

# **INCLUSIVE FEMININE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AS NECESSARY CONDITION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, women have been suppressed by their male counterparts in most societies (even though this situation has improved because of the successful sensitization of women activists). Societal misconception of women was caused hugely by the patriarchal bias which influenced biblical interpretation of women roles. The study examined the position and the efforts of women to change this situation through biblical hermeneutics. Historical research approach was employed in this study and findings showed that to achieve sustainable development in Africa and Nigeria, the contributions of feminine theologians are needed to complement those of the men. The study recommends that theologians should champion the course of repositioning women and change societal views about them through unbiased and proper biblical hermeneutics.

## **Introduction**

Biblical Studies is one of the veritable tools for sustainable development in Africa. The fundamental place of theology makes it very unique and indispensable in improving the lives of individuals and nations. There is hardly a concept, be it scientific, technological or otherwise, that is not traceable to the Bible. In fact, Asaju (2005) (in his Inaugural Lecture) describes theology as the queen of sciences and this assertion is an unquestionable truth. Africa's development (though not all African countries are underdeveloped) should be a major concern since progressive growth should be part and parcel of every living thing.

Scholars have considered the issue of development from diverse perspectives. For Achunike (2004), the atmosphere of peace and justice will usher in development. He goes on to say that development is not an abstract phenomenon but is rather measured by a steady improvement of people's lives. Preponderant opinion however favours education and research as the veritable tools for development. When people receive qualitative education, skilled training and knowledge, these will ultimately lead to improvement of societal life. Ajima (2006) considers it from the perspective of human imagination, innovation and creativity and actually made a solid observation because ideas rule the world. Though the articulations of these scholars are veritable tools for national development, no one of them is sufficient in itself, but a combination of strategies. As a complement to the afore-mentioned strategies and many others, the inclusion of the feminine gender in biblical hermeneutics could be a germane approach in achieving sustainable development in Africa (and Nigeria).

This paper is not an added voice on gender debate, or a promotion of feminist ideologies but more than that an attempt to examine the role feminine inclusion in biblical hermeneutics would play in the social development of Africa. To achieve this aim, it would use the African feminist approach to biblical hermeneutics as paradigm.

### **Hermeneutics: Meaning and Principles**

Interpreting the Bible/hermeneutics is the science and art of understanding, translating and explaining the meaning of the scripture text. Biblical hermeneutics may be understood as the theological principles of exegesis which is often virtually synonymous with biblical interpretation or methodology of biblical exegesis. The procedure adopted in exegesis is hermeneutics. Biblical interpretation emerged with renaissance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, man's knowledge was increased and he began to make enquiry into many aspects of life. Before this time, Christian exegetes accepted the Bible as a heaven sent collection of writings. Even cultural and historical milieu was not considered in the Bible interpretation. However, the rise of rational empiricism gave tremendous impetus to the development of various intellectual disciplines and this includes the biblical studies (Sueizer, 2007: 1114-1115).

Hermeneutics has been on for ages, both the Jewish sects and religious leaders were all involved in Bible interpretation. Jesus had cause to interpret the scripture immediately after his resurrection. On his way to Emmaus, he exposed the scripture to the two men beginning with Moses and all the prophets. He interpreted to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures (Lk 24:27).

### **Basic Principles Guiding Hermeneutics**

These basic principles are important because they keep the interpreter within the bounds of legitimate hermeneutics. One of such principles is that the Bible must be understood as God's inspired and infallible word. It possesses in it every necessary thing for good living in Christian life and salvation. This view however does not go unchallenged by some Bible critics especially Spinoza in

Brown (2007) has this to say "the Bible is merely a collection of historical books whose content must be examined under the rule of reason". It is also very important for an interpreter to identify the kind of literature the text before him is, and its general form, whether it is poetic, narrative, historical etc. This is called genre in biblical language.

The cultural and historical background (Sitz in Leben) of the text must be put into consideration during exegesis. Next to the above is to look out for the purpose and plan of the book to know its specific purpose and message for the readers as the Holy Spirit designs it. Contextual consideration of a text must not be ignored in hermeneutical exercise. Interpretation must fall within the context of the writing. A text should be interpreted primarily within its context so that the general idea conveyed in the periscope could be drawn out. This can be deciphered from the preceding and succeeding ideas in the passage. Another essential principle of hermeneutics is the use of appropriate original languages.

Meanings of words in the original language are important and should be crosschecked with parallel passages. In contrast to these principles explained, when a text

is interpreted with the intention of reading one's interest into it, other than the author's intent, it cannot be regarded as hermeneutics. If scripture is distorted to imply a different meaning outside what a text contains, it is not hermeneutics.

### **Context of Interpretation**

The context of a text is both the historical and social setting of a text. The circumstance, environment, customs and the culture within which a text was written and that of the interpreter are all taken into consideration. The Jewish world and all the cultures where Christianity thrived were patriarchal societies. Patriarchy means a society or system that is ruled or controlled by men. In this kind of society, women are regarded as inferior beings. This idea of placing women as inferior to men is shown in both the Old and New Testaments as found in these scriptures, Exodus 20 and 21, a woman is the property of her father, she can be forced to be married to a slave. Only men are qualified to partake in feast of unleavened bread and ingathering (Exodus 23:17, Nu5:11ff). A woman is believed to go through purification for a longer period if she gives birth to a female child than if she has a male child (Lev. 12:5). In fact, for Paul, they should not even speak in the Church but could consult their husbands at home (1Cor. 14:34 - 35). Now since power and authority reside in the hands of men, scriptural interpretations usually tilt towards men's interest and women become victims of misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Under the Jewish patriarchal society, women's roles were restricted to procreation; family upkeep and training of children and were also considered inferior to men in many passages in the OT (Gen. 21:10; Ex. 1:15-16; 20:21; 23:17, Lev. 12:1-5; 27:6, Nu 3:15). The Bible does not present inequality between men and women but the interpreters of the Bible have.

The African society like the Jewish has the same patriarchal structure. The African world is a masculine world. Male voices are heard all over in biblical hermeneutics resulting in the fact that there are no women commentaries. Men have hitherto dominated biblical interpretations and as such have explained the Bible to suit their selfish and patriarchal bias. The experiences and perspectives of men were used to extract messages from biblical passages. Women's perspectives, so far as they differ from the men's, are rarely visible. Gerstein (2012) adds "This male superiority over women has been so drawn into the minds of women that women themselves have accepted this condition as true". Women are most of the time portrayed in a very negative light as tempters and those who brought sin into the world (Gen. 3).

In pre-colonial African society, women held a complementary position to men even though the society operated on a patriarchal system. The esteem given to women could be explained on spiritual ground that the female deity/mother Africa is a deity that ranks high among other deities in Africa. Onunwa (1992) suggests that men's superiority over women should be considered in terms of men as custodians of authority and not in relation to role performance. He notes that traditionally, women held some political powers especially the *umuada* in Igbo land of Nigeria. The *Umuada* is a very strong organization of women that contribute a lot to the progress of their community both socially and politically. They could act in times of great need or to redress a bad situation like in the case of Aba riot of 1929. In Ashanti kingdom, it was a woman, Yaa Asantewa, the queen mother that led the war against the British who wanted to take possession of their golden stool (till date, her

sculpture stands in Kwame Nkrumah Museum in Accra). He goes on to argue that irrespective of the contributions of women, they are most times treated with levity and spite. These negative notions about women are expressed in African/Igbo myths and proverbs that magnify the misbehaviour of women as problem causers. It is of course a woman's act that made God to withdraw to the sky. Africans have more regard for male children as opposed to female and this starts even from when a baby is born.

In recent times, views held about women are beginning to change, yet women are not given equal opportunities with men. Socially, women are being educated and even study some courses like engineering, medicine, pharmacy and the like. These disciplines were believed to be reserved for the men in the past. Women are beginning to challenge the status quo. Women are speaking out, demanding for recognition of their contributions to national development. There is an increasing number of women in government positions. Some nations such as Rwanda and Tanzania have created a constitutional requirement for the government to include a certain number of women. Liberia has the record of producing the first female president in Africa- Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Societal attitude to the feminine gender varies with cultures. There are visible changes in the African /Nigerian attitude to the feminine gender but it is very minimal and the misconceptions are yet to be erased.

### **What Feminine Biblical Hermeneutics Is About**

Feminine biblical hermeneutics/feminist criticism is the analysis of biblical texts which seeks to recover the experience of women in antiquity and to critique norms and interpretations whereby that experience was marginalized. Napikoski (2017) describes it as a literary method which basically identifies with female characters as a way to challenge the male centred outlook of authors. The feminist movement gave impetus to the formation of the feminine biblical theologians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the forefront of this movement is Elizabeth Cady Stanton with other prominent figures like Mary Daly, Daphne Harnpson, and Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. They all share the view that biblical witness about women is essentially negative. Joyce (nd.) in her work, *Feminist Exegesis of the Old Testament: Some Critical Reflections*, equally recognizes that there are both positive and negative representations of women which should be considered. It is not a "stand alone" method but adds some critical and appropriate questions that can help get some facts about women. Some salient questions that guide this interpretative method are: Is there a woman point of view in the text? How are women portrayed in the text? Do they speak? Are we given access to their point of view? How have women lives and voices been suppressed by the text? Are women made to speak against their own interest? The general interest in this critical method is to see if there can be a fairer interpretation of biblical texts that would at least present positive pictures of women. The feminine theologians seek to examine how texts originally used against woman can be re- interpreted to show good aspects of women. To cite an instance, the creation of man which is usually used by society for proof of women subordination can be re-interpreted to prove God's intent in equality of sexes. If the text is viewed from the perspective that, God used the same material in forming man and woman then we can establish that Genesis 1:27; 2:22 - 23 mean equality. There is nowhere the Bible paints a picture of inequality of sexes, it is an idea that was developed from biased interpretation.

During the trial and resurrection of Jesus, his male disciples failed him in the garden of Gethsemane, deserted him at his crucifixion but women stood by him all the way. This shows that women excelled where men failed. An objective and well structured feminine contribution in biblical interpretation would bring to the limelight the outstanding roles performed by some women in the Bible and this would impact the African society. The political role performed by Deborah saved an entire nation of Israel (Judges 5). Esther played a wonderful role as queen who salvaged her nation and yet was able to combine the duties of a wife with political demands (Esther 2). Ruth's contributions to the social development of the family unit will ever be remembered. She established principles for enduring marriages (Ruth 1:16). For her, marital union is a lifelong affair and this positive attitude to marital relationship is a model that could restore the collapsing walls of many marriages in contemporary times.

### **African Feminine Theologians' Approach To Biblical Hermeneutics As Paradigm For Feminine Interpretative Approach**

The issue of feminine inclusiveness in biblical hermeneutics is highly debated and scholars hold diverse views about it. This study would adopt the approach of the African feminine theologians in addressing this issue. This group of theologians have a more accommodating and liberal approach to feminine inclusiveness in biblical interpretation. African women theologians operate under an umbrella described as a "circle". This circle is a movement that was formed through the inspiration and effort of Mercy Amba Oduyoye in 1989 at Ghana. The group shares the opinion of other feminists that women are marginalized even though their strategy for the actualization of women's full incorporation and development differs.

The idea behind this movement is to build African women theologians up and create a forum through which they can unleash their critical thinking within the framework of theology, religion and culture. The circle unites together diverse women of diverse religions within Africa and in *diaspora* (those living outside Africa) who can voice out their views against patriarchy.

The circle protests against any form of discrimination and exclusion of women and promotes the full expression of one's intellectual ability irrespective of the gender as God intended it. They see theological education and publications as ways that women could be developed and through such forums their impact can be felt. Therefore, increasing the number of women studying, teaching theology and publishing papers is a major target. They are equally interested in collaborating with the male theologians in co-authoring papers, in the academy and the Churches. The idea of women's theology therefore is not a replacement of African theology but to fill up the gap of the missing voices of women. The African feminine theologians' approach to inclusive feminine hermeneutics is holistic because it is built firmly on the concept of community (both men, women and everyone's contribution is important). A major strategy they propose is to give balanced theological education to all the people of God. For them, men and women are equally gifted by God so they should work together to decide on the type of theology that should be taught in theological schools.

### **Feminine Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Development**

In recognition of women's indispensable contributions to social development of the African society, Onunwa (1992) remarks "The whole humanity stands to gain when both men and women consciously get involved in the process of removing all obstacles in the way of women's full development utilization." Odudoye in Udealo (2003) maintains that both genders should be given equal respect and equal right to participate in all things and this is authentic human dignity. The recognition and inclusion of feminine biblical hermeneutics would impact our society greatly on the positive side. When women are fully involved in biblical criticism the imbalance caused by men biases would fizzle out gradually and women would develop their interpretative skills and potentials fully. This is a major stride in social development. Here are a few instances of how feminine theologians can impact society. Frances Siewert (a woman) got involved in the translation of the English Bible popularly known as "The Amplified Bible" (1881-1967). She embarked on an in-depth study of Hebrew, Greek language, and the cultural archaeological background of the biblical times, and her initial efforts led to the production of the Amplified Bible. The Lockman Foundation came in later to assist and facilitate the production of this Bible version. The Amplified version today is one of the best English translations of the Bible from the original manuscript. It is a Bible that supplies the reader with meanings drawn from original languages and this makes Bible reading enjoyable, exciting, and comprehensible. The spiritual and moral lessons derived from this Bible version help to develop the society socially as lives of men are transformed.

In Africa, we have the unprecedented and unmatched contributions of Mercy Oduyoye which have given many women social significance, healing and psychological emancipation. Landman (2007) commenting on Odudoye's contributions avers that Oduyoye, an African first and foremost woman theologian has changed worldviews on gender.

In Nigeria, a woman theologian, Echeta (2014), found out through a critical examination of Genesis 1:29, the solution to current health challenges experienced in contemporary society. The verse presents God's dietary guideline for optimum health. God instructs that fruits and vegetables/herbs, shall be man's food". *Eseb* ( Hebrew word for fruits also means herb, it can also be translated as grasses, leaves, nuts, flowers, roots, legumes, grains etc) serves both as food and medicine (Ezek. 47:12; Dan. 1: 11-16). Therefore, herbs are not ritualistic concoctions made by medicine men as some misinterpret it to be. Plant foods contain complete nutrients, vitamins and enzymes including medicinal properties (Ezek. 47:12).They provide antioxidants and phytochemicals that fight free radicals in the body.

The discovery made in this study is very relevant especially since contemporary society, both in Nigeria and globally, is in dire need of solution against the menace of diseases. In fact, many medical experts - Iwu (1993), Dwight (2012), Dougall (nd.) and Colbert (2014), though the list is not exhausted - all uphold that fruits and vegetables/plant food provide good nutrition for humans. To buttress the indispensable importance of fruit and vegetable diet, the World Health Organization has issued a mandate for daily consumption of 400grams of vegetables to improve general health.

The inclusion of feminine voices would advance theology in Africa, reposition women and make society to place more value on them.

### **Conclusion**

Let biblical theologians champion the correction of the wrong notion held about women since the societal claim is that biblical interpretation of the feminine gender gave them the impetus to suppress and treat women with spite and levity.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are given based on the findings from the study.

A full involvement of the feminine theologians in hermeneutical studies to complement the efforts of men theologians is needed.

Biblical theologians should champion the course of development through more committed and in-depth study of the Bible to harness hidden treasures in the Bible that can advance the society. Discoveries made through biblical research should be implemented for the benefit of the society.

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