

## **The Relevance of Historical-Critical Method of Biblical Interpretation for the Church in Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study of historical-critical method of biblical interpretation has been on-going for centuries. During its history, it has made major achievements and lasting contributions to the general field of Biblical studies. Today, historical-critical studies have reached a climax whereby new development is being advocated by scholars from different theological persuasions.<sup>328</sup> Scholars are making frantic effort to make historical-critical studies relevant in other fields of humanity. Attempts are being made to relate historical-critical investigations to new research in linguistics, literary criticism and social theory. Historical-criticism is one of the several exegetical tools with which biblical interpreters utilize for biblical interpretation. It should be considered indispensable tool for scholarly interpreters but should not be seen as a panacea for every exegetical hope and problem.<sup>329</sup> The interesting thing is that the proponents of these critical apparatus really want to know what the Biblical authors say and what they wrote. Their concern was not about the text per se but the history behind the text.<sup>330</sup> Thus, historical-critical approaches discuss the

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<sup>328</sup> Karl Moller, 'Renewing Historical Criticism' in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* ed by Craig Bethleen, Colin Green and Karl Moller (Calisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000), 163.

<sup>329</sup> Brandford Yeboah *Lecture Notes and Class Discussion* June 13, 2011.

<sup>330</sup> Yeboah *Lecture Notes on Old Testament Themes*, 2011.

world of the author vis a vis the culture, the language and the social background of the Biblical world.<sup>331</sup>

### WHAT IS HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHODS?

A long period of time has elapsed since the writings that make up the Bible came into being. This great distance means that the culture of the people for whom these writings were intended originally was radically different from our own and this difference in culture involves a different world view.<sup>332</sup> The historical-critical studies are based on sound conviction that in order for one to understand the meaning of scripture for today, one must first understand its meaning for the original readers. Some of the questions historical critics would ask include; of what literary form do we have the Old Testament:<sup>333</sup> Are there different genres in the literary corpus, such as poetry, narrative, parables, apocalypse? Who wrote the book? In a situation where the authorship is hidden or disputed what are the options? What was the historical situation that surrounded the writing of a book? When did the author write? And what was the situation he was addressing?

One of the greatest dangers in the process of biblical interpretation is that of taking a scriptural passage out of the context in which it was written. With this approach, the Bible can be used to support any ideology. To avoid this error, the question one can ask is, what was the central idea or thesis of this passage or what was the author saying or conveying? What was the place of this text in the book as a whole and what was its position in the immediate context? What is the linguistic or grammatical context? Every modern biblical interpreter must always keep in mind that the Bible was written in a language

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<sup>331</sup> John Barton 'Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground?' In *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. by D. E. Orton et al, 3-16. Biblical Interpretation Series Vol. 8. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

<sup>332</sup> Barton, 14.

<sup>333</sup> Barton, 14.

different from his own. Therefore, there is the need to have a proper understanding of the language and the culture of the people so as to make the text relevant for the contemporary reader. As earlier said, biblical interpretation involves some understanding of the language in which it was written, that is Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek. What were the stages by which they came into being, this concerns form criticism, the suggestion that many books that composed the Bible are composite, put together out of a number of originally separate documents.<sup>334</sup> Gerald Bray notes that ‘the historical critical method starts from the belief that any text or religious movement must be understood in its original context.’<sup>335</sup> Oeming supporting Bray remarks that ‘the goal of historical-critical method is the recovery of the original meaning each text had at the time when it was written.’<sup>336</sup> The historical critics seeks to understand the intention of the author within its own world using tools common to academic disciplines outside of theology.<sup>337</sup>

### THE NATURE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Barry Smith citing Semler in his four-volume work *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons (Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon)*, differentiates between the Word of God and the canon of the church.<sup>338</sup> For him, canon does not denote a set of divinely inspired texts but merely collections of books chosen by churches as suitable for public reading. This disjunction allowed for the

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<sup>334</sup> Barton, 16.

<sup>335</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present*. (Illinois, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 221.

<sup>336</sup> Manfred Oeming *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutic: An Introduction*. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 32.

<sup>337</sup> Oeming, 32.

<sup>338</sup> Smith “The Historical-Critical Method, Jesus Research, and The Christian Scholar” *Trinity Journal* 15NS (1994) 201-220. Accessed on Trinity site electronic Journal July 3, 2011

emergence of a new interpretive method, which has become known as the historical-critical method.<sup>339</sup>

Smith observes that if one follows Semler's view then the Bible would not be seen as a set of divinely inspired texts rather it would only be restricted to what the author intended it to mean and, therefore, its meaning would be tied to the author's historical context.<sup>340</sup> Citing the words of Benjamin Jowett, Barton notes 'Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had in the minds of the Prophet or Evangelist who first uttered or wrote to the hearers or readers who first received it.'<sup>341</sup> Klein observed that 'the task of the historical-critical scholar is to reconstruct the historical conditions of the production of a text and then to determine the author's intended meaning from within those parameters.'<sup>342</sup> This is the historical side of the historical-critical method, what it means to understand a text historically. The historical-critical method, however, has another side: it is not only historical but also critical. Again, since the biblical texts are not to be considered as divinely inspired, it is obvious that the truth claims made by a biblical text be open to refutation.<sup>343</sup> There can be no instances of special pleading; all texts are to be treated alike. In other words, the biblical texts are to have no *a priori* authority.<sup>344</sup> The historical-critical method is synonymous with the scientific approach to the study of the Bible as opposed to the "dogmatic" teaching of the church.<sup>345</sup> The appellation "scientific," of course, contains an implicit claim to superiority. Smith commenting on the Semler's position on historical critical method notes 'it is no coincidence that Semler is a

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Barton, 14.

<sup>342</sup> William W. Klein [et.al](#) *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. (Dallas: Word Publishing), 14ff.

<sup>343</sup> Smith.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

rationalist in his theological orientation.<sup>346</sup> Barry Smith thus sums up Semler's position as follows:

'The historical-critical method is the necessary methodological correlative of the rationalist assumption of human intellectual autonomy. Religion rationally conceived ("natural religion") is not dependent for its existence on a set of documents, divinely inspired or otherwise; the possibility of recognizing the truth of its maxims is intrinsic to the one who assents to these insofar as he or she possesses the faculty of reason. Rationalistic religious truth becomes, therefore, the criterion by which the contents of all "positive" religious texts, including the Bible, are determined to be authoritative for the reader.'<sup>347</sup>

This method makes the Bible open to everyone to interpret whether one is a Christian or not in as much as one can reason historically. So a non-Christian can adopt the historical-critical method when studying the Christian Bible. This is one of the strengths of historical-critical method. However, some scholars like Moller, Hoyt and Smith were opposed to historical-critical methods; though they did not condemn the method outright, they advocated for an improved method that would benefit the church world.<sup>348</sup> Karl Moller supports the view that historical-critical methods cannot be done away with but can be improved. He developed two approaches on its improvement.

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Thomas Hoyt posits that historical critical method cannot be ignored though the method may be fraught with some inadequacies. He notes that many scholars have developed variations on the method and have suggested other perspectives in connection with it. He notes that since the enlightenment period the bible has been interpreted variously by different scholars from various persuasions. For example, Immanuel Kant and Albrecht Ritshl interpreted the bible from moral and disposition articulated on the text. Gustavo Gutierrez and other Latin American theologian interpreted the bible from liberation or struggle against oppression end, other scholars like John Gager, Robert R. Wilson sees the key to interpretation as being the social world of the biblical text. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Ed) by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 22.

First, he proposes historical approach which is the duty of the historical critics, where the culture and the background of the text is taken into consideration. Secondl, he offers the Christian approach, after the historical critic has fulfilled his duties; then he proceeds to interpretive process that would make meaning to his audience.<sup>349</sup>

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

Broadly speaking, the emergence of historical critical studies for systematic interpretations of the Bible in the 1700s and their development in the 1800s fostered a sense of unity in biblical interpretations where the goal of interpreting the meaning of a text was perceived as arriving, through grammatical-historical methods, at some objective historical meaning of the text. Biblical scholars and others alike who intended to apply readings of the Bible to contemporary issues of *ecclesia* and society would have had such a determinate meaning of a text as their starting point. However, two shifts occurred in succession which displaced historical criticism as the central method, or at least disturbed its hegemony, in studying the Bible.<sup>350</sup> “Close reading” (similar to “formalism” and “New Criticism”) emerged in the 1920s and shifted the reading of texts from their social and historical context and from the interpreter’s mind and life to the text itself. In interpreting a text what is important was the text itself, its structure, architecture, intrinsic form and the internal relationships of its parts.<sup>351</sup>

A literary reading of texts was called for- this is the so called “textual paradigm.” Then in the 1960s, the textual paradigm was itself challenged by the emergence of post structural criticism, which

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<sup>349</sup> Moller, Karl. ‘Renewing Historical Criticism’ in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* ed by Craig Bethleen, Colin Green and Karl Moller (Calisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000), 163.

<sup>350</sup> Peter Nyende, ‘Addressing Ethnicity Via Biblical Studies: A Task of African Biblical Scholarship’ *Neotestamentica* 44.1 (2010):124-143.

<sup>351</sup> Nyende ‘*Neotestamentica* 44.1 (2010):124-143.

shifted the controlling principle in reading texts from the text itself to the reader. The reader mattered most since s/he was the one understood to confer meaning to a text (“the reader’s paradigm”). Consequently, the field of Biblical Studies became methodologically plural and contested ground.<sup>352</sup>

## **VARIOUS HISTORICAL CRITICAL APPARATUS FOR STUDYING THE BIBLE**

The Bible is an historical book. It records the history of Israel and their neighbors in the words of humans who were inspired by God.<sup>353</sup> Because the bible is an historical work which comprises ancient text, it is subject to historical investigation and the results of historical research.<sup>354</sup> Thus, the overall purpose of historical-critical method is to investigate what actually happened in the events described in the text or what the author alluded to in the main context of the text.<sup>355</sup> Krentz gives the following goals of historical investigation: Present a body of facts that show what actually happened and why. Illuminate the past, creating a comprehensive picture of a culture's own record of history. Understand the significance of events and interpret them. Understand the motives as well as actions. Marshall points out that reading Biblical accounts raises the following historical questions:

1. Discrepancies with parallel Biblical accounts.

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<sup>352</sup> Nyende, From this time forward different methods are adopted for biblical interpretation, scholars from different school of thought propounded methods that would make bible more explicit and meaningful. Between 1976 and 1985 a new hermeneutics developed this kind is referred to as Post modern hermeneutics which asserts that no single literature should claim or teach absolute truth and that knowledge is objective. See S. Baba *History and Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics for Beginner*, (ACTS; Jos, 2010), 93-133.

<sup>353</sup> Krentz E. *The Historical-Critical Method*. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975), 1. See Black & Dockery *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), 73-74.

<sup>354</sup> Black & Dockery *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), 73-74.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid. p 74.

2. Discrepancies with non-Biblical material. Historical improbabilities. Supernatural occurrences.
3. Creation/Modification by the early church
4. Literary genre.
5. Insufficient evidence.

These problems and questions may only be resolved by historical study.<sup>356</sup> Using critical methods, it is possible to determine all relevant sources of historical data, the accuracy and credibility of these sources and the development of the material in these sources. Using this information it is possible to determine what is historically probable and form an historical hypothesis which successfully accounts for what the sources say and build a coherent picture of what probably happened.<sup>357</sup> Krentz notes that ‘it is not always possible to arrive at certainty. Complex events are difficult to record in detail and often the sources are missing or incomplete. History is limited - historians only produce a limited or reduced representation of the past.’<sup>358</sup> Other critical methods that complement the historical studies of the ancient text include; Literary or source and Form criticism, tradition, redaction (higher criticism) and textual criticism (lower criticism).

## LITERARY CRITICISM

Literary Criticism like historical criticism encompasses an array of analytical methods that focus on certain fundamental concerns and questions. Historical critics’ view the biblical text as a lens through which the skilled observer may gaze into Israel’s past and thereby discover those events, processes and context that shape its meaning.

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<sup>356</sup> I. H. Marshall (ed), *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*. (Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1985, 1992), 131

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.* p 127.

<sup>358</sup> Krentz, 37.



When put in another context historical critics approach the Pentateuch from a diachronic perspective that concentrates on the dynamics process by which the Pentateuch came into being. Literary critics on the other hand view the biblical text as a cut gemstone, a thing of beauty in its own right.<sup>359</sup> Generally speaking, they adopt a synchronic perspective that focuses on the literary character of the Pentateuch as a subject worthy of study in and of itself. Literary approaches therefore tend to forego questions of history and external references in favor of others that explore the ways in which the Pentateuch communicates as a written work of art.<sup>360</sup>

Literary criticism is the process of analyzing and evaluating the literary genre of a particular literature document with the goal of arriving at a meaningful interpretation of that literature. The aim of the critics is to determine style, language, genre and content of the literature in view. In the course of the analysis they identify different genre types and styles and present a methodology that will aid in its interpretation.<sup>361</sup>

From the conception of the historical-critical enterprise, literary study of the Pentateuch involved the identification of sources and the description of the editorial process by which they were combined and modified.<sup>362</sup> Literary criticism as utilized by the historical critics thus consisted of delineating and describing the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic and Priestly sources meticulously fitting pentateuchal texts within a scheme and speculating on the sequence and time periods in which the various strands were redacted.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Oeming, 34.

<sup>360</sup> Oeming, 35.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> R.K Harrison. *Introduction to Old Testament*. (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 28.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid. p 38

**LITERARY DISTINCTIVES.**

1. Literary criticism attempts to answer some very basic and important questions concerning the biblical text such as: who was the author? What were its characteristics? What were the date and the circumstances that led to the compilation of the book. Literary criticism was the dominant force in biblical scholarship. For example it arose as the byproduct of documentary hypothesis where it was suggested that the Pentateuch was written by multiple authors J, E, D, P. Literary analysis shows that the Pentateuch was not written by one person. Multiple strands of tradition were woven together to produce the Torah.<sup>364</sup> The view that is persuasive to most of the critical scholars of the Pentateuch is called the Documentary Hypothesis, or the Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis, after the names of the 19th-century scholars who put it in its classic form. Briefly stated, the Documentary Hypothesis sees the Torah as having been composed by a series of editors out of four major strands of literary traditions. These traditions are known as J, E, D, and P. We can illustrate their relationships as follows.<sup>365</sup> J (the Jahwist or Jerusalem source) uses the Tetragrammaton as God's name. This source's interests indicate it was active in the southern Kingdom of Judah in the time of the divided Kingdom. J is responsible for most of Genesis.<sup>366</sup> E (the Elohist or Ephraimitic source) uses Elohim ("God") for the divine name until Exodus 3-6, where the *Tetragrammaton* is revealed to Moses and to Israel. This source seems to have lived in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the divided Kingdom. E wrote the Aqedah story and other parts of Genesis, and much of Exodus and Numbers.<sup>367</sup> J and E were joined fairly early, apparently after

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<sup>364</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.com/literary> criticism Accessed July 3, 2011.

<sup>365</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 5ff

<sup>366</sup> Plaut, 5.

<sup>367</sup> Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984),

the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE. It is often difficult to separate J and E stories that have merged. D (the Deuteronomist) wrote almost all of Deuteronomy (and probably also Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). Scholars often associate Deuteronomy with the book found<sup>368</sup> by King Josiah in 622 BCE (see 2 Kings 22). P (the Priestly source) provided the first chapter of Genesis; the book of Leviticus; and other sections with genealogical information, the priesthood, and worship. According to Wellhausen, P was the latest source and the priestly editors put the Torah in its final form sometime after 539 BCE. Recent scholars (for example, James Milgrom) are more likely to see P as containing pre-exilic material.<sup>369</sup>

Contemporary critical scholars disagree with Wellhausen and with one another on details and on whether D or P was added last. But they agree that the general approach of the Documentary Hypothesis best explains the doublets, contradictions, differences in terminology and theology, and the geographical and historical interests that we find in various parts of the Torah.<sup>370</sup>

- Literary criticism had further demonstrated that the prophetic books or material were not stemmed from the prophets themselves, they were put together by a scribe within the Jewish community. Thus the prophetic books were the product of the prophet, they only contributed to the layers of these books
- Literary criticism has made great strides in dating the Old Testament writings; this was done by observing the language and styles, inconsistencies, contradictions and duplication in a book, which may probably indicate

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<sup>368</sup> Oeming, 34.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid. p 35.

<sup>370</sup> Friedman, "Torah (Pentateuch)" in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.

multiple authorship. The variation in Theological view point and the historical allusion might indicate date.

- Literary criticism has helped to discover in many cases what might be considered to be the multiple authorship which is in fact the evidence of multiple authors or editors that sharpened the Bible into its final form.

## FORM CRITICISM

The application of form-critical method to literature has long been recognized, although undefined.<sup>371</sup> The discipline of form criticism can be traced to the German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1832-1932) who was one of the most influential biblical scholars of the past century. Before Gunkel many scholars had made attempt to explain the pre-literary history of the Bible for instance D. Cassel in 1872 presented an aesthetically sensitive history of Israelite literature as the first part of a comprehensive survey of Jewish literature. In fact, Gunkel acknowledged Cassel's work as a partial precursor of the latter's approach to biblical form criticism.<sup>372</sup>

In the last 250 years, historical research has proved that the Bible is not a unit with a single literary form and that the idea of the canon must be more carefully defined. According to Klaus Kock, form criticism is a process by which form and content are studied at one and the same time. The type and form are nearly the same and one should carefully differentiate between them. The only difference between type and form is that form designates a means of concrete expression, a formula of style that is more or less fixed through usage, whereas a type is characterized by a certain number of these means of expression. The form is that by which a unit is connected to a

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<sup>371</sup> Klaus Kock *The Growth of Gospel Tradition* (London: Adam and Charles Press 1969), 3.

<sup>372</sup> Kock 3.

particular literary type; therefore by specifying the forms of a text it is possible to determine the literary type to which it belongs.<sup>373</sup>

He observed that the book contains a more remarkable assortment of literature narrative some crude, some highly sophisticated, prophetic sayings, proverb, cultic songs, long letter, apocalyptic vision. The use of words, the style and construction follow correspondingly varied principles, and all these must be considered before a text can be accurately interpreted. This is form criticism<sup>374</sup> (8). To Kock form criticism is both descriptive and historical. Form deals with description and *sitz im leben* deals with history. The tracing of form is an aspect of traditional criticism.<sup>375</sup> Comprehensively, form criticism deals with literary questions (the forms) historical questions (the community setting) and theological development that questions the tradition history of the form's development.<sup>376</sup> R. A. Taylor says form criticism is the study of biblical literature that seeks to identify the various genre of that literature and their function in ancient religious life. By isolating and analyzing the particular forms found in biblical literature, form criticism seeks to discover their pre-literary history, life setting and function thereby shedding light on the meaning of the biblical texts in which these forms are found.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid. p 3-4.

<sup>375</sup> Traditional criticism is an aspect of historical criticism that was introduced in the middle eighteenth century by J. Semler who made distinction between the word of God which has abiding authority unto salvation and the 'scriptures' which contain information important only for the times in which they were written hence inspiration has given way to objective history *see* David S. Docker "New Testament Interpretation: A Historical Survey" *The New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* 50.

<sup>376</sup> The existence of forms in literature has long been recognized although undefined. In 1865 in his *Geschichte des Volkes Israel II*, p139. H Ewald traced the history of the style (form) of commandments and functions of each of the literary genre of the Hebrew Canon.

<sup>377</sup> R.A Taylor "Form Criticism" *Dictionary of the Old Testament* Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 2003.

## THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN AFRICA

The Bible was written to the people who lived within a culture that is different from ours. These people had different customs and spoke different languages that are foreign to ours hence, for the book to be relevant for us there is the need for its interpretation. The Bible is believed to be God's word revealed to His people, then each of the passage has an historical context with a particular intention in mind. The intention of the author, the occasion of his writing and the purpose of writing are all vital for accurate interpretation. The confusion we notice today stems out from the distorted interpretation of God's word. Those that interpret the bible for the church are unlearned and as such they read their mind on the text and make it to say anything. An interpreter of the Bible must be ready to be diligent in his study and be faithful in his interpretation of the Biblical text before it is applied. We need to remember that this book is an ancient book written in a foreign language hence to understand the culture and the language of the people the historical critical methods need to be applied in an intercultural context.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Manus notes that intercultural hermeneutics is another synonym to inculturation which he defines as a descriptive paradigm that seeks to make Biblical narratives and message address grassroots Christians in their actual contexts and social location in Africa. He notes that inculturation is a dynamic on-going process by which people consciously and critically appropriate the Bible and its message from within the perspectives and with the resources of their cultures (Manus 663; Ukpog 35). It is a process of appropriation, which in the case of Africa is concerned to make specifically African contribution to Biblical interpretation and actualize the creative power of the Bible in African society. Its focus is on Africa's anthropological empowerment and cultural identity (35). It is a methodology that employs the resources of Africa social or religio-cultural contexts, that is, the African view of reality and African life experiences, to examine the text of a given passage of the Bible and to derive meaning suitable to her/his context (Manus 663). This approach shares with the historical-critical method the dictum that the Bible is a culture's literary property that needs to be understood in its concrete historical and social cultural contexts (Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* 174).

## THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

The relevance of historical-critical methods in biblical interpretation cannot be ignored. This method, though, may have some gray areas notwithstanding, has uncovered a wealth of new information about the Bible. It has provided for us a great amazing insight into the authors' world.<sup>379</sup> This method without prejudice meets the needs of a modern, rationalistic age. It is free from dogmatic constraints; it examines the Bible with an array of scholarly tools.<sup>380</sup> According to Oeming, the strength of this method is enormous. Apart from the few ones listed above, historical critical method has helped to remove from the texts the burden of being something they were never intended to be: factual reports.<sup>381</sup> He also notes that by interpreting the Bible from its historical context, these methods comply with the modern autonomy of reason. Historical critical methods are involved in a discourse with atheistic world on the basis of history. In the face of a global rejection of the Bible as fairy tales, lies, illusion or priestly propaganda, they differentiate between historical certainty and probability between fact and creed.<sup>382</sup>

Another point to note is that historical critical methods have opened our eyes to the fact that the texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament have been shaped by a long process of growth and tradition, therefore, understanding this process is of great help in understanding the texts. Also the high intellectual sincerity of the historical critical method as well as its continuing courage to ask questions has rooted the biblical texts in honest exegesis. It is also noted that a precise analysis of theological concepts within the bible protects its texts from dogmatic simplification and reinforces the breadth and the depth of the Word of God.

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<sup>379</sup> Yeboah, *Lecture*, Old Testament Themes, 2011.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Oeming, 41.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

The historical-critical method especially protects the Bible from being monopolized by fundamentalism.<sup>383</sup> Although the method may be fraught with some challenges, the truth is that this method has shed light on the history and cultural background of the ancient Israel; not only that, the method has helped us to understand the evolution of some obscured text especially in the Old Testament. Also, the method has dug into limelight the practices that the ancient world was accustomed with through archaeological discovery and other tools used to dig up facts by the historical critics. This method though not sufficient for biblical interpretation, is in fact connected intimately to modern critical spirit to the Protestant principle of *sola scripture* and the Catholic premise of orienting one's teaching around the witness of the saints and apostles.

Oeming notes that this method will continue to be of basic importance. It cannot be omitted or substituted; however the dissatisfaction produced by this method should be worked upon and when mastered, would help the interpreter to understand the worlds of the authors and reduce the effect of fundamentalism in interpreting the scripture and also prevent people from reading their mind into the scripture.<sup>384</sup> One basic challenge in some African churches is ignorance on the part of some ministers and church members alike who believe that the moment one receives the divine call one does not need theological training; thus many are using the Bible to say what it does not say (some pastors are guilty of *eisegesis* and proof-texting). Where historical-critical method is understood it fits well into the African setting. The Africans and even the Asians are used to telling stories and thus contextualization of the Bible from the historical perspective becomes easy. Thus, the biblical story contextualized within a context becomes more relevant to the African people.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid. p 42.

<sup>385</sup> See J. S. Ukpong *Contextual Hermeneutics: Challenges and Possibilities* in JNK Mugambi and Johannes Smit (eds), *Text and Context in New Testament Hermeneutics* Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2004), 22-55. For more on



Historical-critical method studies the scriptural text as an historical document and seeks to understand the text in terms of its historical context. This moves to stories within the cultural context and draws out parallels before being applied. One of the dangers of doing contextual hermeneutics is syncretism but I am of the opinion that if historical-critical-contextualization is done properly syncretism will be far from it. Folaranmi notes that if an interpreter has a right contextual approach that take seriously the biblical context and the cultural milieu where the message is given into consideration, syncretism will be far from it. Also Adamo has suggested African Cultural Hermeneutics<sup>386</sup> where he suggested a shift from historical-critical method to the cultural milieu where the interpreter operates. This method if pursued with all integrity will make historical-critical method more relevant for the African church.

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contextualization and indigenization see Babajide Cole, A biblical Approach to Contextualization of Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1979. See also Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1989)

<sup>386</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* Benin City: Justice Jeco Press, 2006), 14; *Healing in the Old Testament NABIS: 2004*, 32 He defines it as a special approach to Biblical Interpretation that makes Africa social cultural context a subject of interpretation. It is the re-reading of the scripture from a premeditatedly Afro-centric perspective with the purpose of understanding the Bible and God in our African experience and culture to break the hermeneutic hegemony and ideological stronghold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed.

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