

Introduction

RECENTLY, THERE HAS BEEN growing recognition and acceptance of the contextual nature of biblical interpretation. As a result, various contextual readings of the Bible have been explored in different local contexts throughout the world. Although it is encouraging that the number of contextual studies of biblical interpretation is increasing, the study of contextual biblical interpretation has yet to be developed more extensively. In particular, more historical case studies are needed in order to expand our understanding of the nature of contextual biblical interpretation.

This monograph is an exploration of contextual biblical interpretation through the investigation of the biblical interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church (EOTC). The EOTC has a long history with a unique ecclesiastical tradition. Particularly, the EOTC has its own approach to biblical interpretation, an approach that has been shaped and developed under the substantial influence of the EOTC's tradition in the historical and cultural context of Ethiopia. Consequently, it has interpretive characteristics that are distinctive from those of other Christian traditions. Thus, the biblical interpretation of the EOTC demonstrates the contextual nature of biblical interpretation.

The thesis of this monograph is that tradition and context significantly influence biblical interpretation and that the EOTC provides a compelling historical example of contextual reading of the Bible.

This introductory chapter provides the focus of this research. It begins with a presentation of the background of the research. This is followed by presentation of the purpose, goal, significance, central research issue, research questions, limitations and delimitations, definitions, and overview of the study.

BACKGROUND

In Ethiopia, a biannual council meeting of a certain mission agency was taking place. National church leaders and missionaries were seriously discussing the issue of interdependence. One church leader said, “Interdependence means those who have give things to those who do not have.” His remark expresses a general perception of interdependence that is found especially in the relationship between national churches and foreign organizations. Even the discussion of accountability in mission tends to focus only on how to wisely and effectively give from one side to the other. This attitude leads to the permanent dependency of national churches on foreign churches and/or mission agencies. I believe that this is one of the most serious challenges yet to be overcome in the current missional context of the world.

This attitude of dependency is found in theological education in many parts of the world, as well. The basic attitude of the students is, “Teach us the truth. We will learn.” The expatriate teachers respond, “I will teach you. Listen carefully.” This gives rise to the theological dependency of many national churches, as well as the churches of emerging mission countries, on Western churches. This theological monopoly is prevalent in many different places in the world. It is my conviction that genuine interdependence is possible only when the entities in a relationship are independent. A healthy relationship is not one-sided—the “give” of one side and the “take” of the other side—but reciprocal—the “give and take” of both sides.

I experienced this unhealthy relationship of dependence in theological education through my past ministries in East Africa. Beginning in 1999, I served as a theology teacher first at *Kale Hiwot* Ministry Training Center in Asmara, Eritrea, and then at Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A foreign mission agency started both schools. Even though the two schools were quite different in size, both had curriculums that were similar to those of Western theological schools.

When I began my teaching ministry, I simply assumed that my task was to teach my students the theology I had learned. I was under the significant influence of Western theology because of my own theological education. I graduated from a Presbyterian theological seminary in Korea. Theology students in major seminaries in Korea were exposed to and significantly influenced by Western theology, since many professors received their advanced theological training in schools in the West. Later,

I studied theology in England and the U.S., where I increasingly absorbed the theological viewpoints and methodologies of the West. Thus, an interesting cultural dynamic was taking place in my classroom: a Korean theology teacher was delivering Western theology to African students.

As time went by, I found an unfortunate phenomenon happening among my students. They were struggling with the gap between what they learned at school and what really happened in their local ministry contexts. They were becoming more isolated from the community of believers in their own contexts. It seemed that in this situation many of the students regarded their theological education simply as a means of promotion, in order to get a better job, for example. In their actual ministry, however, they continued to do what they were accustomed to doing, because they could not find relevant contact points between their theological education in school and their practical ministries in the local church.

Especially I observed the students struggling with Western modes of biblical interpretation. They were unable to come up with abstract and rationalistic hermeneutical concepts and methodologies. They simply made efforts to memorize them for exams. Western hermeneutics was not helpful to the exegetical practices of these students for the local churches they served. Furthermore, such sophisticated hermeneutical approaches led these students to ignore their own ways of reading the texts, which had been passed on and practiced in their historical and cultural contexts.

With this recognition, I encouraged my students to understand the importance of constructing their own theologies in their historical and cultural contexts, rather than simply and passively accepting foreign theologies. Particularly, I worked diligently with my students to discover culturally relevant ways of reading the Bible in the Ethiopian context. Fortunately, there was a time-honored church tradition in Ethiopia: the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church. It has developed and maintained its own ecclesiastic tradition in the Ethiopian context for almost as long as the history of the Christian church. Significantly, the EOTC has its own distinctive way of reading the Bible, which has been shaped and developed in the context of Ethiopia's long history.

At that time, I had opportunities for fellowship with the teachers of the Theological College of the Holy Trinity, an Orthodox seminary in Addis Ababa. I visited the school and spoke with theology teachers there. They were happy about my interest in the EOTC and the theology

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of the church. They were willing to help me in my research on the biblical interpretation of the church. This interaction enriched and transformed my theological perspective, especially in the area of biblical interpretation. I came to affirm the contextual nature of biblical interpretation and the significance of tradition and context in biblical interpretation. As a result, I was motivated and encouraged to pursue this monograph on the biblical interpretation of the EOTC as a historical example of contextual biblical interpretation.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the EOTC's reading of the Bible with a focus on the significance of tradition and context in biblical interpretation.

GOAL

The goal of this research is to demonstrate the contextual nature of biblical interpretation, and to present the EOTC's reading of the Bible as a historical example of contextual biblical interpretation.

SIGNIFICANCE

First, this research is significant for the EOTC's biblical interpretation, in particular. It is an attempt to present the biblical interpretation of the EOTC. Though the church has a distinctive interpretive tradition, which developed over its long history, it has not been recognized appreciatively by other church traditions. Even the EOTC has not clearly articulated its own hermeneutical tradition. There are relatively few scholarly studies on the EOTC's interpretation of the Bible, and most of these studies focus only on the *andemta* commentary.

Second, this research is significant for the discussion of contextual biblical interpretation, in general. As I propose, the appropriate approach in constructing contextual biblical interpretation is descriptive rather than normative. In other words, in order to construct contextual biblical interpretation, it is necessary to conduct various case studies on the reading of the Bible performed in particular contexts. This research into the biblical interpretation of the EOTC provides a compelling case of contextual biblical interpretation.

CENTRAL RESEARCH ISSUE

The central research issue is how the EOTC reads the Bible in the historical and cultural context of Ethiopia.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is contextual theology? How can contextual theology be constructed?
2. How can the contextual nature of biblical interpretation be demonstrated?
3. What is the role of tradition and context in biblical interpretation?
4. What is the ecclesiastic tradition and context of the EOTC as a hermeneutical community?
5. What is the interpretive tradition of the EOTC found in the *andemta* commentary?
6. What are the characteristics of biblical interpretation revealed in the preaching of the EOTC?

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This study limits the area of research into biblical interpretation to the *andemta* commentary and the preaching of the EOTC. The *andemta* commentary represents the tradition of EOTC's biblical interpretation and it still significantly influences the biblical interpretation of the church. In addition, the preaching of the EOTC most practically reveals the distinctive characteristics of the church's biblical interpretation. Thus, this study does not include other areas that might also disclose the biblical interpretation of the EOTC, such as other Ethiopian literature, liturgy, hymns and prayers, icons, etc.

This research is also delimited in terms of its regional scope. The sermons in this research were collected mostly in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, and its vicinity. There may be discrepancies in preaching between those who have official theological training and those who do not. This research does not consider the levels of theological education obtained by the preachers.

DEFINITIONS

In this monograph, I use certain important terms with the definitions given below. Other significant terms will be defined and treated in detail in subsequent sections.

Biblical Hermeneutics

“Biblical hermeneutics” is the study of the principles of interpretation of the Bible. Here it is used interchangeably with “biblical interpretation.” The term “biblical exegesis” is also used as identical with these terms, even though it can be more narrowly defined.

Western Theology

It is difficult to clearly define the term “Western theology,” even though it is frequently used in theological discussions without any specific definition. Geographically, “the West” designates Europe and North America (i.e., the North Atlantic). The term “Euro-American” refers to “persons of North Atlantic origins and cultures.”¹ Though there are variations in the forms of culture in Euro-America, scholars assert that there are also underlying similarities and commonalities shared and exhibited by Euro-America as a cultural entity. In this regard, Louis J. Luzbetak notes that the term “culture” is used in an extended sense, referring to a number of closely related cultures.² By employing this perspective, we can speak of “Western culture” and “Western theology.”

Accordingly, Western theology can be defined as theology that has been formed and developed by Euro-Americans in their historical and cultural context. Scott Foutz gives a relevant definition of Western theology: “that body of doctrine and tradition developed solely in terms of the temporal and cultural situations within the West.”³ This definition presupposes that “all doctrinal development takes place within a historical and ideological context which defines not only the issues raised but also the language and concepts used in attempting solutions.”⁴ In other words, theology is always context-laden, and this includes Western theology.

1. Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 14.
2. Luzbetak, *Church and Culture*, 171.
3. Foutz, “Theology of Slavery.”
4. *Ibid.*

The Non-Western World

“The non-Western world” is defined as that part of the world that does not include the countries of Western Europe and North America, such as those of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Oceania.

OVERVIEW

Chapter 1, “Contextual Theology,” explores contextual theology. First, I offer definitions for basic terms, such as culture, context, and contextualization, and then, based on these definitions, I demonstrate the contextual nature of theology. Second, I investigate the construction of contextual theology through a critical interaction with the Western mode of doing theology. Finally, I address the role of tradition in theology.

Chapter 2, “Contextual Reading of the Bible” is an investigation of contextual biblical interpretation. First, I demonstrate the contextual nature of biblical interpretation through a critical interaction with historical criticism. This analysis is particularly telling due to the so-called objective nature of historical criticism, and its claims to be context-neutral. Next, I address the aim and task of biblical interpretation from this perspective. Finally, I discuss the role of tradition in biblical interpretation in its theological and historical aspects.

Chapter 3, “The Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church: Tradition and Contextualization,” explores the tradition and context of the EOTC as a hermeneutical community. First, I briefly describe the history and position of the EOTC in Ethiopia. Next, I address the unique tradition of the EOTC, which is woven out of various strands of influences. Last, I discuss the characteristics of the contextualization of the EOTC, along with a consideration of the present context in which the church is situated.

Chapter 4, “The Interpretive Tradition of the EOTC: The *Andemta* Commentary Tradition,” examines the *andemta* commentary tradition of the EOTC. First, I describe the general features and history of the *andemta* commentary. Next, I discuss various exegetical issues in order to clarify the interpretive character of the *andemta* commentary. Then, I investigate the internal and external sources of the *andemta* commentary. Finally, I address the ways in which different interpretive traditions have been integrated in the context of Ethiopia to produce the unique interpretive tradition of the *andemta* commentary.

Chapter 5, “Biblical Interpretation in the Preaching of the EOTC,” analyzes the preaching of the EOTC in order to illuminate the

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characteristics of the EOTC's biblical interpretation. First, I analyze nine sermons given by EOTC preachers. Then, I discuss the characteristics of biblical interpretation exemplified in these sermons.

In the "Conclusion," I summarize the findings of this research, and discuss its implications and contributions. Then, I offer suggestions for further studies. I finish this monograph by presenting some concluding remarks.

SAMPLE