THE VALIDITY OF MEANING AND AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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In verbal communication, we normally have three elements involved: the speaker, the language (words) used by the speaker, and the audience or listener. When communication is in writing, as is the case with our interpretation of the Bible, we have the author, the text, and the readers or recipients. Two of these, namely the speaker and the reader, determine how effective the communication will be. The sender must put his thoughts into accurate words and the reader must accurately understand the speaker's words if any valid meaning at all will be communicated. In between the two lies the text. Where is meaning located in this transmission? Is it in the speaker's thoughts, in the text, or in the reader's understanding? In other words, in our attempt to interpret the text, for example as we have it in the Bible, where should our interpretation center, on what the Bible writers meant to say, on the Bible independent of its writers, or on the audience for whom it is meant?

Before we explore this question further, let us note how the answer will affect the course of theology in Africa. If meaning lies with what the author meant to say as he is represented by the text which is his product, then the initial task will involve the African theologians' digging out the historical and cultural contexts of the author and analyzing the text grammatically and contextually in order to find out what the author intended the text to communicate to the original readers. Only after that intended meaning has been gotten will the interpreter then proceed to answer the question: How does this relate to the African and his situation? This approach will emphasize that African theology is an attempt to answer the questions relevant to Africa in light of what we can discover from the Biblical text to have been the Bible author's answers to similar issues of his own day. If meaning lies with the text as independent from its author, then the African theologian will quote the Scriptures simply as proof–texts in his attempt to give answers to the present questions without any respect to its original context. The measure of one's interpretation will not be in terms of true and false, accurate or inaccurate, but in terms of whether it is plausible, reasonable, defensible, and not impossible. [1] In this approach, one therefore cannot speak of the true interpretation for there will be many legitimate interpretations. If the meaning lies with the reader (audience), then a Biblical text may have as many meanings as there are readers, or if we want to limit it somewhat, there are as many meanings as there are groups perceiving matters from the same perspective. In this way, a given Biblical text may mean something different to the African theologian than it meant or means to the Western theologian.

Each of these three approaches to interpretation of the text is presently tied with a main streak of interpretative process. Structuralism [2] lays emphasis on the text and examines it not in order to recover meaning which lies behind the text and thus governing its structure but in order "to participate in and observe the play of possible meanings to which the text gives access." [3] The text itself has an afterlife of its own, totally cut off from the author. [4] The text is autonomous and for the most part "indefinitely its own interpreter and its own subject," being accountable only to itself. [5] The existentialist's approach to text lays emphasis on the recipient with the notion that "the meaning of a text is what it means to me" (the interpreter). According to this approach, the thoughts which the author had in mind as he wrote down his text are not the major thing, for the text has life independent of its author. The interpreter turns his attention "away from the cognitive content of the text to its effects." [6] In these two approaches, the interpreter replaces the author as the determiner of the text's meaning. In structuralism, he reaches what he sees as the meaning by way of analysing the narrative (narratology), and in existentialism by letting the meaning get a hold of him as he reads the text. The interpreter, therefore, ceases to be the recipient of the meaning and becomes a collaborator, if not the author of the meaning. These two approaches have their positive contributions in terms of reminding the interpreter that the Biblical text must be viewed as a piece of literature following certain structures and that the message contained therein is to be appropriated to life. The positive contributions are, however, damaged by the disregard of the historical and cultural contexts reflected in the text. The disregard of the historical and cultural contexts shows a failure to realize certain matters that are fundamental to Biblical interpretation:

1. Both the divine and human authors of the Bible had original readers. The Scriptures did not evolve out of nowhere but are the product of God communicating his will through human writers to the Israelites (Old Testament) and to believers at Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica or any other destination of the New Testament writings. Each book had a purpose contemporary to its original readers.

2. As such, the Scriptures carried a message which, if not communicated to the Israelites or to the New Testament recipients, the writing of the text would have been a waste of time as far as the situations contemporary to the writing were concerned. What this says is that a meaning had to be communicated to the original recipients, otherwise why would the author write?

3. Until we have discovered the meaning which the recipients of the Old and New Testaments should have gotten from the writtings, then we cannot dismiss it as irrelevant for our day, and without the original meaning, we cannot be sure that what we are calling our meaning has any relationship with the text we have, for it was written by an author to a people in a given situation. If the circumstantial contextual element is removed from a group of words, then the words may have many meanings and no one can be sure what the speaker or writer wanted to communicate. It is our common practice to understand the words of a speaker in the context in which s/he speaks and in light of the circumstances in which s/he

was. The same principle should be allowed for a text.

In light of this, therefore, the writer of this paper advocates that the approach to the Scriptures as source for African theology be that of first attempting to know the meaning of a text in light of what the author intended to communicate to his original readers. Only after that has been done will we, with accuracy, apply the text to our situations – be they colonialism or neo–colonialism, liberationism, oppressionism, paternalism, "militarism" or any other issues to which African theology should address itself.

The chief proponent of the view that the normative meaning of a text is what the author intended to communicate is E. D. Hirsch, Jr [7] He expounds this view both in his *Validity in Interpretation* [8] and in his *The Aims of Interpretation.* [9] Hirsch argues that if we are going to make our search for meaning not "just a playground for the joustling of opinions, fancies, and private preference," then we need a criterion which determines *the* interpretation of the text. [10] Hirsch sees this criterion as what the author intended to communicate: "The only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old–fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant." [11] According to him,

> Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs. [12]

In addition to advocating that the meaning lies with the author's intentions, Hirsch also argues that the verbal meaning of a text is changeless. [13] If one agrees with Hirsch concerning this second assertion, then the question of relevance of the meaning from the Biblical text is raised. Since the Bible was written thousands of years ago and each Bible book intended to meet a need at its own time which was characterized by different situations than we are in, then how does a meaning which is changeless answer today's interpreter's questions which were not the questions of the Bible times? Hirsch's answer to this question would be that we are by asking this question failing to differentiate meaning from significance. He defines these as follows:

> Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names the relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable. [14]

Hirsch's position has been defended as the most promising approach to Biblical exegesis by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. Kaiser concludes his discussion on "The Definition and History of Exegesis" by defining exegesis as "the practice of and the set of procedures for discovering the author's intended meaning." [15] Meaning, according to Kaiser, is changeless – even for the author, but significance "does and must change, since interests, questions and times in which the interpreter lives also

change." [16]

Thus, the implication of distinguishing meaning from significance is that while meaning is one (as intended by the author) and changeless, the relationship of that one meaning to different ages will differ, not altering the meaning of the text but multiplying the significances of the one meaning. [17] In this way, the significances/applications are inexhaustible but the meaning remains changeless. True significance can, however, be derived only from accurate meaning. This is why it is so crucial for the African Biblical scholars to be exegetes before they become theologians. The warning of McQuilkin needs to be heard aloud: "To determine the single meaning is the objective of biblical interpretation. Otherwise, the fancy of the interpreter, or the preconceptions he imposes on the text becomes the authority." [18]

Where is African theology then in light of this view of one meaning and many applications? The point which I would like to make in answer to this question is that it is to a great extent in the wrong camp. It has been placed in the area of meaning of the Bible text rather than the category of application. [19] This is seen both in what is at times set as the goal for African theology, and also what has been produced in its name. Just to give two specific examples, Nomenyo says, "It (African theology) must not see itself as heir to the system of values belonging to theologians foreign to Africa. It must rather try to bring in Christ (and not Christian doctrines) into this African universe. . . ." [20] This is a good caution but it raises the all-important question of what to do with Christian doctrines which have been worked out exegetically from the Scriptures before the arrival of the African theologian. If, for example, the context of Mark 10:45 requires that *anti* be treated in terms of Jesus giving his life in the place of the many, and that kind of exchange is called substitution in the English language, should the African theologian look for a term other than substitution just in fear of replaying the western thologians? Certainly not, for if *anti* as a Greek word can mean "instead of" and Mark so uses it, its true meaning, in the Markan context, will remain "instead of" in every case. The meaning of the text abides and in this sense Christian doctrines when expressing an exegetically based Biblical theme belong to the Christian church universally. It is only that element which is an attempt by the Western theologian to apply the meaning to his own situation which must not be inherited. African theology cannot, therefore, be a replacement of Christian doctrines as they have been formulated in the West. Rather, the crucial question is: How much of a given Christian doctrine has been formulated the way it has on the basis of cultural milieu and not exegesis? A second example is Appiah-Kubi's use of Luke 4:18-19 in his discussion of Jesus as a Liberator. [21] After quoting the text, Appiah-Kubi says, "To the untold number of refugees and displaced people in Africa this is more than a 'solace'." [22] How will this really give consolation to the refugees and the displaced in Africa – just because they are displaced, or because Jesus was talking about them, or why? It is crucial that the meaning of the text in its original context be sought first because it is only then that one can determine wherther the significance one is deriving from the text has a foundation. The meaning of Luke 4:18-19 must be viewed in the context of Jesus' redemptive ministry, and for Appiah-Kubi to present a 'solace' by quoting this passage and excluding Christ's redemptive ministry is to offer to the refugees

and displaced a promise which won't be fulfilled. The application must be true to the meaning of a given text. African Christian theology belongs to the category of application/significance and not meaning of the Biblical text, and it must, therefore, be well founded on the meaning of Scripture for it to have Christian value.

This approach to the Bible text presents a difficult task. If one must first seek to understand the meaning of a text in light of what the author intended to communicate to his original readers, then there are many gaps to cross. There is, first of all, the historical gap because the writing of the New Testament itself is about two thousand years before our time, and more than this for the Old Testament books. Secondly, there is the linguistic gap. Three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) were used in writing the Bible text and they have their own peculiarities. Then, there are the cultural (both the Israelites and the first century Christians had cultures of their own) and the philosophical (outlook of life) gaps. The existence of these gaps calls for study of history of Bible times, the cultures of the Bible people, the original languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic), and the general thinking of not only the Bible people but also their surrounding neighbors. Viewed from the African persepctive, such a realization is an overwhelming challenge both to the individual student of the Bible and the African Christian church, yet it must be done if Africa's authentic theology will remain true to the meaning of the Biblical text. Lack of many African theologians with this kind of preparation is acknowledged by Fashole–Luke in the words: "Unfortunately, there are few African theologians with the necessary source materials, of sufficient high quality, so that African Christian theologies will rise above the level of banal and peripheral." [23] Fashole–Luke expresses the suspicion that it is primarily because of this lack of good grounding in Biblical studies on the part of the African theologians that "consultations, conferences and seminars on African theology simply affirm the uniqueness of Christianity and the primary status of Scripture and then quickly pass on to African traditional religions and the impact of westernized Christianity upon them." [24] Unless the meaning of the biblical text has been researched and then the text applied in the African setting in light of its original meaning, African theology will be "sterile, bankrupt, and unworthy of the African tradition nourished by Tertullian, Cyprian, Tyconius, and Augustine." [25]

Notes

[1]P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 197.

[2]The chief exponent of this approach to literature is Levi–Strauss, who applied it in the analysis of myth with no purpose of examining specific historical circumstances which led to their creation (Edgar V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 127, 128. This approach controls, for example, the Biblical works of J. Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 47–108, and D. O. Via, "The Parable of the unjust Judge: A Metaphor of unrealized Self," in *Semiology and Parables: An Exploration of the Possibilities Offered by Structuralism for Exegesis*, ed. D. E. Patte (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976), pp. 1–33.

[3]Juhl, *Interpretation*, p. 187

[4]T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York, 1932). Quoted from Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 1.

[5]Alain Blancy, "Structuralism and Hermeneutics," in *Structuralism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Collection of Essays*, ed. and trans. Alfred M. Johnson, Jr. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1979), p. 87.

[6]John C. Cobb, "The Authority of the Bible," in *Hermeneutics and the Worldliness of Faith: A Festschrift in Memory of Carl Michalson*, ed. Charles Courtney, Olin M. Ivey and Gordon E. Michalson (The Drew Gateway, 1974–75), p. 191.

[7]Appearing about the same time with Hirsch's works were also those of W. K. Wimstatt, especially his *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966). While both Hirsch and Wimstatt advocated that meaning is what the author meant to communicate, Hirsch emphasized (more than Wimstatt did) that it was the speaking/writing author and not the biographical speaker/author who is involved in this definition of meaning (*Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 209– 244). Also, before Hirsch's works came out, Emilio Betti wrote his *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1962), in which he called back the interpreter's attention to differentiating between *Auslegung* and *Sinngebung*.

[8]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

[9]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[10]Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 163.

[11]Ibid., pp. 26–37.

[12]Ibid., p. 31.

[13]Ibid., p. 46.

[14]Ibid., p. 8; also, *The Aims of Interpretation*, pp. 1–13.

[15]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 47.

[16]Ibid., p. 32.

[17]McQuilkin, who advocates the same view as Hirsch, allows the possibility of a second meaning but then adds: "But for the interpreter to be dogmatic about a second meaning, the author must first have affirmed it." J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible: An Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 66.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Acknowledgement must be made here of Mark Shaw's definition of African evangelical theology as an application of the evangelical theology to the African context (Mark Shaw, "What is African Evangelical Theology?", *EAJET* 2:1 (1983): 2. What, however, Shaw does not bring out strongly enough is that the application is of the exegetically gotten meaning of a Biblical text and not just evangelical theology by its own rights.

[20]S. Nomenyo, "Theology in the Life of the Churches" in *African Challenge* (Nairobi: Transafrica Publishers, 1975), p. 69.

[21]Kofi Appiah–Kubi "Jesus Christ – Some Christological Aspects from African Perspective" in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology: Report of a Consultation held at the Ecumenical Institute, Bosey, 8–14 June, 1976*, ed. John S. Mbiti (1977), p. 61.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Edward W. Fashole–Luke, "The Quest for African Christian Theologies," *JRT* 32.2 (1975): 80. The same article is published in *The Ecumenical Review* 27 (1975): 259–269 and *SJT* 29 (1976): 159–75.

[24]Ibid., p. 80.

[25]Ibid.