

Interpreting Scripture with the Church Fathers: A Case for Effective Hermeneutics

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Introduction

The interpretation of scripture by the Church Fathers was motivated by their understanding of scripture and the place of scripture in the life of the Church. The proximity of the Church Fathers to the New Testament writers gave an added vigour and purpose to their exegesis of the Bible. Their overarching position in the appreciation of the Bible gave them a place of honour and respect in the history of exegesis. As ancestors (in the African understanding) of the Christian faith and with the advantage of being close to the very formation of the canon of scripture, they are not only beacons on the field of exegesis but also pivotal points in sketching a holistic understanding of the Bible. The Church Father lived, ate, preached and taught scripture with the passion of fathers who were ready to break down any barrier in the understanding of scripture. No doubt, their excessive zeal sometimes veered off the tangent and gave us not only ridiculous interpretations of some sections of the Bible but further made them suspects in the interpretation of Scripture.

Indeed, in the modern time, Textual, Historical, Grammatical, literary, Form, Tradition, Redaction and Structuralist criticisms have advanced the interpretation of Scriptures but they have also left a yawning gap in the overall understanding of scripture as a book in the Church. Apart from the Canonical Criticism that has insisted that the Bible is “the sacred scripture of the Church and synagogue.”¹ there has been almost the neglect of this point by other criticisms; such that the Bible has been put on the same level of interpretation with other ancient texts like Iliad and Homer.

While the Historico-grammatical interpretation of the Bible implies three elements: knowledge of the different meanings of the expression, the precise meaning of the expression in the text, and the historical description of the idea this determined, there is the need to re-read the Bible with the Church Fathers; in order to advance our knowledge of the text; rather than keep the text in the past.² The Church Fathers interpreted that spirit and message of the gospel within the tradition of their time in its social context.³ They struggled to explain the scripture to the Hellenized world in which they lived even as they read the Scriptures in some instances as apology to combat the Jews.

The challenge before this paper is to discover how relevant is the insight and interpretative methodology of the Church Fathers today. How can we form a synergy between the hermeneutics of the Church Fathers and the modern day hermeneutics? These will form the gadfly for the contextual study of the fathers. Because of space, we shall study the two schools of interpretations at the time of the Church Fathers and highlight their import in the corpus of patristic exegesis.

At this juncture, we wish to state that we have had Church Mothers in the Church also. Their dedication to the life of the Church cannot go unnoticed. Paula, AD 404, Olympia AD 404. Indeed, The Apostolic Constitution, late fourth-century document on church order, allows women to function officially as deaconesses.⁴

State of the Question

¹John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis* (London: SCM , 1983) 7.

² Hayes and Holladay, 123.

³ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (New York: Orbis, 1994) 4.

⁴ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1998) 9.

What has the “self-imposed amnesia” of Church Fathers on interpretation of scripture done to the modern day hermeneutics of scripture? Has the novel interpretative methodology in the modern time advanced exegesis or retarded it? What can we proffer as the reason for the constant dissatisfaction about modern day exegesis?

The need to go back to our roots has become imperative today in the appreciation of a contextual theology. This is in line with Thomas Oden’s view that the time has come “to hear voices from the past with different assumptions entirely about the world and time and human culture.”⁵ This is very important today because many modern day theologians find themselves rootless and are constantly drifting in “a barren secular scientific or ecclesiastical landscape, largely because they have forgotten their Christian past.”⁶

This divorce of modern day interpretation from the heroes of the past has led to a grand disconnection from the source of our Christian history. This has also led to modern day distrust of exegesis. This therefore calls for an interrogation of the tools of our exegesis and how we can eke out a much more satisfying mode of doing exegesis with the Church Fathers. As Catholic Biblical scholars, are we drifting in a circle and have lost our identity and the methods of interpreting scripture in the Church?⁷ Or have we been affected by the bug of the enlightenment⁸ that was suspicious of tradition? This rudderless way of doing exegesis according to Robert Wilken has made us unable “to accept with gratitude what has come to us and what has been done on our behalf.”⁹ Or has the post modern hermeneutics infection that elevates gender, culture, language, social change and social problems as seed bed for interpretation caught up with us? We agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that this has led us to “subjective perspectivism” that glorifies our own myopic views as the therapeutic answer to the plaguing problems of life.¹⁰ Or as William Meyer says concerning students that were trained with different set of tools of work have we “... become painfully aware of the fact that they have been given a “metric” set of tools to work with “nonmetric” context?”¹¹

The drive to go back to interpret scripture with Church Fathers is to underscore the fact that as catholic exegetes we need to make use of the tools that will foster a profound appreciation for understanding the text and guide us from losing the aim of every exegesis.

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical “Providentissimus Deus” repeats that authority of the Fathers of the Church laid down by the Vatican and Tridentine councils¹² in which he argues that the Fathers are our guide in interpreting the scripture in its true sense. How can catholic exegete in Nigeria therefore interpret scripture to meet the needs of Contextual Theology or African Theology? The Fathers will offer us their help.

Church Fathers

The title of Church Fathers has a more comprehensive meaning. According to J. Quasten, it extends to “Ecclesiastical writers in so far as they were accepted as representatives of the traditions of the church.”¹³

⁵ Thomas Oden, *Word of life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 219.

⁶ Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) 18.

⁷ The document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the church is a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. It was produced on Sept. 21, 1993. The document contains a well-grounded overview of the panorama of present day methods of doing exegesis. In this way, the document provides for exegetes an orientation to the possibilities and limits of these methods or approaches. This document provides us with a synthesis of the official Church document of 1943 and advances them in a fruitful way.

⁸ This was the period in history that glorified reason and science. It left its mark on the bible as a science text to be inductively studies through renews reason alone.

⁹ Wilken 171.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1989) 353.

¹¹ William H. Meyer, “The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student”, in Cain Hope.

¹² Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* 1983, 27.

¹³ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4vols (Westminster, Christian Classics, 1986) 1:9.

The term took a more technical meaning from the fourth century on especially in the context of the theology controversies that filled the fourth and fifth centuries, “while bishops – the teachers of the church – had been called fathers from the second century forward, bishops who faithfully preserved and protected the decisions of the council of Nicaea (AD 325) Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) received the designation as persons worthy of special regard for having preserved the orthodox teachings”.¹⁴

The Church Fathers demonstrate deep commitment to one of their crafts; which was interpretation of biblical text. This is the same with some of the doctors of the Church. We shall treat some of the Doctors of the Church in an extended sense to fall within the context of our study. This is because they all exemplified love for the four central degrees.

Boniface Ramsey identifies the four central criteria used for determining a given Church figure as a “father” as: Antiquity, holiness of life, orthodox doctrine and Ecclesiastical approval.”¹⁵ These classifications also include according to Quasten, “eminent erudition” and express “ecclesiastical declaration”.¹⁶ All these combine to elevate the pedigree of the Church Fathers. As a matter of fact, they do not always embody all the characteristics but have more or less all the characteristics

For example, Origen has not received Ecclesiastical approval because the consensus of the Church judged his ideas to be outside the boundaries of orthodoxy.¹⁷ Neither can we admit that they were all holy because, Tertullian displays a very cruel streak, Jerome has an unforgiving temperament, Theophilus of Alexandria was an opportunist of the worst sort, Cyril of Alexandria persecuted his enemies relentlessly and some misdirected their zeal for God.¹⁸

These fathers of the Church are also persons with their weaknesses but with their strength in the way they teach and preach the word of God. Their exegesis was not exegesis for its sake or for the academia; but one that was pastorally motivated. It is for this reason that numerous exegeses of the Church Fathers are found in their sermon, catechesis or commentaries. They interpreted scripture for the sake of knowing the truth about Jesus.

To show how important the Church Fathers are to us today, Benedict XVI during his weekly general audiences from March 7, 2007, to February 27, 2008 devoted it exclusively on the father.¹⁹ He says “let us now devote our attention to the Apostolic Fathers; that is to the first and second generations in the Church subsequent to the Apostles. And thus, we can see where the Church’s journey begins in history”.²⁰ Let us now briefly turn to the Patristic Exegesis.

Patristic Exegesis

We shall treat patristic exegesis from the point of the two major schools of exegesis that the Fathers fall into; that is the Alexandrian (allegorical) and the Antiochian (literal). This is done with the purpose of stating that the Fathers used predominantly these methods in their exegesis. These methods were the ones that the patristic times required for the purpose of making lucid the word of God. Their exegesis “consists in drawing from the totality of scripture the basic orientation that shaped the doctrinal tradition of the Church, and to provide a rich theological teaching for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful”.²¹

¹⁴ Hall, 50.

¹⁵ Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist, 198) 4. He captures in this seminal work, a detailed list of the factors at the head of this designation. Quasten also agrees with him on the point of holiness of life. These criteria further reveal the fact that the designation is not arbitrary one.

¹⁶ Quasten, 1:9-10.

¹⁷ Hall, 55.

¹⁸ Ramsey, 4.

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *the Fathers* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008) 7

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, 7.

²¹ The , *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

Indeed, for the Fathers of the Church, “the chief occasion for reading the Bible is in Church in the course of the liturgy. This made the Church Fathers to make their hermeneutics God centered. This therefore made their exegesis theologically and pastorally oriented. In all these, the Fathers had some peculiar methods they used in interpreting scripture. Though their exegesis was not exegesis in the strict sense; “they used the biblical text either to support their exhortations to lead a fruitful Christian life or to form a spiritual mosaic of spiritual texts”.²²

But why were the Church Fathers of Alexandria interested in the allegorical method? How were they to present the gospel message effectively in a deeply Hellenized world? They used the allegorical method to reach the Hellenized Jews and convince them of the relevance of the Old Testament. There was also the need to combat Gnosticism. Allegorical interpretation according to James Kugel and Rowan Greer “is an interpretative approach in which biblical persons and incidents become representative of abstract virtues or doctrines”.²³ This does not exhaust the fact that the allegorical approach was for some time confused with the Typological Method²⁴. These methods were used by some early biblical writers who read or interpreted the Old Testament in a “spiritual” sense. Paul labels his spiritual reading of Old Testament texts as a “typos” (Rom 5:14; 1Cor10:6). On one occasion Paul refers to the Hagar and Sarah narrative in the book of Genesis as “allegoroumena (Gal 4:24)”.²⁵ Paul further refers to Hagar as a slave woman and Sarah as a free woman. Each of their sons according to Paul was born according to a different principle: Ishmael according to “the flesh” and Isaac is according to “the promise”. Paul clearly allegorizes each woman: Hagar represents Mount Sinai bearing children forth for slavery while Sarah corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem bearing forth children that are free (Gal 4:24-26). These add up to show that in allegory there are two main points to look out for: the immediate meaning and the ulterior meaning.

On the opposite side of the hermeneutic field, why was the literal response of the Antiochian School different from the Alexandrian school? Was allegory too subjective a methodology to aid in proper interpretation of the text? How can we arrive at a literal interpretation of a text and apply it to the life of the people? Was the Antiochian School out to destroy the over spiritualization of a text by the Alexandrian school? Or was the Antiochian School that was versed in textual criticism, philological and historical studies out to test the veracity of the biblical text? Is the literal method contrary to the allegorical method or complementary to it? These are some of the questions that we shall attempt to answer in our bid to express the divergence of both methods of hermeneutics.

In this school we have Lucian of Antioch and Diodore of Tarsus who is seen as the fountainhead of the literal method. Theodore of Mopsustia and John Chrysostom are also illustrious members of this school. They were suspicious of the allegorical method and formulated rules of interpretation in the literal sense. In doing this, they wanted to insist on the validity of biblical history and the need to stay in the text and eke out the truth in it. Their hermeneutical principles helped to reveal the plain truth in the text without any form of romanticizing on the text.

The combination of both schools of interpretation has brought forth the fact of understanding the text in context and bringing out the truth in the text. This is why the study of the Fathers will remain a watershed for future exegesis.

Effective Hermeneutics

²² L.F. Hartman “Biblical Exegesis” in Catholic Encyclopaedia 5 (Washington: Thomson Gale, 2003) 509-30.

²³ James and Kugel Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 80.

²⁴ This is a method whereby parts of the Old Testament are read as foreshadowing and prediction of the events of the gospel. It is this method that was used mainly in Christological interpretation.

²⁵ For details on the use of Allegory by Paul confer Manlino Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 12-20.

In this brief paper, we shall not go into the hair spitting difference between exegesis and hermeneutics.²⁶ We shall focus on hermeneutics “as the natural process by which a human being interprets, understands and relates meaningfully to self and the world outside self on a daily basis”.²⁷

The case for an effective hermeneutics is borne out of the urgent need to interpret scripture to meet the need of every age. Any hermeneutics that does not speak with every age and culture is irrelevant nay ineffective.²⁸ This is truly the case because “any theology that is not up-to-date (actuelle) is a false theology; because it is not reflective of the times, culture and current concerns”.²⁹

Unfortunately, we are at a time when the hang over of Western Enlightenment has stayed with us for too long and its method has made modern day hermeneutics of the bible lifeless. Okure captures the present situation thus: “As a result biblical criticism has been largely like the barren fig tree full of leaves season after season, but with little or no fruit to nourish God’s people hungry for the word of life”³⁰. The result of some of these lifeless works is what we have on our library shelves gathering dust from year to year with no one interested in opening its dead letters. This explains in part why many exegetes today wing out in search of better exegetical tools to enable them explain difficult texts. This will not help the exegete much because the social context is an index in the interpretation of a text. We agree with Bernard Ukwuegbu that hermeneutics should no longer see a social context as a mere marginal factor in the corpus of interpretation but one that is the index that guides the flow of textual interpretation.³¹ This is what patristic hermeneutics does. It takes the text in its context and exposes the germ of the text. It is polemical some of the time also. The interpretation of the text of Is 7:14 will clarify the issue further.

This text falls within the corpus of the sign of Immanuel (Is 7:10-17). Ahaz is put to the test by the prophet. The prophet invites Ahaz to test God by asking for a sign. But why should Ahaz abandon himself to his worst enemy Assyria? Faced with the threat of Syria and Northern Israel? This verse therefore deals with the sign that the sovereign will give; “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (7:14a).

This text would not have raised any dust if not the translation of *‘almah* (young woman) by the Septuagint (LXX) with *parthenos* (virgin). In this verse the LXX translated the word *‘almah* with virgin as quoted also in Matt 1:23. The Jews objected to this Christological interpretation (translation) of the term. As an issue at the time, the Jews were against any Christological interpretation of the text; this resulted in an endless debate among the Jews and the Fathers of the Church. Indeed Origen’s enterprise of seeking to stabilize the fluidity between the Masoretic Text and the LXX stemmed ultimately from this concern that Christian exegetical debates with Jews needed to rest on a careful critical assessment of the textual relationship.³²

When dealing with the virgin birth in Isa 7:14 Irenaeus pursues not only the miraculous elements but also the theological implications of Christ being truly God and truly man. In his argument against Theodotion, Aquila and the Ebionites, Irenaeus argued that it was a virgin who conceived and not a young woman. Justin the Martyr also follows the same argument against the Jews. It was Jerome who gave the over-drawn argument a conclusive approach. He began by reviewing the parallel occurrences of the word *‘almah* in the Old Testament. He notes that the Jewish commentators and the Greek versions – the Septuagint is an exception – all translate the term as “young woman.” The Jews argue that in Hebrew only *betulah* means a virgin and that the term is not used in the passage. Jerome sets out to demonstrate even referring to the Punic cognate that *‘almah* does mean in Hebrew simply young woman or even merely

²⁶ For a detailed study of the distinction between Exegesis and hermeneutics confer T. Okure, “‘I will open my mouth in parables’ (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics” and Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Towards a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*.

²⁷ Okure 447.

²⁸ Bevens 3.

²⁹ Bevens 4.

³⁰ Okure 454.

³¹ Bernard Ukwuegbu, “Towards an Alternative Hermeneutical Impulse for Interpreting Paul and His Galatian Correspondence”, *JIT* 8/1 (2006) 3-20.

³² Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*

virgin, but “hidden – away virgin” (virgin *abscondida*), of marriage age. It is interesting to note that the word has a double sense of concealed and *nubilis*. He opts for the former sense of concealed. In this way he used the text and brought the important issue of virginity at the time to the front burner. This philological treatment and the historical consideration with the context of the time helped in clarifying this thorny issue. The conclusion from this is that while the prophet did not mean to stress the virginity, he did not mean to leave it out either. “In fact he could have used this term because of its richness and diversity.”³³ The translators who used *parthenos* to translate may also have meant a woman who has remained inviolate up to the time of marriage. This important aspect of the text is one that we need to appreciate profoundly. The Fathers of the Church did not underestimate the treasure in the LXX. They employed its use because it is not only a “unique linguistic monument but also constitutes the first complete and pre-Christian commentary to the Old Testament”.³⁴

It is for the above reasons that we hold with Ernest Ezeogu that there is the “crying need to give biblical scholarship a more serious attention in the whole enterprise of African Christianity”.³⁵ This is possible to the extent that we are able to enter into the world of the text and see the richness in the nuances of the lexical forms. The selective choice of instruments for this important project should no longer put the LXX on the margin. The Fathers did not play down on the importance of the LXX. This is the dearth that we suffer today. We need to expand our world view and appreciate the path that the Fathers of the Church took to make their exegesis life-giving.

Conclusion

The Fathers of the Church conducted their work in the Church and for the Church; an idea foreign to many modern scholars who conduct their work in the academy largely for the academy. Therefore Childs says, the “challenge of reclaiming the bible for the Church is awesome, particularly at a time in which the academic guild is moving in the exact opposite direction.”³⁶ This has become necessary because once the interpretation loses its point of departure; it is bound to drift like a ship without a rudder. This is the challenging problem for the modern exegete. To know whose and what purpose the interpretation is serving at every moment of interpretation is very important in the act of interpretation.

The Fathers of the Church interpreted scripture Christologically because the bible has to be read holistically. This is because the bible is characterized by continuity and fulfillment. For the Fathers therefore, if we fail to read the bible in the light of its overarching message we have failed to read the bible correctly.³⁷ The Fathers had some questions that they wanted to answer; are all scriptures pointing to Jesus? If this is so where can we find the fulfillment in scripture? How can they preach Jesus and his work to the Jews and the Hellenists?

What are the questions the African Christians are asking today? What are the answers the exegetes are giving? How are they responding to the questions raised by fundamentalists by their faulty hermeneutics? The Fathers of the Church have addressed most of the defective ways of interpreting scripture. It is therefore left for the African Exegetes to follow the outline: The meaning of the text for its primary audience; the history of the text up till now and the meaning of the text for us Africans in our context; as

³³ John S. Oswalt, The book of Isaiah 1-39.

³⁴ Martin Hengel, The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: The Prehistory and the Problem of its Canon (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002) xi.

³⁵ Ernest Ezeogu, “The Crucial Role of Biblical Scholarship in the Development of African Christian Theology” *JIT* 9/2 (2007) 108-130.

³⁶ Brevard Childs, “On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology”, in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, Carl E. Braaten (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) 16.

³⁷ Hall, 191.

given at the workshop for the Bible in African.³⁸ The inclusion of the methodology of the Fathers of the Church in the above outline will aid the project tremendously.

³⁸ Cited in Ezeogu, 108.