

*The Global Wesleyan*  
ENCYCLOPEDIA  
*of* BIBLICAL  
THEOLOGY



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## AFRICAN CONTEXT, BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN THE

Hermeneutics is the science of studying passages of the Bible within their proper contexts in order to derive the intended meaning. Context is crucial to the understanding of a biblical passage. Context in this instance refers to historical, structural, cultural, and linguistic settings. Context also infers that we must interpret a passage in the light of the whole biblical book and indeed the entire Bible. It is Scripture that sheds light on other passages of Scripture. Hermeneutics helps us to approximate the intended meaning and phraseology of the original author and to avoid using the lens of our own individual bias when reading the Bible.

The OT is closer to the African context than is the NT. Stories from the OT are more easily understood by Africans, since their worldview is similar to that encountered in OT times. Books such as the Psalms, Proverbs, Prophetic Books, and 1 and 2 Kings draw an immediate symbolic parallel with the African religious milieu.

The hermeneutical task, however, demands that when a translator translates the Bible into African languages, he or she must use cultural tools. Many of the original translations, however, were done by missionaries who at times were not well versed with the indigenous languages, metaphors, idioms, and cultures. For instance, translating the term “God” according to the cultural understanding of a supreme deity has led many times to mistaken renderings, resulting in the misunderstanding of the whole concept.

The Bible describes people who were from different cultural backgrounds: herders, agriculturists, city dwellers, village folks. Some were **slaves**, and others were rulers. In biblical interpretation we need first to place ourselves in their cultural modes. Then using the cultural parallels with our own contemporary setting, the text of the Bible may be translated with more meaning for our situation.

African Christians understand that when they read the Bible, they are entering into a long period of Christian tradition during which time the canon was developed and was brought to a close. They recognize it as truly the inspired **Word of God**. Following the Christian tradition concerning the efficacy of the canon and the realization that Christian councils put a stamp of authority on every stage of its development, the Bible becomes the inspired Word of God that has authority above indigenous traditions. It is not just literature but is foremost the inspired Word, which is authoritative for African Christians and as such influences their human endeavors and existence.

Being God's self-revelation to humankind, the Bible becomes a norm by which African Christians reflect their relationship with God and with each other. In this sense **inspiration** does not mean that they take the Bible literally or irrationally, but it means they must expect to discover God's challenges to them and to find meaning for their lives and **hopes**.

### **Vernacular Translations of Scripture**

The Bible has been translated into many African languages. The translation of the Bible continues to be an important task in evangelization. It becomes the medium through which biblical hermeneutics is promulgated at the grass roots, because translation carries with it the process of enculturation as a way of acquiring exegetical skills. This process exposes the Bible to the practices of the local culture and worldview. For in the process of translation, African views become the medium of expressing deep biblical truths about God and our relationship to God and humanity. Indigenous concepts have to be discovered as well as local words for "God" and "divine mystery." The importance of the Bible to African communities cannot be overestimated. Often, portions of the Bible became the prime readers for literacy. Through the translated Scriptures, God addresses people in their own language, using their own metaphors. Africans identify with this God who reveals himself through their language as one who is concerned about their history, well-being, and future.

David Barrett detects a certain hermeneutical independence when the Bible is translated into local languages. He draws a link between the translation of the Bible and the initiation of some indigenous churches. In communities where the complete Bible has been translated, more indigenous churches appear to have emerged. The main reason is that translation helps a particular community grasp the deepest meaning of a biblical passage and thus transform it into a deeper theological manifestation (1968, 109).

The Bible is highly esteemed by the African Christian community and provides a strong medium through which Christian **faith** is propagated. Its authority has penetrated deep into the spiritual, cultural, and social life of African communities that are pervaded by a strong conviction that the **Holy Spirit** gives ordinary people **wisdom** and power to interpret the Bible as well

as discern its deeper spiritual meaning. Many believe that everything in the Bible is true and reliable. They have, particularly within charismatic groups, a special yearning for mystical experiences. The hermeneutical task in the translation of Scripture tries to bridge the historical, cultural, and linguistic gaps that would inevitably hinder a reader from drawing out the actual and authentic meaning of a passage.

### **Pneumatology in African Hermeneutics**

Many of the African churches (including locally instituted churches) have a bias toward Pentecostalism. The Holy Spirit features prominently in many sermons and Bible study sessions. Their theological orientation is tinged with Pentecostal traits. The Holy Spirit manifests himself in dreams, visions, prophecies, healing, and worship. Charismatic gifts of the Spirit inspire Christians to serve others through their devotion in evangelism, **repentance**, and the building up of the community of believers (Gk., *koinōnia*). The Spirit makes it possible for people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to hear the Word of God speak to them in their natural surroundings.

Through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the African churches have endeavored to interpret the Bible in order to make it more relevant to their communities in their contemporary situations. Although Africans accept and revere the centrality of Jesus Christ, they are inextricably linked to the cultural and religious traditions that inform their values, insights, and philosophical traits. These values are incorporated in exegetical practices in an attempt to bring out genuine African interpretations. For the biblical exegete to be true to the task, he or she must place the text in its historical context and also do the hermeneutical work of placing it in the contemporary situation.

The Spirit of God leads interpreters to unfold the mysteries of the Bible for the situation of the hearer instead of trying to transpose the hearer into the times of the Bible. Preachers in African-instituted churches have learned skills to apply biblical texts to the real-life situations of the people. Their hearers thereby readily identify themselves with the message and try to discern the will of God. In such free interpretation of the Bible lies the danger of the preacher reading into the passage his or her own thoughts rather than reading the meaning out of the passage.

The Bible has had great influence even among people with little or no religious inclination. Being a relatively new phenomenon in many parts of Africa (translations belong to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during the era of modern Christian missions), the Bible has influenced many communities, some of which are not yet Christian. What has captured the imagination of many people is the Bible's bias for **justice**, popularly known as the "option for the **poor**." Jesus's mission has been understood to mean that he came to emancipate all those who find themselves on the periphery



of society. The proclamation of the **gospel** leads to the wholeness of life, for the gospel cannot be complete in a situation where injustice (social and economic) prevails.

### **Centrality of Scripture**

To the church in Africa, the Bible is the central and primary source of God's revelation. The OT appears to be more popular than does the NT, even though the parables and miracle stories are given special prominence. The Epistle of James has strong appeal to African preachers because it portrays the importance of applying faith to daily living. In it they see the practical struggle between light and darkness, faith and unbelief, **sacred** and profane.

The exodus motif has been used by many groups, particularly within the African-instituted churches. They believe that just as God liberated the Israelites in their hour of need, he will likewise liberate those undergoing perilous moments. The Bible is depicted as a book that supports and upholds what is appropriate within the African traditions and practices. The example of Jesus healing others has taken a central place in worship because wholeness is juxtaposed with **holiness**. In order to be **holy**, one has to be made whole; Jesus must **forgive sins** before performing an act of healing.

### **African-Instituted Churches**

Among the African-instituted churches, the Bible is often interpreted freely in sermons. Sermons are teaching sessions, and a three-hour sermon is not unusual. For example, an elder from an African-instituted church in Nairobi, Kenya, preached a sermon based on Exodus 4, concerning the calling of Moses. He described the background of the text, explaining Moses's upbringing as that of a prince in Pharaoh's court, emphasizing that Moses was brought up by royalty and lacked nothing. He was, therefore, reluctant to answer God's call to liberate his people from bondage. The elder reminded the congregation members that they, too, were in bondage in various ways. Some were unemployed, lacked a good education, or did not have decent shelter. Some lacked food, while others were sick. He reminded them that they needed a Moses in their midst. God had heard their cries and would soon send a Moses if they fixed their faith and trust in him. Many people were able to identify with the message that addressed their contemporary situations. The elder's hermeneutical interpretation was a rereading of the biblical text within an existential context that made the biblical message relevant and real.

Another exposition was done on John 4:1-42. Verse 12 was highlighted because it mentioned ancestors. In Africa ancestral veneration is strong. The Samaritan woman valued her ancestors, whose deeds and heroic benevolence were worthy of remembrance. The concept of ancestor worship held the key to the interpretation of the story. The reference to Jacob as an ancestor de-

picted the woman's devotion and reverence to her culture and tradition. Jesus succeeded in demonstrating that in line with ancestor Jacob, he brought life to those who encountered him.

The preacher emphasized that the people must hold on to Jesus as their proto-ancestor just as their forefathers held on to their ancestors for sustenance. The African Christians' experience of ancestorhood makes them feel that they are indeed part of the great Christian family with a rich heritage.

## Conclusion

When Africans read the Bible, there are certain themes that become of greater interest: the themes of healing and wholeness, physical and spiritual well-being, the reality of **sin** and its alienation, curses and blessings, and the need to seek holiness. The theme of justice in the midst of oppression is also becoming prominent.

Biblical hermeneutics in Africa involves the art of demonstrating that the Bible is a living and practical book; hence Bible study cannot be meaningful unless there is practical life experience. In the Bible, Africans experience the acts of God that impinge on their lives in a mundane and practical manner.

While it can be said that Africans respond to the biblical message within their socioeconomic and religious milieu, the message is dynamic and influences the whole community. African Christians will continue to interpret the Bible within their own context, since God speaks to them directly using their language, idioms, metaphors, and culture. The Bible is alive in Africa. It continues to influence and transform the lives of individuals and communities.

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## AFTERLIFE

The OT reflects an ancient Semitic view of spatial reality with three tiers: the realm of heaven, the realm of the living, and the realm of the dead. While their neighboring peoples were concerned with navigating the various influences that both the realm of heaven and the realm of the dead had on the realm in which they lived, the Israelites were called by Yahweh to keep their focus on life. The **Torah** prohibits the Israelites from the worship of other gods (Exod. 20:3; 34:14; Deut. 12:30-31) as well as from contacting the dead through mediums (Deut. 18:10-13). Although bodily contact with the deceased was obviously necessary to some extent, it rendered the living ritually **unclean** for a certain amount of days (see Num. 19:11-22). God's people were to be focused on God and on life.

And so the OT does not directly answer the question that many today ask: What happens when we, when I, die? It does, however, reflect a belief that life continues on beyond the grave.

The realm of the dead is referred to as *Sheol*, often translated into English as “the pit” (i.e., Ps. 30:9 [10 HB]), physically located in the depths of the earth. One of the most vivid pictures in the Bible is given in the book of Numbers, where the earth opens up and swallows alive the rebellious Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; their families; and all they own (16:27-33). Sheol is bleak and silent. Worms (Job 24:19-20) and decay (Ps. 16:10) are associated with it. Sheol's inhabitants are apathetic (Eccl. 9:10) and cannot praise God (Ps. 6:5 [6 HB]; 31:17 [18 HB]). And yet, Jonah can say that he cried out to the Lord from the depths of Sheol and was heard (Jon. 2:2 [3 HB]). And the psalmist proclaims that even if one would go down to Sheol, God would be present (Ps. 139:8).

Communication between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead is portrayed in the unique story of King Saul requiring a medium to call up Samuel in order to ask him for advice. While there are instances portrayed in the OT in which breath was returned to lifeless bodies (see 1 Kings 17:19-22; 2 Kings 4:32-36), in this situation Samuel did not return to life but communicated to King Saul from the realm of the dead (1 Sam. 28:3-25).

Later writers reflect a belief in postmortem **judgment** and a **resurrection** from Sheol. Daniel 12:2, perhaps reflecting Isaiah 25:8 and 26:19, indicates this succinctly: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake:



some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (NIV). These texts model the logical consequences of the OT belief in the **righteousness** and **mercy** of God in the face of extreme **suffering**. Despite the borders between life and death that humans experience, vindication will come for God’s people who live according to God’s heart.

This belief in an ultimate judgment and resurrection is also reflected in the writings of the NT. Jesus discussed the issue of resurrection with the Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection, claiming that those who had passed before were yet alive (Mark 12:18-27). The grieving Martha confessed her faith in the ultimate resurrection of her brother, Lazarus, when Jesus told her that her brother would live (John 11:23-24). The idea of an ultimate vindication of God’s people is expressed with echoes of Daniel 7 and in Mark 13:24-27 (see also Matt. 24; Luke 21:25-28). The parables in Matthew 25 express this vindication as an ultimate judgment for all nations, in which the result is either happiness in the presence of God (vv. 23, 46*b*) or separation from God (vv. 30, 46*a*). The ultimate verdict is determined by how people use that which was entrusted to them (Luke 16:19-31).

While a modern reader might be sensitive to the temporal dimension of Jesus’s response to the penitent criminal crucified with him (“today you will be with me in paradise” [Luke 23:43, NIV]), Luke’s focus may be more on the words “with me.” The request of the criminal had been for Jesus to remember him. Jesus’s reply transcends mere remembrance; the man will actually be with Jesus. The Gospel narratives show Jesus consistently together with his followers. Death does not change this.

Paul affirmed the general resurrection on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because it had been confirmed by several witnesses that Jesus had indeed been resurrected, it could be deduced that all who belong to him will also be resurrected from the dead (1 Cor. 15:23). The body that is subject to decay will be removed in death, and a new body will be given that is not subject to decay. A resurrection without a body is unthinkable.

The biblical view of the afterlife cannot be separated from the total narrative of God’s redemptive presence with humanity. Death is never portrayed in the Bible as a good thing. The various descriptions of Sheol in the OT attest to this. However, God is good and is portrayed consistently as faithful even beyond the grave. The God who covenants himself to humanity through Jesus Christ’s death has covenanted himself to be with humanity through death into eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While no human, including the biblical writers, has ever known exactly what will meet him or her on the other side of the grave, the biblical **faith** is that no human needs ever to make the transition alone.

*See also* **Cosmology; Covenant; Creation; Hope; Remembering.**

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## ANTICHRIST

The Greek word *antichristos* is made up of the prefix *anti* and the noun *christos* (“anointed one” or “**messiah**”). *Anti* can mean both “in the place of” and “against.” It is related to *pseudochristos* (false Christ) and *antitheos* (against God).

Even though we do not have the word “antichrist” in the OT, the OT provides the background for NT usage. The **prophecy** of Daniel speaks of the beast that is against God (Dan. 7:25; 8:25). Daniel also foretold of the “abomination that causes desolation” (11:31, NIV) and described the actions of a king, an *antitheos*, most likely Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who would disregard God and his temple (vv. 31-38).

In the NT, Jesus warned his disciples that false messiahs and **prophets** would come. The Greek word translated “false messiahs” (Mark 13:22) is *pseudochristoi*, a variation of *antichristoi*. Paul warned that the “man of lawlessness” (*anthrōpos tēs anomias*), an agent of Satan, would exalt himself above God and take his position. However, even he is destined for destruction (2 Thess. 2:3, 8-12).

The word “antichrist” is only found in 1 and 2 John. John announced that many antichrists have already come (1 John 2:18) and that they denied that Jesus is the unique Son of God, the Christ (v. 22). They were led by a spirit that does not **believe** Jesus is from God (4:3), and they were deceivers (2 John v. 7). In contrast to the Synoptic **Gospels** and Paul’s writings, there is not just one antichrist but a plurality of antichrists. These antichrists were not just against Christ but actually presumed to be Christ.

The concept of antichrists finds its fullest expression in the book of Revelation, where the beast becomes the “embodiment of **evil**.” Revelation reflects the beast envisioned by Daniel, which is worshipped as a god by those who do not follow the Lamb of God (ch. 13). The dragon gives the beast its authority (v. 5). However, God and the Lamb have the final word on the fate of the beast and Satan behind it. **Wrath** awaits both Satan and those who follow him (17:11, 14).

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## ASIAN HERMENEUTICS

In any quest of Asian biblical interpretation, one must acknowledge the cultural and religious diversity and the socioeconomic and historico-political complexity of Asia and its people. There are several contextual issues germane to Asian hermeneutics. First, Asia has long been a place with scriptures of major world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam), including highly developed philosophical teachings (Confucianism, Taoism) and a deep cultural heritage. Second, socioeconomic **poverty** and disparity is a day-to-day reality in many parts of Asia. Third, colonization by imperial powers is a shared experience of Asian countries.

Given these realities and the issues arising from them, Asian hermeneutics seeks to read the Bible in ways that are relevant to the Asian settings. At the same time, it uses Asian contexts to illuminate the Bible. Thus Asian biblical interpretation stresses dialogic ways of interacting between text and context, and transformative aspects of texts in praxis.

In reaction to Western critical hermeneutical methods and in search of indigenous Asian hermeneutics, Asian biblical interpreters have developed various approaches either reflecting Asia's past religio-cultural traditions or applying Asia's present contexts to interpret the Bible. In this article, five Asian hermeneutical approaches are discussed: (1) cross-textual; (2) cross-cultural; (3) contextual (liberation); (4) postcolonial; (5) Asian feminist.

### Five Approaches in Asian Biblical Hermeneutics

*Cross-Textual.* The cross-textual approach seeks to put the Bible and Asian scriptures such as the Vedas (Hinduism) and the sutras (Buddhism) side by side as dialogical partners for mutual enrichment of the texts. Archie C. C. Lee, a proponent of cross-textual hermeneutics, argues that the Bible needs to be appropriated in the light of Asian religio-cultural texts in order to be read critically and relevantly in multi-scriptural Asian settings and to be reclaimed as an Asian scripture (2008). In doing so, the exclusiveness and authority of the Bible over against other texts is challenged. Thus the emphasis is shifted toward its relatedness to other texts in order to accommodate the Bible to Asian Christians and to broaden the dialogue from intrafaith among minority Christians to interfaith among diverse religious communi-