

Old Testament scholarship in Africa

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Abstract

Old Testament can be said to be co-terminous with African life and culture. This means that it is able to serve as a springboard for the internalization of African values and vice versa. In the light of this, Old Testament study in Africa is crucial. Scholarship in this context means serious academic research or study in the area of Old Testament. This vital area of research is being faced by many challenges which hinder its effective growth and development in Africa. This paper therefore examined the necessity and challenges of Old Testament scholarship in Africa. Cooperation among African universities and Old Testament scholars, evolvement of African methodology, planning of curriculum that reflects African perspectives and writing of textbooks that reflect African standpoints are paramount among the solutions suggested.

Introduction

Over the years, studying Old Testament in Africa has been a challenging enterprise and has been in its budding stage. Adamo (2001) notes that discussing Old Testament research in the entire continent of Africa is indeed a phenomenal task, as Africa is such a large continent with so many countries. The development of the study is still unstable in almost all the countries of Africa as no country can be regarded as the center of excellence in Old Testament Scholarship. The need for serious biblical research in Africa has been emphasized and encouraged in many conferences and consultations.

Unfortunately, the books, journals and articles resulting from these conferences and consultations turned out to have few serious Old Testament contributions. There are still some positive exceptions as there are some books, journals and articles related to the Old Testament by African Old Testament scholars. For instance, there is African Journal of Biblical Studies by the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, the Old Testament Essays by the Old Testament Society of South Africa and a host of others. Old Testament scholarship in Africa involves doing serious academic research or study in the area of Old Testament in African soil as well as in African context.

This paper aims at investigating the need for doing Old Testament scholarship in Africa. The work also examined the challenges facing this important academic research in Africa and suggests the way forward in tackling the challenges for the enhancement of African values and concerns.

The Need for Old Testament Research in Africa

The need for Old Testament scholarship in Africa is pressing in various ways. In the first instance, it is not only a vital part of the Christian book called Bible but also the foundational structure of the Bible and its faith or faiths. A coordinated study of such an important material in a time when Christianity has mixed up with everything African in African setting cannot be over emphasized. The type of nexus between African traditional religious culture and Christianity in Africa at present is such that no being or force can separate. For the optimal maximization of the cooperation between the two religious beliefs and cultures for African development, Old Testament study is crucial.

Old Testament Scholarship in Africa is necessary considering the fact that the African and Old Testament worldviews are almost identical. They almost have common views and perceptions about many issues. For instance, their understanding of concepts such as sin, creation, family, marriage, community, names, sacrifice and ancestor veneration are closely similar. In the words of Burden (1983), the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion share a common outlook on life and human existence. As a result of this common stance, African Old Testament academics are in a position to understand, appreciate and communicate these concepts better than their Western Old Testament counterparts.

Old Testament research in Africa is important in that no continent has been misrepresented in biblical scholarship like Africa. Western biblical scholars researching on passages that have bearing on Africa clearly reflect their scholastic biases and prejudices. The Bible has been used not only to justify the enslaving of Africans but also to develop a theory of inferiority of African people. Western biblical scholars making research in Africa are full of prejudice against the African people. Adamo (2004) succinctly posits that the Bible is read and interpreted in universities and seminaries in the tradition of Western scholarship. Only serious African research can attempt a correction of this western influences and biases.

Many African universities as well as seminaries have curricula, just like in many disciplines, that betray Africans as still being slaves to the tradition of Western scholarship. African culture, which is very close to the Old Testament culture, is derogatorily dismissed by majority of Western and African Christians as irrelevant to the understanding of the message of the Bible. Accordingly, some Western scholars have described African Traditional Religion as fetish, magical and idol worship. Many years ago Ludwig in Ezenweke (2008) ignorantly described the Africans in these words: How can these untutored Africans conceive God? This explains the fact that Africans are seen as backward people whose religious and cultural values cannot be substantiated in the Bible. Unless serious Old Testament study in Africa corrects this academic bias and prejudice, Africa will continue to languish in scholastic oppression.

Related to the above but more important is the need to restructure the Old, and in fact the New, Testament curricula and methodologies as bequeathed to us by the missionaries. Only serious Old Testament African study can necessitate this. The

curricula and methodologies for the study of the Old Testament in African Universities and seminary schools do not have African touch. Many years after the missionaries had gone this trend is still in vogue. This is understandable because no one can give what he or she does not have. It was the teacher that taught the student, who later became the teacher and considering what learning is in Africa; change is not easily welcomed, especially in the realm of religion and when it involves replacing things European with African ones.

The importance of Old Testament scholarship in Africa can also be seen in the fact that the future of African Christian theology depends on it. For Christianity to have meaning in Africa, the gospel message which is an off-shoot of the Old Testament should be presented in the light of African culture and experience. In the words of Madu (2004), “In fact the feeling of estrangement on the part of the African Christian viewed against the received Euro-Christianity has become extremely pronounced in the fervent search for African self identity” (p.60). Theologically, the Old Testament provides firm background or foundation for the Christian faith.

It is practically impossible to articulate an adequate Christian faith in Africa and elsewhere without reference to the Old Testament. Just as there are many adherents of traditional Religion in Africa, so also there are many Christians in Africa. African Christians most of the time practise the two religions without much distinction because while Christianity cannot provide the all encompassing African spiritual fulfillment; the traditional religion alone lacks in the provision of the social status and modernity associated with Christianity. According to Abogunrin (1986), “The future of Christian theology in Africa depends on biblical research in Africa today hence, biblical scholars of

today are pioneers in laying the foundation of tomorrow's Christian theology in Africa" (p. 21). This is to say that Christianity in Africa is very dynamic and Western theology and their scholars cannot effectively meet the need and challenges of the African Christian. Parratt (1987) clearly says that African cultural cum religious heritage should therefore be the source for African theology so that the Hebrew scripture can be meaningful for Africans and only African research in Old Testament can achieve this.

African Old Testament scholarship can provide stability and succor to the disoriented African Christian who is not well-grounded in the Euro-Christian culture and practice and who is also high and dry in African way of life and tradition. Such a study is able to make the African Christian not to hide or feel inferior while engaging in genuine African trado-religious practices. For instance, the African who wants to be a Christian, and of course almost everyone is, is taught to believe and regard things such as looking for solutions to problems from traditional medicine men as fetish and satanic. Ironically many consult the medicine men in times of crises, but to play safe they hide while doing this.

Hide and seek behaviors and inferiority complex as exhibited by Christians in Africa in course of traditional practices produce counterfeit, false, fake and ethically low personality in them as witnessed in every segment of our society today. Old Testament research in African context certainly can supply or improve confidence in the African Christians about their own hallowed indigenous religio-cultural practices by drawing similarities from the Old Testament so as to elicit the much needed ethics and moral values in African persons, schools and churches.

Challenges of Old Testament Scholarship in Africa

Old Testament Scholarship in Africa faces serious challenges notwithstanding its necessity or importance as pointed out above. One of the challenges is lack of competent specialists in the area of Old Testament. In many African universities and theological seminaries, there is lack of specialists or experts in the area of Old Testament studies. Most of the graduate students who want to study Old Testament at post graduate level are therefore left without competent supervisors, thereby forcing many of them to take up other areas of studies where there is competent manpower. In addition to this, many who choose to specialize in Old Testament in many African universities are being supervised by scholars and professors with specialization in New Testament, African Traditional Religion, Religion and Society, Church History or Systematic Theology. Even where there are Old Testament specialists, they are very few in number. For instance, Nigeria with its large population has very few scholars in Old Testament studies. It is usual to find only one, or at most two, in a whole university at a time. So many tertiary and seminary schools operate for years before employing one or even overlook the problem entirely. There is no single country in Africa with sufficient number of scholars in Old Testament studies.

The fact of the matter is that even those very few scholars trained in Old Testament Studies are mainly personnel of the Churches. And what happens is that some of the scholars leave the field of teaching and research sometime in the middle of their career for more lucrative Church appointments in their respective Churches. They could of course still continue with their research, while working with the church but they are not really doing so. This may be due to the fact that these scholars are much engaged in

ecclesiastical works. Also in Africa research does not seem to get the proper value that it deserves. As a result, these available Old Testament scholars are not motivated to pursue their research in the fertile but neglected field of Old Testament studies. Other scholars, due to financial constraints, leave African continent for greener pastures in foreign land.

Another challenge facing Old Testament scholarship in Africa has to do with bad government policies in many African countries. Many governments in African countries are perpetuating bad policies that have no regard for scholarship or research. If there is any investment in research at all, it is always in science which is said to be the only research area that is of importance to national development. Consequently, the libraries in Africa lack current books and journals for scholarly research especially in the field of Old Testament. This is the case in Nigeria where libraries lack current books and journals in Old Testament. Another manifestation of the bad policies of some governments in African countries is that the salaries paid to lecturers are low compared to what ordinary politicians earn. Of course, as a researcher, one would like to work in an environment where one is well valued and well paid.

Challenges facing Old Testament Scholarship in Africa can also be seen in the fact that the few available scholarly Old Testament journals are not well circulated within the continent. Although there are scholarly journals that have bearing on Old Testament throughout Africa, the majority of these journals are dead before they see the light of the day, or they are not circulated beyond the country of origin. This could be as a result of the fact that African continent is very large coupled with the inability of African scholars to establish proper means of circulating these journals. This continues hindering the effective development of Old Testament scholarship in Africa.

The challenges can also not be denied in the fact that the few Old Testament scholars in Africa do their research in isolation from each other. Owing to the fact that nobody is a compendium of knowledge, doing Old Testament scholarship in isolation encourages academic dishonesty. There is virtually no proper communication between scholars of the Old Testament to disseminate information about their research. Doing Old Testament research in isolation or together with only a handful of colleagues makes it almost difficult if not impossible to do meaningful scholarship in the field of Old Testament. It is practically difficult to encourage or overlook dishonesty, insincerity and mediocrity where many share and work together in the same field of study.

Another point that is relevant to this discussion is the reluctance of many African Old Testament Scholars to depart from the Western approaches and methodological assumptions in which they were trained. Ntreh (1998) explains that there are two concerns here:

Some scholars are certainly concerned with the questions raised by the African context. Unfortunately, however, they lack the proper tools and in the end they interpret it all through the eyes of their study of the Old Testament. They have accepted the approaches and methodologies of their trainers as universal and cannot be bothered with African concerns in their interpretation of the Old Testament. (p. 3).

In this regard, many available African Old Testament Scholars are products of Western education and theology. African Report Group (1983) maintains that the influence of Western education and theology throughout the continent (Africa) is a fact of its colonial heritage and cultural domination by the West. All, or nearly all, African theologians have

been trained in Western schools of theology. The development of a living theology outside the traditional mould now appears on the scene as a great adventure to be undertaken.

Some biblical scholars like Mbiti (1986) and Idowu (1973) are of the view that no matter the imperfections of the Western biblical scholarship and theology, bequeathed to Africans, Africans still owe the Western scholars an unpayable debt of gratitude. African Old Testament scholars are supposed to build upon this foundation using the rich contemporary Old Testament hermeneutics to decide Old Testament passages in pursuance of the much needed preservation and enhancement of African values. But it seems these supposed African Old Testament Scholars are inseparably tied to the aprons of their Western trainers.

Another challenge facing Old Testament Scholarship in Africa is the difficult nature of the indispensable Hebrew language. According to Akao (1999), "Hebrew language is one of the indispensable tools for the study of the Old Testament. For any Old Testament or biblical scholar, a sound or working knowledge of Hebrew language is a pre-requisite" (p. xi). Many students of Religion in African universities and theological seminaries have a phobia about biblical Hebrew. Ugwueye (2007) is of the view that the essence of studying biblical Hebrew is not to speak the language but to enable the student work with it. Despite the fact that a working knowledge of Hebrew is an essential tool for a proper study of the Old Testament, yet only a few number of students graduate from universities or theological seminaries with a working knowledge of Hebrew.

To worsen the situation, in many African universities, only about two or three Hebrew courses which are not enough, are approved for the study of Biblical Hebrew at

undergraduate level resulting in poor working knowledge of the language within the period of students' graduation. The tendency to ignore the original language of the Bible is widespread in Africa owing to its difficult nature. Many departments of Religion do no longer emphasize the importance of the original biblical language (Hebrew), sometimes seen as deterrent to the students of religion and biblical studies. Because of the indispensable Hebrew language in Old Testament scholarship the prospective post graduate students rather prefer to do African Traditional Religion, Religion and Society, Church History or Systematic Theology.

Many people wonder why students study Religion. Some students of Religion ignorantly feel inferior because they are studying religion as a course. Within the department of Religion itself some students and lecturers ask why Hebrew should go hand in hand with Old Testament studies. As the Latins would say *omnis traductor traditor* - every translation is a betrayal and every translator is a traitor because no translation efficiently and perfectly conveys the original meaning. Hebrew enables one to understand the authentic mindset, thought pattern, concepts, literature and theology of the Jews. Articulating clearly what Christianity and the Bible (just like other religions) have done positively and negatively in one's life, family, community, place of work, politics, church, marriage and other relationships would help one appreciate the essence of Old Testament scholarship that expounds the foundational truth of Christianity and the Bible. No discipline needs critical and crucial study like religion, at least in Africa. In Africa, unlike Europe, the sacred/religion has refused to disappear or limit itself to the personal realm. According to International IDEA (2001) religion in Africa is "effectively challenging the ideology that has sought to limit its operational space in many societies"

(p.70). It is increasingly informing the private and public decisions and actions of Africans in almost every matter.

One of the challenges of Old Testament scholarship in Africa involves methodologies and sources. The Hebrew scripture, Old Testament archeology and many extant literatures relating to the Hebrews and other ancient near Eastern peoples remain the sources of Old Testament studies while sources for the study of African religion and culture because of its oral nature include myths, proverbs, meanings attached to names, pithy sayings, liturgy, songs, dances, artistic expressions and artifacts. The term African refers to the African people's religiousness in the flux and turmoil of the modern world which is rooted in the past but no doubt includes the present and the future. There is a plethora of African cultures. To confound the issue, within West Africa and even within one country, like Ghana, there are remarkable differences based on tribal background. The Akan for instance are matrilineal while the Ewe and the Ga are patrilineal. In some tribes like Akan of Ghana the spirits of the ancestors are very important, while among the Masai of East Africa, they are not. As a result of hard geographical and physical conditions, there is a gulf between Africa north of the Sahara and Africa south of the Sahara, between East Africa and West Africa. In the words of Pobee (1987) the concept or term 'Africanness' is a very elusive one.

The challenge here consists in fashioning out a method or methods that could take care of the apparent divergences and differences as above. It is not clear yet whether the Old Testament scholar needs to be an expert in African Traditional Religious studies. It is not settled whether the issue should centre on applying Old Testament narratives

/messages to African situations or drawing similarities or Africanizing the Hebrew scripture.

It needs to be pointed out that one of the biggest challenges to African Old Testament study is that the church ministers, pastors and all those involved in the teaching of Old Testament possibly will not make use of the results of such research. This is clearly noticed in the way and manner the Old Testament, and in fact biblical passages, are grossly misinterpreted in our society. One needs not accuse those with little education alone for the well-read are guilty too. These scholars and 'men of God' would rather talk arrogantly as if they wrote the Bible instead of consulting the numerous commentary books on the Bible. The Bible is the only book in Africa where everyone, especially those with the gift of the gab, is an expert. Many biblical scholars, who already may be discouraged by this, can attest to the veracity of the observation from the stiff resistance they have faced while trying to correct this anomaly even in the academia. To compound the problem these scholars and 'men of God' mislead the people by alluding or appealing to revelation by the Holy Spirit as their source of interpretation thereby making a complete mess of literature, theology and research.

Generally, the challenges pointed out above and many more as may be noticed by others elsewhere in Africa have been hindering the effective growth and development of Old Testament scholarship in Africa.

Solutions to the Challenges of Old Testament Scholarship in Africa

The challenges of Old Testament scholarship pointed out above are not insurmountable. In order to tackle the challenges, the following possible solutions and suggestions can be of help. One is that there is a need for more cooperation among

African universities where Old Testament scholarship is being done. Western universities should also participate in this cooperation. The cooperation should include research fellowship and exchange of post graduate students as well as lecturers and professors. It should also involve special scholarships for special programs in Old Testament studies related to African culture and values. This may not be easy to achieve but the onus lies on Old Testament scholars and students who as a matter of urgency should initiate the move in their schools by coaxing the school authorities to sponsor such proposals.

In doing Old Testament scholarship in African universities and theological seminaries, there is an urgent need to plan a curriculum that reflects African culture and religion. Nzomiwu (1985) had earlier observed that “It has been discovered that it is impossible to tear a people from their cultural surroundings. Indigenization strives to take very seriously the traditional or native culture of a people” (p. 3). African people have many cultural values around which valid Old Testament scholarship could be constructed. This is not to say that some basic Western Old Testament courses in Old Testament should be neglected. He suggested that the following likely courses should be included in any Old Testament curriculum in African universities and theological seminaries: Introduction to the Old Testament from African perspective, Africans in the Old Testament, the history of ancient Israel from African perspective, Old Testament hermeneutics from African cultural perspective etc.

Moreover, Old Testament scholars should start writing textbooks and articles that reflect African perspectives. Most of the Old Testament books that are used in Africa, including commentaries, introductions to the Old Testament, histories of ancient Israel,

theologies of the Old Testament and others are written by Western and African scholars with Western approaches. It is time for African Old Testament scholars to write textbooks and articles that reflect African culture and tradition. In doing Old Testament in Africa those western textbooks that are seen as classics should become supplements to the African textbooks.

There is also a need for more cooperation among Old Testament scholars with regard to publication of research books and articles. The majority of the higher institutions in Africa find it difficult to finance the publication of their journals and books. There are research projects going on, but the cost of publishing them is very expensive. On a more general basis, it should be noted that there is an urgent need for conscious efforts to make interaction between the few African scholars in the field of Old Testament possible. To this, Ntrel (1998) suggests that the interaction can take place at least two levels. First, there is need for African Old Testament scholars to more regularly arrange conferences and seminars with participation from the entire continent. This would obviously involve sponsorship; money would have to be raised from both within and outside the continent to sponsor the conference and seminar participants. Secondly, the interaction could also take place through the interchange of research findings. It seems that it is necessary that complimentary copies of journals and other published works in the field are given free to relevant libraries. By this process of interaction African Old Testament scholars shall hopefully be able to sharpen their knowledge and questions in Old Testament scholarship.

African Old Testament scholars need to evolve their own methodology in the study of Old Testament. For them to do this, they have to define the goals and concerns

of African people and culture. Till now, so has unfortunately not been the case. It is the reader that gives meaning and relevance to the text. From this perspective, the text cannot be relevant for the African reader if he or she merely accepts the interpretation of people whose experiences differ from those of the African reader. In considering Old Testament studies as part and parcel of biblical theology, Nkwoka (2007) is of the view that Africans should develop a living theology because the Western theology is not alive to the needs of the African enterprise. Accordingly, the living Old Testament theology in Africa is to be done in African context. Therefore, for the Old Testament to be meaningful in Africa, it has to be given an interpretation that takes African values and concerns into consideration.

For better understanding and appreciation of the Old Testament in Africa, a working knowledge of the biblical Hebrew language is a prerequisite. In order to improve the African students' performance in Biblical Hebrew, which remains an indispensable tool in the study of the Old Testament, more courses should be devoted to the study of Biblical Hebrew. As far as the essence of studying Biblical Hebrew is not to speak the language but to enable the student work with it, devoting more courses to it would enhance the performance of the students within the period of their graduation. Clearly, Hebrew language is unlike English and French languages which are official languages commonly spoken and even studied at secondary school levels in African countries. It is therefore necessary that Old Testament courses related to Hebrew language should be allocated to competent lecturers with specialization in Old Testament.

There is also the need for African Old Testament scholars to establish easy access to the major international market-place, where current scholarly products are being

offered, evaluated and exchanged. Access to the international market-place is a question of economic resources: the rapidly increasing number of scholarly books and journals are indeed expensive, and so are also the international conferences. Management of the available resources should not be entrusted into the hands of cheats and charlatans.

As discussed above the term Africa depicts a large continent and the religion, customs and traditions are rooted in the past but include also the present and the future that are already mixed up with western culture. Though there are enough common elements to warrant the use of African Traditional Religion in the singular, it is being advocated that researches should always be concentrated in particular or specific places at a time. This is because the Old Testament and its study, the responses and continued interactions with the traditional culture and religion have not being the same both in degree and shape.

Conclusion

The use of African context in the study of the Old Testament in Africa has been shown to be of serious significance; its importance cannot be over-emphasized in the effective internalization of Old Testament rich significance. The challenge of developing such an Old Testament study anchored within the African context and milieu is enormous. Nevertheless, it is recommended that high-quality number of competent Old Testament scholars, good quality government policies that encourage research, co-operations among African Old Testament academics and scholarly curricula and textbooks that reflect African standpoints can positively make Old Testament scholarship in African continent more beneficial for the Africans. It is robustly believed that if the above submissions are appropriately put into operation, they would facilitate the improvement of Old Testament study and the conditions of doing it in Africa.

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