literature, songs and letters.

On another note, she explains the use of the word prophecy as the Adventists use it as not to 'foretell' but to the 'forthtell', announcing the judgments of God. This comes in handy since most prophets in the modern day are focused on foretelling. This brings a new perspective to prophesying and understood by Africans.

In as much as the ordering of these stages differs from that of Adventist hermeneutics, she highlighted the importance of looking for the theological and historical context of the text as emphasized by Adventist hermeneutics practices.

Chapter Summary

The historical grammatical method avoids eisegesis and since there is a connection between misinterpretation and misapplication, when the bible has been misinterpreted, the propagation of the gospel suffers. Also, the gap between the writer of the Bible and the reader of the same today is catered for by closing the gap using Biblical principles in interpretation. Meaning is not what the reader desires to gather from the text but it is what the author intended to convey to the reader. This meaning must be allowed to come out from the text, not from the socio-cultural context of the reader.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This research was an attempt to have a closer look at African Biblical Hermeneutics as proposed by Elizabeth Mburu in the light of the Adventist approach to hermeneutics. A search was conducted to discover the merits and demerits of African Biblical Hermeneutics in juxtaposition with hermeneutics from an Adventist perspective.

What has been observed is that African Biblical hermeneutics, as submitted by Mburu, drives toward recognizing the culture of the reader as a major contributing factor to interpretation. Comparing her submissions with other African theologians, Mburu must be commended for providing a holistic approach to interpretation. It must be noted, however, that her approach has negative effects on the message of the Bible.

Summary

Mburu's hermeneutical procedure can be termed as hybrid since, unlike other theologians who disregard completely the literary and historical-cultural context of the text, she considers these steps as needful, just like the historical-grammatical approach employed in hermeneutics according to the Adventist understanding. In this, there is a similarity. The notable difference is in the positioning of these steps: In Mburu's procedure, one first finds theological messages or principles before considering the literary and historical-cultural contexts of the text, whereas in the

historical-grammatical approach, these stages come before formulating theological messages since they contribute in discovering the message in the text. It was proven from her submissions how hazardous this can be since it leads the interpreter to make assumptions about what message the text may be conveying. It is eisegesis to formulate principles or theological messages before the text has spoken. Following Mburu's procedure, one first formulates the theology in the text, then verifies if what has been assumed is correct by considering the literary and historical-cultural contexts. This creates unnecessary back-and-forth movements and opens a gateway to making inaccurate applications of the message in the text, especially if the culture of the interpreter is resilient to the teachings of the Bible.

The historical-grammatical approach employed in Adventist hermeneutics uses a theological message or the principle in the text to bridge the gap between cultural contexts. Mburu suggests formulating theological messages by first finding parallels to the African context from the Bible. The story may have affected the audience targeted when the story was told. Still, the principle spans across cultures, time, and space making the message applicable in life today to people of a different culture than the original audience. African Biblical Hermeneutics incorporates inculturation in its way of practicing bible interpretation. The first step of looking for parallels to the African context seems to exalt contemporary culture over the background of the text. The process of inculturation also has the challenge of defeating the meaning of the message and, in turn, its application. Misrepresentation of Christ and his being is mostly found in inculturation that has gone wrong because of cultural resilience or refusal by people to reject certain cultural habits that the Bible forbids. The historical-grammatical approach allows the text to bring out its original meaning, allowing the application of the message to be accurate.

Freedom must be treasured as a priceless possession; however, it must not obstruct the message of God as He has intended it to be understood. Looking for parallels of the text with the African context is a protest to say that the contemporary context of the reader must be exalted over that of the writer, in the process setting Biblical interpretation free from Western domination. It is important to moderate the urge to see blackness even in Biblical interpretation.

Conclusion

The historical-grammatical approach presents itself as a safe approach to hermeneutics as compared to Mburu's approach to hermeneutics. The other task of the interpreter is to ensure that the message of the Bible is applied to the contemporary context or else the interpretation process will be incomplete. The quest to have the bible speak to the contemporary context of the reader is addressed by crossing the cultural bridge using principles or theological messages. To exalt contemporary culture over that of the original audience is to create room for the continuance of certain cultural traits that the Bible forbids.

In His omniscience, God knew that the same words that were penned for the audience at the time would be applied to readers in any culture today through theological teachings, principles, and messages. Through His written Word, He intended for everyone to hear the good news of salvation. To claim that the Bible was not written with future generations in mind would be to ignore God's omniscience and to demand that a new Bible be written for and to us.

Commenting on the movement of Black Theology in South Africa, Mbiti asserted that "What blacks in South Africa need is liberation not a theology of

liberation.”¹ It is befitting to borrow from these words to say what Africans need is liberation not a hermeneutics of liberation.

¹ John S. Mbiti, “An African Views American Black Theology” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History. Vol. 1: 1966 - 1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 383.

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