

# Interpreting the New Testament in the East African Context

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## KEY WORDS

| Biblical Interpretation | Grammatico-Historical | Inculturation Hermeneutics |  
| African Context | Exegesis | Worldview | Culture |

## ABSTRACT

Historically biblical interpretation in East Africa is the brainchild of the Western world. Missionaries brought the gospel to this region but influenced by their western cultural perspectives. The first African biblical scholars in East Africa attended seminaries in the West where they received training in the western approaches to biblical understanding and interpretation. Such methodologies could not fit the needs of African situation. Africans seek Bible reading informed by their cultural perspectives, worldview and life experience. Presently there exist diverse approaches to biblical interpretation propounded by African scholars. Their concern has been how to make the message not only understood by Africans but also relevant to them. This paper attempts to show the significance and challenges of grammatico-historical method of interpretation for African contexts. It also examines the existence of diverse biblical interpretations within the African context. The African context has its peculiar issues such as culture, worldview, political, social and economic concerns among others. This impact on the responses to the interpretation of the scripture that should ensure relevance to the particular context. Such an approach should seek to empower the African readers and hearers for a critical study of the Bible in relation to their life-situations, and for personal and societal transformation..

## INTRODUCTION

Africa is composed of different regions which have undergone different unique experiences. However, scholars treat African context as one due to same worldview and cultural components. African scholars talk of African Religion instead of African religions (Mbiti, 1969; Magesa, 1997). In this paper East African context is used when the information is specific to East Africa, while African context when it can relate to Africa in general. The minority immigrant communities such as the Asians are not focused upon in this discussion.

The greatest Christian influence in East Africa resulted from European missionary activity in the region in the nineteenth century. However, the challenge which has persisted is how to make the biblical message relevant and meaningful within the African situation

(Mugambi, 1989, p. 36). The main reason is that the missionaries brought the gospel to Africa but were influenced by their western cultural perspectives (LeMarquand, G., 2000). They attempted unsuccessfully to domesticate the message in Africa through indigenization sometimes seeking help from the Africans (Gehman, 1987, p. 12-22). However, their interpretation of the Bible was mainly influenced by their own cultural background. The Africans could not identify with such a message. Africans responded to Christianity in several ways:

1. Some communities became very hostile to the missionaries and their converts. In certain instances African converts to Christianity were ostracized from their homes.

2. For those who converted to Christianity and became members of the missionary churches, most of them still resorted to traditional means to sort out their problems. This happened in situations where the church failed to address such needs. Religion to Africans must be practical especially in addressing felt needs (Barrett, 1968).

3. Some retained their membership in the missionary churches while attending African Instituted Churches (AICs). These were churches established by Africans most of which focused on the supernatural dimension of Christian ministry (Barrett, 1968).

4. Majority broke away to start their own churches as a result of their needs and which were based on African reading of the Bible (Koech, 2008, p. 63). The work of Christ in the New Testament (NT) of exorcism, healing and addressing social needs of the people became attractive to the Africans.

Three categories of Christian readers of the Bible can be noted in the African context. The first comprise the ordinary Christian who takes the scripture literally. These ordinary Africans readers of the Bible are generally influenced by their worldview and life experiences which then color the way they understand the biblical message. The second category are the preachers who have no theological training and thus unfamiliar with interpretive methods. Such preachers are guided, as Magesa notes, by pastoral rather than by academic concerns in interpretation (1997, p. 25).

Tite Tienou (1998) notes that one of the major problems facing the church in Africa is the proclamation of the message without serious reflection of both the scripture and

the context of the audience (p.4). Many of the African preachers who enter into the church to minister do not necessarily go through training first. Training is not even a priority. The third group comprises the minority ministers who received training in seminaries which have theological curriculum developed in the West. Some of the seminaries in Africa are beginning to make attempts to incorporate African culture and worldview in the curriculum. In some situations theological training may even be seen as an impediment to ministry basically due to the irrelevance of the curriculum.

Due to the frustration in attempting to domesticate the biblical message in the African situation African scholars have proposed diverse interpretive ways to the biblical text. These are explored below. There has not been any agreement on the exact method of interpreting the biblical text in the African context. Several questions which touch on interpretation in relation to the African context include:

1. What is the meaning and significance of Jesus for the African situation?
2. How can the gospel message become alive not only in the individual lives but also in their communities at large?
3. What is the relevance and application of the good news in their life situations?
4. How can they experience the gospel message today?
5. How can the message be truly African and yet remain Christian?

The mainline churches seem to have fallen short in providing adequate and relevant answers to the above questions. To most of these mainline

churches, the Jesus of the gospels is no longer active today in the same way he was in the gospels. He belongs to history. When Africans read the gospels they are attracted by the activities of Jesus such as healings, exorcisms, and other supernatural acts. They see in Him and His work solutions to their predicaments including freedom from oppression. E. Obeng (1997, p. 17) notes that "...many in Africa are searching for a spiritual haven for physical problems like economic hardships, political turmoil, social unrest and supernatural problems."

Biblical scholars state that the interpretation of the biblical text is important for several reasons. First, the Bible is an ancient text using first century Palestinian expressions for the case of the NT. Differences between the biblical world and our contemporary world as a whole and East Africa in particular is in culture, history, language, literary styles, and worldview among others. A correct interpretation would most likely lead to Africans acceptance the message (Sam Oleka, 1998, p. 104). Many within the African context read the Bible not only as though it was written within their present context but are also influenced by their traditional worldview. In some cases there seem to be parallels or similarities between the Jewish and African perceptions. The present reader is separated by several gaps which must be bridged in order to understand the biblical message. Second, proper application of the text requires proper interpretation. The NT for instance was produced within the first century Palestinian context with many factors influencing its production. The three main cultures which predominated the situation were Greek, Roman and Jewish. Third, the reader is always an interpreter who has pre-understanding informing, mostly

unconsciously, the interpretation. Subjectivity is difficult to surmount unless proper interpretive approach is adhered to.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper first attempts to show both the importance as well as the challenges of determining the author's intention and doing biblical interpretation for African contexts. Second, the current situation of biblical interpretation in Africa is examined the focus being on the diversity of approaches and thus the need for a unified and relevant approach. The assumption here is that the African context has its peculiarities such as culture, worldview, political, social and economic concerns among others. These have an impact on the approach to the interpretation of the scripture that should ensure relevance to the particular context and remain faithful to the authority of the biblical text. Currently, biblical interpreters state that the African context provides critical resources for biblical interpretation. The concern of this paper is not just to show the existing challenges of biblical interpretation in Africa but also makes a proposal for the components of the relevant approach.

## BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Despite the challenges resulting from western approaches to interpretation, Western scholars have made immense contributions to biblical scholarship particularly the interpretation of the Gospels using myriads of approaches (Kinoti & Waliggo, 1997, pp. 8-24). Generally these approaches have their merits and demerits particularly for non-western contexts and especially for the African contexts. Historical-

critical method was popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tate, 2000). Merits and demerits of this methodology have received scholarly scrutiny (Stock, 1983; Lategan, 1984). It focused on the world behind the text but was rejected by evangelicals because of among other things its liberal tendencies as well as scientific and rationalistic perceptions. They instead preferred grammatico-historical approach (Carson, 1980). The significance of this method rests in the usefulness in the understanding of the text in its original context. The intentionality of the original author is crucial in the unearthing of the original meaning of a text.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD

A significant starting point of grammatico-historical method is first determining the original rendering of a text by use of textual criticism. Scholars of this school of thought assert that God used the original author's words to give His message. However, due to the process of transmission of the text, changes occurred resulting in variant copies of manuscripts of the same document. The linguistic analysis of the text in question is done in order to determine the accurate meanings of words and idioms used. The awareness of language, style of writing and types of literature is done in order to get as accurate as possible what the author said. To Kaiser getting author's intention requires a study of verbal meanings of the texts because God inspired the authors (Kaiser, 1978, p 138).

In the second place it also seeks to answer questions of circumstances that prompted the author to write, identity of recipients, date of

writing, occasion and sources. Another focus is to understand the world behind the text, the intention of the author and what the original readers understood. Before one can discover what the text means for today, it is important to establish what it meant then at the time of writing (Gordon Fee, 1993, p. 19). True meaning can only be attained in the writer's intention in his context (Yilpet, Yoilah K., 2000). Before bringing the message home in the African context it is important to understand it in its original context. Grammatico-historical method is therefore significant for interpreting the Bible in the African context because this approach forms the foundation stage in the interpretive process.

Explaining the author-centered approaches W. Randolph Tate (2000, p. xvi) notes that meaning lies in the author's intention formulated within its social, political, cultural, and ideological matrix. Gordon Fee (1983, p. 28) clarifies that in interpreting NT documents examining the historical context in general is the starting point. The exegete must address several questions touching the identities of the authors, the recipients, their relationships, present circumstances, the historical situation which occasioned the writing, the author's purpose, the overall theme or concern of the document, and also if there exists a recognizable outline in the argument or narrative. This forms the first point of departure in interpretation in the African context. The starting point of the interpretation of the NT and other biblical texts within the Africa context is the paying of attention to both the historical context of the document as well as the present context of the reader.

Single-meaning authorial intent is based on the work of E. D. Hirsch (1967). Unless a biblical author indicates otherwise, it must

always be assumed that there is a single meaning in a text (Kaiser, 1984). This approach seeks to avoid four errors (Millard J. Erickson, 1993, p. 12). First is the guarding against subjectivism in interpreting scripture. It seeks to distance the interpreter's influence on the meaning of a text. Second is the refuting of the idea of *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning of Scripture) advanced by some Christian scholars. Third is the rejection of allegorical method of interpreting scripture. The fourth error to be avoided is given in Erickson's words, "... [a] form of eschatological hermeneutic that finds dual or multiple meanings within prophetic passages. According to this view, the "real" meaning of the passage may be something quite different from the apparent or surface meaning" (Erickson, 1993, p. 12).

### CHALLENGES OF THE GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD

Apart from the challenges posed by historical distance between the 21<sup>st</sup> readers from the biblical writers as well as those brought about by textual variants, the knowledge that the Bible has dual authorships escalates the challenge. Several other challenges can be noted from the view touching on the author's intention and the idea of a single meaning of a text.

In the first place, it has been argued that a single-meaning in authorial intent contradicts the practice in the NT of imputing different meanings to OT quotations (Payne, 1977). Such interpretations would not have existed if the NT was missing. For instance situations where OT prophecies find fulfilment in the NT. Such texts have their own historical contexts but now are reinterpreted in the NT without necessarily

paying attention to those contexts. It appears then that their reinterpretation in the NT gives them fuller meaning especially in the life, work and crucifixion of Jesus. The implication is that the OT writers of those passages were not conscious of meanings beyond their intention. For instance Donald Hagner (1976, p.92) cites the case of Matthew's use of OT that seem to give the relevant texts fuller sense than intended by their original OT authors.

Another challenge to single-meaning approach is existence of texts in the Bible where the authors seem to suggest that they did not fully understand what they were saying or writing about. In 1 Peter 1:10—12, Peter speaks of how the prophets tried to determine in vain what the Spirit was speaking concerning issues related to the incarnation and suffering of Christ. A similar case is that found in John 11:49—52, where Caiaphas, the high priest, gave prophesy about Jesus unknowingly (Erickson, 1993, p. 15).

Some scholars state that due to the dual authorship of the Bible it is difficult to maintain the single authorial intent. The human author may have had a single intention but the divine author may have had a different intention. *Sensus Plenior* is one such proposal which is rejected by some evangelical theologians (Erickson, 1993). However, others like G.K. Beale support the possibility of fuller meaning of scripture (Beale, 1989, p. 92; Phillips et al, 2012, p.7).

The definition of the term "intention" is noted by Philip B. Payne (1977) to be problematic. Several reasons have been identified for this. Payne (pp. 244-5) notes:

The Bible authors' intentions are an elusive matter for many reasons. We will consider only four reasons here: (1) "Intention" can be understood at many levels; (2) an author may have more than one reason for making a statement—his intention, in other words,

may be complex; (3) intention is a complex category involving mental states that are in a constant flux; intention may suggest subconscious as well as conscious factors; and (4) it is difficult to demonstrate what the intentions of the Biblical authors were, since we are separated from them by many centuries and their thoughts are known to us only through their writings.

“Intention” may have several layers touching intention in writing a book, a chapter, a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or even a particular word. Another challenge is going beyond the meaning to arrive at the significance of the text in today’s contexts. Significance of the text relates to applying the meaning to different situations today resulting from diverse cultural contexts. Normativeness of scripture in relation to cultural context is debated by scholars (McQuilkin, 1984).

Another problem is the dilemma faced by those who (especially pastor) want to apply the method in practical ministry. This is coupled with the fact that in the African context the field of hermeneutics is still in its early stages of development (Justin Upkong, 1999).

The trained African minister may have knowledge of exegetical process, but how to apply it to the African context is a problem. The message of the Bible can easily remain locked up in the original first century times. The Student of the NT instead of bringing the message to the present gets lost in the NT (B. C. Lategan, 1984, pp. 14-15).

The foregone discussion has highlighted the challenges at the initial stage of doing exegesis even before moving to applying it to the African context. Kaiser has attempted to respond to each of the issues raised (Kaiser, 1984).

The task of the interpreter is to bridge the existing gap between the Jewish world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (in case of NT texts) and the present

African contexts. It has been acknowledged that the world of the Bible is closer to that of Africans than to that of the Westerners. The search for a contemporary African meaning of the text should be the concern of hermeneutics. Scholars are not to be satisfied with a mere unearthing of the past nor an overemphasis on the original historical context (Michael Prior, 1995, p. 182) at the expense of the present relevance particularly the African context.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Another challenge of biblical interpretation in the African context is seen in stages of its development. At each stage new methods are proposed which have little or no connection with the previous one(s). Not only is multiplicity of approaches noted in the African context but also the shifting of approaches over time. The developmental stages can be seen below.

The first is the Comparative method (1930s-1970s). This period is also called reactive and apologetic era. The main focus of the methods of this time was to show that African Traditional Religion and Culture is acceptable if not equivalent with that of the Jews as depicted in the scripture. The leading scholars include Kwesi Dickson (1984, pp. 141-184), Daniel Wambutda (1981, pp. 137-153), Joseph John Williams (1930), Justin Upkong (1987), S. Kibicho (1968), John Mbiti (1971), Theodor H, Gaster (1969), just to name a few. Objections have been raised against this method (Erick Isaac, 1964). These approaches mostly served apologetic and polemic purposes. However, though inadequate they are foundational to biblical studies that connect the biblical text to

the African context.

The second stage is the Africa in the Bible inculturation-evaluative and liberation hermeneutics of 1970s-1990s, also known as the reactive-proactive approach. These methodologies make use of the African context as a resource for biblical interpretation. Some leading scholars in these approaches are Cheikh A. Diop (1974), Michael Prior (1997), Cain Hope Felder (1991, p. 130), West Claus Westerman (1984, pp. 459ff), and David T. Adamo (1993, pp. 138-143). Other studies focused on identifying the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible, such as those by Engelbert Mveng (1972, pp. 23-39), Temba Mafico (1989), and Adamo (1987, pp. 1-8; 1992, pp. 51-64).

The inculturation-evaluative method examine also concerned itself with what the Biblical text or theme has to say in critique of a particular issue in society or in Church's life. It draws out lessons from a biblical text or theme to add to a particular African context. It searches for implications of the text to the specific context. Examples include the works of Chris Manus (1982, pp.18-26) and Nlenanya Onwu's (1998, pp. 43-51). The biblical theme or text is also interpreted against the background of African culture, religion, and life experience as exemplified by Daniel Wambutda (1981, pp. 23-41), and Bayo Abijole (1988, pp. 118-129). It seeks also to establish continuity between the African culture and Christianity like in the works of John Mbiti (1972) and John Pobee (1979). Contextualization is sometimes used to describe this approach (Gehman, 1987; Pobee & Hallencreutzeds, 1986).

1990s up to the present is seen to be the most productive phase in hermeneutical approaches in Africa which is duped the proactive time. The leading interpretive approaches are Liberation

and Inculturation. Contextual theology and inculturation hermeneutics are the two main approaches with the aim of producing original contribution to biblical interpretation in Africa. Gerald West and Justin Upkong (1993) are among the leading scholars, previous approaches either sought to defend African religion or justify African culture.

The challenge of finding an interpretive approach that pays attention to traditional African worldview, culture plus the economic, social and political realities faced by Africans is still ongoing. African scholars are not yet in agreement as to the best approach.

#### THE CONCERN OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN AFRICA

Another persistent problem in the African situation is the existence of a gap between the academic approach to the scriptures and the understanding of the ordinary reader who is supposed to benefit from the message. The purpose of hermeneutics especially in Africa is to empower the African readers and hearers for a critical study of the Bible in relation to their life-situations, and for individual and societal change (Koech, 2008, p. 35). The concern of hermeneutics should be the making of Jesus real and his message relevant in the present African context. The meaning of Christianity must become clear in the African context paying attention to culture, worldview, social and other concerns. Also the gospel message comes alive in African societies. Pobee (1986) makes important comments, "... if there is to be an effective and meaningful communication of the Gospel, there is need for a careful engagement between the eternal, non-negotiable Word of God, divested of cultural trappings of one area,

with the new society in heart, soul and body (p. 1). Whatever the method proposed it should involve the following processes:

1. Understanding the text in its original context. The intention of the author must be sought because missing the author's original intention means missing out on the message. We must know the sense of the text then before it can be applied to any present context, in this case, the African context.
2. The reader or hearer must see the text as relevant and functional for his/her particular situation. The needs of the hearer should be addressed by the particular interpretation.
3. The context of the receptor clearly plays an important role in the communication and understanding of the biblical message. In the case of Africa, an approach informed by the western grid will not make sense.
4. The message should be intelligible to the hearers. The worldview issue is significant in any communication process. One may hear the words but may not get the message. The traditional African sees reality from a supernatural perspective. However, there are certain aspects in the African worldview that differ from that of the Bible. These are areas of discontinuity discussed below.

In order to make the biblical message relevant for the African context today, it is essential to get the original author's intention. Out of this the relevance for African contexts can be sought, in other words the significance of the

text is sought. Inculturation hermeneutics seems flexible enough to incorporate the above processes.

### INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS AS A VIABLE OPTION

The proposal made here is that of inculturation hermeneutics which takes into consideration the biblical text in its context and reader in his/her context.

The basic framework of inculturation hermeneutics first finds its basis on the African worldview. This worldview sees reality as unified (Justin Upkong, 1999, pp. 313-339; 1995, pp. 3-14; 1996, pp. 189-210,). There is no separation between matter and spirit, sacred and ordinary, religious and secular. Both the visible and invisible realities are unified. The constitution of the human being has no divisions. Humans are persons with visible and invisible dimensions. Even the dead are considered part of the visible reality since they still influence and participate in what goes on the physical world.

In Traditional African worldview everything in the universe had a divine origin. There exist an ontological connection between God, humans and the created world. The sense of community is an important component in the African worldview. This sense of community is what connects humans with other aspects of creation. Individuals only exist as part of the human community and nature. Humans are also custodians of the earth. This sense of community includes the ancestors, the living and the future generations.

Another dimension of the traditional African worldview is the belief in the supernatural. The entire universe is seen as a plane of interaction

between human beings and spiritual beings. The spirit forces are either good or evil and can influence human life (Koech, 2008, p. 50). Spirit beings also participate in every activity of human life, work, worship, weddings, meal times, harvest, and preparation of food and not just during a religious function. All these must be taken into account in the interpretation process. One such approach which pays attention to these aspects is inculturation hermeneutics but in a modified form especially to exclude the subjective elements.

Inculturation hermeneutics seeks to redress the African situation by first adopting a holistic approach to culture whereby both the secular and the religious aspects of culture are treated as interconnected. It finds its basis from the African worldview where reality is unified. There is no dichotomy between secular and the religious aspects of society. The Bible is also read within the religious as well as economic, social, and political contexts of Africa (Upkong, 1994, pp. 3-15). The proposal here is that interpretation is not to be influenced by contextual concerns but should address those concerns.

Inculturation hermeneutics attempts to establish a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. The meaning of the text is a function of the interaction between the text in its context and the reader in his or her context. The starting point of interpretation begins with establishing the meaning of the text in its context. At this level the grammatico-historical method is utilized. The exegete seeks not to inform the text, but to be informed by the text. The questions addressed are: What did the text mean when it was written? Also what did the original respondents understand the text to have meant? Michael Kyomya (2010, pp. 13-14) argues against pursuing meaning in the understanding of original audience because

in some instances they misunderstood the message.

Second, the approach is concerned with the context of the reader. It pays attention to African religious and cultural issues, such as belief in ancestors, the spirits, spirit possession, and witchcraft to name a few. Here the question addressed is: What is the significance of the text to the African situations? The reader's context is important, as it can influence the understanding of the text and seeks to be addressed by the interpretation. The subjective element here needs to be avoided so that the reader's context should not inform the text (Erickson, 1993).

Third, the method is holistic in its presentation as it concerns itself with all the aspects of life of the respondent, the worldview being at the core. The Spiritual world impinges on the natural at every point. B.J. Van der Walt's (1991) comment gives further explanation, "The African concept of the world, society and the human being is defined, molded, and conditioned by his faith- the reality of the spirit world and the application of the law of the spirit as a means of explaining social phenomena and all kinds of mysteries." At the core of culture is a worldview which does not change even in the face of the forces of secularization such as education, the church, and media just to name a few. The worldview colors the reading of the Bible and influence the perception of reality. This points to the need for the use of inculturation hermeneutics in interpreting the Bible within the African context.

In spite of the challenges the African context has resources which can enrich the understanding of the biblical text. This point is made clear by Erickson when he states that contact with other cultures such as the African culture:

...enlarges our understanding of the text. It enables us to see facets of the truth to which we are blind because of our cultural limitations. It does not give a different meaning to the text, but a fuller meaning. And it does not say that the text has different meanings for different persons—a sort of epistemological subjectivism. But it reminds us that there are meanings in the text that are meanings for everyone, but that some persons may be more likely to observe certain of these meanings than are others, simply because of their perspective on things (1993, p.96).

The example given by Erickson is that of the experiences of Joseph in the Old Testament (OT). For the North American Christians they see in the story evidence of the providence of God as well as Joseph's faithfulness, but to the African Christians the leading thought in the passage is family ties.

#### AREAS OF DISCONTINUITY

Whereas it is important to pay attention to African worldview and culture in biblical interpretation, it is however necessary to be aware of existing discontinuity between the Bible and African culture. In the first place "the perception of the spirit world is different in detail in the African understanding from that of the biblical view" (Koech, 2008, p.192). The spirit world in African understanding is populated by ancestors, spirits (divinities), and the Supreme Being. These beings influence the physical world. The biblical worldview shows that the spirit world is occupied by angels, the devil, and God (or the Godhead).

Another area of divergence is that the African world is anthropocentric while the biblical worldview is theocentric. The African perspective is that humans must perform prescribed rituals to maintain relationship with

the spirit world especially the ancestors and the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 1969, p. 16). The thoughts, speech, actions, and relationships influence how the spirit beings will respond to humans. The biblical perspective especially the NT is that God has taken the initiative to restore relationship with humans who respond to Him by faith.

Whereas there is no superior culture the scripture is to provide a corrective to the African understanding of reality where the African understanding differs from that of the Bible.

#### CONCLUSION

The foregone discussion has highlighted the challenge of interpretation of the biblical text in the African context. The missionaries brought the message to Africa but influenced by their own cultural perspectives. It made it unintelligible and irrelevant to the Africans due to their worldview including economic, social, and political contexts. Various methods have been developed in Africa over time leading to diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches. The starting point of biblical interpretation the text in the original context. The aim of Grammatico-historical approach is to unearth the original intent of the text which is the first stage in the process before making use of contextual methods for the target audience. An interpretive approach that pays attention to the text in its context as well as the context of the reader needs to be developed. The scripture, being eternally contemporary, must have meaning in the present contexts, in this case the East African context. Scholars are unanimous that the NT was produced within the 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian context. The setting is important for the understanding of the intended meaning of a text, and thus making it possible to apply the

same to the present context. One ought to come to the scripture with an openness of mind and heart. It means becoming critically involved with the text within one's present context. The African respects the scripture and treats it as the word of God, which is meaningful to him or her now. The African freely interacts with the biblical text, and especially those parts that speak to his or her need. African biblical scholars are however not agreed on the best approach of interpreting the Bible in the African context. Each of the proposed approaches have their own merits but also demerits. There is a continuous evolution of new methods of biblical study as noted above. The present paper proposes inculturation hermeneutics in a modified form as a viable contextual method for the contemporary East African context. It pays attention to the text in its context, the relevance of the African social, political, economic and cultural context, and its holistic approach to reality in the East African situation.

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