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African contextual hermeneutics and new testament interpretation: Language, method, and contemporary contributions

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Abstract

African contextual hermeneutics has become an increasingly significant approach to biblical interpretation. While a great deal of research has been done on African approaches to biblical scholarship, the relationship between language, hermeneutical method, and methodological rigor in contemporary African New Testament interpretation has received relatively less attention. This study fills this gap by analysing how African contextual hermeneutics negotiates the relationship between the biblical text, its original contexts, and the modern African context, with special attention to cultural context, language, interpretive methodology, and its contribution to New Testament scholarship. The study uses a qualitative research design and historical, analytical, and hermeneutical methodologies to reveal how African contextual hermeneutics questions the notion that biblical interpretation should primarily rely on interpretive frameworks created outside of African contexts, while simultaneously opening up new avenues for reading the New Testament using African experiences, conceptual categories, and linguistic resources.The analysis shows that African research can transcend the dichotomy between simply contextual readings and imported interpretative frameworks by using methodological reflexivity and contextual sensitivity. The paper concludes that African contextual hermeneutics can make a significant contemporary contribution to New Testament interpretation when context functions not as a substitute for the biblical text or as an unquestionable interpretive authority, but as a critical partner in a linguistically informed, historically grounded and methodologically rigorous hermeneutical dialogue between language, text, historical background, and the African experience

Keywords: African Contextual Hermeneutics, New Testament Interpretation, Linguistic Resources, Hermeneutical Methodology, Contextualization, Biblical Interpretation.

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Introduction

The interpretation of the New Testament is influenced by its historical and cultural contexts, leading to diverse interpretations across generations. Meanwhile, African contextual hermeneutics has emerged to integrate African experiences and cultural contexts into biblical interpretation, while arguing for a hermeneutical approach that recognises the significance of local contexts in understanding biblical texts.This is although, not an attempt to replace Western interpretation with African interpretation, but a broader epistemological and hermeneutical question concerning who interprets the Bible, from where, with what questions, and for what purposes. Hence, Adamo (2001)[3] demonstrates how African cultural and indigenous resources can become meaningful resources for biblical interpretation.

Moving further, Adamo (2015)[4]also describes African biblical hermeneutics as a methodological resource that places African social and cultural contexts within the interpretive process.In Nigeria, this development has become particularly visible within New Testament scholarship. Uwaegbute (2023)[5] observes that African Biblical Studies has become a significant approach among Nigerian New Testament scholars because of its capacity to address issues relevant to African Christians. However, he also identifies persistent concerns regarding methodological rigor in African biblical studies in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, the value of contextual interpretation cannot be established merely by demonstrating that African culture is important. The more fundamental question is how African context should be brought into dialogue with the New Testament text without compromising responsible exegesis. A contextual approach that gives absolute authority to contemporary African experience may risk reading present concerns into the biblical text. On the other hand, an approach that excludes African experience from interpretation may fail to recognise the legitimate contextual nature of biblical understanding.

It is against this background that this study examines African contextual hermeneutics and New Testament interpretation, paying particular attention to its methodological issues and contemporary contributions. The study argues that African contextual hermeneutics should be understood neither as a rejection of established New Testament exegetical methods nor as an unrestricted imposition of African culture upon the biblical text, but as a critical dialogue between the biblical text, its historical and literary contexts, and the contemporary African context.

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[3]Adamo, D. T. (2001). *Reading and interpreting the Bible in African indigenous churches*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
[4]Adamo, D. T. (2015). The task and distinctiveness of African biblical hermeneutic(s). *Old Testament Essays, 28*(1), 31–50. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC171694
[5]Uwaegbute, K. I. (2023). African biblical studies and the question of methodology: A focus on New Testament scholarship in Nigeria. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 79(4), Article a8750. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8750

African contextual hermeneutics has become an increasingly significant approach to biblical interpretation. While a great deal of research has been done on African approaches to biblical scholarship, the relationship between language, hermeneutics, and methodological rigor in contemporary African New Testament interpretation has received relatively less attention.Uwaegbute (2023)[6] highlights the need for biblical interpretations that prioritises contemporary experiences over historical and literary contexts without downplaying the need for methodological rigor and its impact on the visibility of New Testament scholarship. However, the diverse cultural and socio-political landscapes in Africa complicate the understanding of a singular "African context," which raises issues of ethnocentrism. Thus, the need for a clear methodological framework is essential for integrating contextual concerns with textual accountability. This is the gap this study aims to address by proposing a balanced model for text-context engagement.

The study aims to investigate African contextual hermeneutics as a method for interpreting the New Testament and evaluating its relevance for modern African biblical scholarship. It focuses on four key objectives: examining the methodological foundations and approaches of African contextual hermeneutics and their interaction with various contexts; identifying challenges such as contextual diversity and cultural bias; assessing the contributions of this approach to New Testament scholarship; and proposing a framework for responsible interpretation that balances rigorous methodology with contemporary African contexts.

By examining the interaction between biblical interpretation and the unique historical and cultural circumstances of readers, particularly in Africa, this work advances New Testament scholarship; hence, its significance.It further emphasises the importance of contextual relevance supported by robust methodology for African scholars,promoting responsible engagement with biblical materials. By avoiding detached interpretations and those that are unduly impacted by modern culture, the framework offered supports theological education.The study also emphasisesthe need for the Nigerian Church to adopt contextual hermeneutics that upholds the integrity of the biblical text while addressing urgent societal challenges.In general, it encourages African scholars to participate actively in international debates by promoting context as a partner in the dialogue with biblical interpretation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Review

African Contextual Hermeneutics is located within the larger discipline of hermeneutics; the study of the nature, processes and conditions of interpretation. The theoretical underpinning is reinforced by a combination of Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics (1960)[7], Ukpong's Inculturation

[6]Uwaegbute, K. I. (2023). African biblical studies and the question of methodology: A focus on New Testament scholarship in Nigeria. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 79(4), Article a8750. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8750

[7]Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer& D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

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Hermeneutics (1995,2002)[8], West's Liberation Hermeneutics (1991/1995)[9] and Adamo's African Cultural/Biblical Hermeneutics (1999–2015)[10]. The views assume interpretation is historically and socially situated, but differ in the specific role they give to the interpreter, community, culture and biblical text.

The wider theoretical context for theorising interpretation as a dialogical encounter between text and interpreter is provided by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, most fully developed in *Truth and Method* (1960)[11].Gadamer rejects the view that interpreters can approach texts from a completely neutral or presuppositionless position. Understanding takes place through historically effected consciousness and what he calls a "fusion of horizons" where the horizon of the text meets the horizon of the interpreter. Interpretation is, therefore, neither just a retrieval of authorial intention nor an unrestrained projection of the reader's assumptions. This view is especially important for African contextual hermeneutics because it gives a philosophical basis for recognising that African readers are historically and culturally situated interpreters while still upholding the importance of dialogue with the textual horizon.

In furtherance of the African biblical scholarship, Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, which he developed explicitly in the 1990s and articulated systematically in Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation (2002)[12], also represents a major methodological formulation. In his earlier essay "Reading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics" (1995)[13]Ukpong shows movement from simply comparing African experiences to biblical narratives to making African social-cultural realities an integral part of interpretation. For Ukpong, the African context is not just a stage of application after the exegetical process but a part of the interpretive process itself. Inculturation hermeneutics thus offers an interplay between the biblical text and a given contemporary African socio-cultural context, each capable of shedding light on, and critically challenging the other. His approach also pays considerable attention to the conceptual frameworks of lay readers of the Bible. Another important perspective is Gerald West's liberation hermeneutics, developed within the South African context of apartheid and systematised in Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context (1991; revised 1995)[14]. West's

[8]Ukpong, J. S. (1995). Reading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, 91*, 3–16.
[9]West, G. O. (1995). Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: Modes of reading the Bible in the South African context (2nd rev. ed.). Cluster Publications; Orbis Books.
[10]Adamo, D. T. (2015b). What is African biblical hermeneutics? *Black Theology*, *13*(1), 59–72.
[11]Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer& D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).
[1212]Ukpong, J. S. (2002). Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation. In D. Dietrich & U. Luz (Eds.), *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (pp. 17–32). William B. Eerdmans.
[13]Ukpong, J. S. (1995). Reading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, 91*, 3–16.
[14]West, G. O. (1995). Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: Modes of reading the Bible in the South African context (2nd rev. ed.). Cluster Publications; Orbis Books.

approach is rooted in liberation theology, black theology and the struggles of oppressed communities.

It challenges approaches that restrict biblical interpretation to academic specialists and gives interpretive significance to the experiences of **ordinary readers**, particularly communities experiencing social, political and economic marginalisation. His methodology emphasises dialogue between trained biblical scholars and ordinary readers, while maintaining critical engagement with the biblical text. Thus, West demonstrates that African contextual interpretation is not simply a matter of importing African culture into biblical studies; it can also function as a critical and socially transformative reading of Scripture.

A third perspective is Adamo's African cultural hermeneutics, whose foundations can be traced to his work of the late 1980s and 1990s and whose methodological formulation is particularly evident in Africa and Africans in the Old Testament (1998/2001),Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches (2001)[15],and his explicit formulations of African biblical hermeneutics in 2015[16]. According to Adamo, appropriate interpretative resources for biblical interpretation should include African cultural and linguistic resources, indigenous worldviews, customs, and life experiences.African biblical hermeneutics is defined in his 2015 formulation as an interpretive method focused on cultural identity, transformation, and the critical reevaluation of Eurocentric presumptions.

African comparative and evaluative readings, communal interpretation, and a reciprocal movement in which Africa interprets the Bible and the Bible interprets Africa are some of its unique characteristics. However, because Africa is culturally, linguistically, religiously, and historically diverse, no single cultural experience can fully capture the continent as a whole. This raises a significant methodological dilemma regarding the definition of "African context." Furthermore, cultural customs are not inherently authoritative just because they are African. Context itself may require critical consideration, particularly where cultural beliefs contradict with the theological, ethical or literary claims of the New Testament.

Therefore, a dialogical and critically reciprocal model of African contextual hermeneutics is adopted in this work. Its theoretical stance incorporates Ukpong's text-context interaction, West's focus on community and socially placed readers, Adamo's stress on African cultural and linguistic resources, and Gadamer's concept of interpretive discourse. The paradigm proceeds from the biblical text in its historical and literary setting, engages the concerns and experiences generated by African contexts, and puts text and context into critical interaction.The biblical text and the African setting are not regarded as separate or unquestionable sources of interpretation in this formulation; rather, their interaction serves as the foundation for a methodologically rigorous,

[15]Adamo, D. T. (2001). *Reading and interpreting the Bible in African indigenous churches*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
[16]Adamo, D. T. (2015). The task and distinctiveness of African biblical hermeneutic(s). *Old Testament Essays, 28*(1), 31–50. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC171694

contextually relevant, and exegetically responsible reading of the New Testament.

The Concept of Hermeneutics

The word hermeneutics is commonly associated with the theory and practice of interpretation. In biblical studies, it refers broadly to the principles and processes through which biblical texts are understood and interpreted. Hermeneutics, therefore, goes beyond the simple reading of a biblical passage. It involves questions concerning the relationship between the text, the author, the original audience, the interpreter and the contemporary community. New Testament interpretation requires attention to the historical circumstances of the first-century world. The social structure of Jewish and Greco-Roman society, religious beliefs, political institutions, economic realities and literary conventions all contribute to the interpretation of New Testament texts. At the same time, the New Testament continues to be read by communities living in radically different historical circumstances. This creates the continuing hermeneutical challenge of relating the ancient text to contemporary life. African contextual hermeneutics addresses this challenge by asking how the New Testament can be meaningfully interpreted within African circumstances without losing sight of its original message.

African Contextual Hermeneutics

African contextual hermeneutics may be understood as the interpretation of biblical texts from within African historical, cultural, religious, social and existential contexts. It recognises that African readers bring particular experiences and questions to the biblical text and that these experiences can contribute to the interpretive process. Adamo (2015)[17] specifically describes African biblical hermeneutics as a methodological resource that makes African social-cultural contexts the subject of interpretation.

The concept, however, should not be reduced to the use of African cultural illustrations in preaching. Contextual hermeneutics is more fundamental than finding African examples to explain biblical passages. It involves examining how the interpreter's social location affects the questions asked of the biblical text and how the biblical text subsequently speaks to those contextual questions. African contextual hermeneutics therefore represents both a theological and methodological development. Theologically, it affirms the legitimacy of African Christians as interpreters of Scripture. Methodologically, it seeks appropriate ways of allowing African experience to participate in the process of biblical interpretation.

Context and New Testament Interpretation

The concept of context is central to this study. There are at least two important contexts that must be considered in New Testament interpretation: the context

[17]Adamo, D. T. (2015). The task and distinctiveness of African biblical hermeneutic(s). *Old Testament Essays, 28*(1), 31–50. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC171694

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of the biblical text and the context of the contemporary interpreter. The context of the biblical text includes the historical, literary, social, political and religious circumstances associated with its production. The contemporary context refers to the circumstances within which the text is being read and interpreted. African contextual hermeneutics becomes particularly important because African readers encounter the New Testament from within contexts that differ considerably from those of the first-century Mediterranean world.

The challenge is therefore not simply to choose between the ancient context and the African context. A responsible hermeneutical process must recognise the importance of both. Ignoring the original context may result in anachronistic interpretation, while ignoring the contemporary context may make interpretation disconnected from the actual life of the Church. Thus, the context ought to function as a partner in the dialogue for New Testament interpretation rather than as a substitute for exegesis. This distinction is important because it allows the African context to raise questions of contemporary significance while requiring the interpreter to test proposed answers through careful engagement with the biblical text.

Contextualisation

Contextualisation refers to the process by which Christian faith and biblical interpretation are expressed and understood within particular cultural and social contexts. In African Christianity, contextualisation has become particularly important because Christianity has interacted with traditional African worldviews, indigenous religious practices, communal structures and contemporary social realities. The challenge is to distinguish responsible contextualisation from cultural accommodation. Contextualisation becomes problematic when Christianity is simply reshaped to fit every existing cultural assumption. On the other hand, refusal to engage culture can produce a form of Christianity that remains externally imposed and insufficiently connected to African realities.

African contextual hermeneutics therefore requires a critical form of contextualisation. The African context must be taken seriously, but it must also be subjected to critical reflection. Likewise, biblical interpretation must remain attentive to the New Testament's historical and literary contexts.

African Biblical Interpretation

African biblical interpretation encompasses the various approaches through which African scholars and Christian communities interpret the Bible in relation to African realities. It includes liberationist, inculturation, postcolonial, gender-sensitive, social-scientific, contextual and reader-oriented approaches.
The diversity of these approaches demonstrates that African biblical hermeneutics is not a single fixed method. Instead, it represents a broad field of interpretation characterised by different methodologies and contextual concerns. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge. It is a strength because it demonstrates the richness of African engagement with Scripture. It is a challenge because the phrase “African hermeneutics” can become too broad unless the interpreter clearly identifies the particular context, methodology and

interpretive objective involved.For this reason, the present study does not treat African contextual hermeneutics as a single fixed method. Instead, it understands it as a family of approaches united by a concern to interpret Scripture responsibly from within African realities.

Empirical Review

Nyiawung (2013)[18] provides an important methodological contribution by arguing for an African biblical hermeneutic approach while also identifying threats such as cultural diversity, ethnocentrism and anachronism. His work is particularly relevant to the present study because it shows that contextual interpretation requires critical attention to the nature of the African context itself. Ellington (2021)[19] is concerned with a reader-centred approach to biblical interpretation. He thus provides an additional methodological perspective by arguing that African contextual hermeneutics should give adequate attention to literary context and inductive analysis. His concern is that a reader-centred approach can sometimes allow the voice of the community to become louder than the voice of Scripture. He, therefore, proposes a closer dialogue between Scripture and context through careful attention to the literary context of biblical passages.

The work of Uwaegbute, Odo and Ugwu (2021)[20] also demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary engagement in Nigerian New Testament scholarship, particularly through social-scientific criticism. Their study argues for supplementing African Biblical Studies with social-scientific criticism as a means of improving the contextualisation of New Testament texts in Nigeria.
Uwaegbute (2023)[21]further examines African Biblical Studies in Nigerian New Testament scholarship and identifies methodological rigor as a persistent concern. As a recent Nigerian study, the research provides an important dimension to this discussion. Hence, he argues that strengthening methodology is important for improving the global visibility and competitiveness of Nigerian New Testament scholarship.

Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical, and hermeneutical research design to explore the evolution of African contextual hermeneutics and its impact on New Testament interpretation. It includes a historical overview of

[18]Nyiawung, M. D. (2013). Contextualising biblical exegesis: What is the African biblical hermeneutic approach? HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 69(1), Article 2011. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2011
[19]Ellington, D. W. (2021). The promise of attending to literary context for contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa. *Acta Theologica, 41*(Supplement 32), 111–131. https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.sup32.8
[20]Uwaegbute, K. I., Odo, D. O., &Ugwu, C. I. (2021). Social-scientific criticism in Nigerian New Testament scholarship. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, *77*(1), Article a6394. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i1.6394
[21]Uwaegbute, K. I. (2023). African biblical studies and the question of methodology: A focus on New Testament scholarship in Nigeria. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 79(4), Article a8750. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8750

African biblical hermeneutics, a critical analysis of key scholars' arguments, and an evaluation of the interplay between biblical texts, their historical contexts, and contemporary African settings. This framework allows for a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of contextual interpretation.

Data Sources and Method of Analysis

The study explores major contributions to African biblical hermeneutics through a selection of seminal works, including those by Gadamer, West, Ukpong, and Adamo, alongside various peer-reviewed studies. The analysis employs thematic, comparative, and critical methodologies, identifying key themes such as the situatedness of interpretation, the role of African context, and methodological challenges. It finds that biblical interpretation is inherently dialogical, with African cultural resources enriching the hermeneutical process. However, it cautions against treating Africa as a homogeneous entity and emphasises the importance of methodological rigor to avoid ethnocentrism. Ultimately, the study advocates a dialogical model whereby textual grounding, contextual interrogation, critical dialogue, and contextual re-appropriation converge, thus positioning African contextual hermeneutics as a reflective practice that engages both text and context meaningfully.

Thematic Data Analysis and Discussion

Analysis of the selected works reveals four interconnected themes: **the situatedness of interpretation, the role of African context, the negotiation between text and context, and the need for methodological control.** These themes demonstrate that African contextual hermeneutics has expanded the scope of New Testament interpretation while simultaneously raising questions about the boundaries and procedures of contextual reading.

Interpretation as a Situated and Dialogical Process

The analysis indicates broad agreement that biblical interpretation cannot be completely separated from the historical and social location of the interpreter. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (1960)[22] provides the broader theoretical basis for this position by conceptualising understanding as an encounter between the horizon of the text and that of the interpreter. Within African biblical scholarship, Ukpong (1995, 2002a, b)[23], West (1991/1995)[24]

[22]Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer& D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).
[23]Ukpong, J. S. (2001). New Testament hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and possibilities. *Neotestamentica, 35*(1–2), 147–167.
Ukpong, J. S. (2002a). Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation. In D. Dietrich & U. Luz (Eds.), *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (pp. 17–32). William B. Eerdmans.
Ukpong, J. S. (2002b). The story of Jesus' birth (Luke 1–2): An African reading. In W. Dietrich & U. Luz (Eds.), *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (pp. 59–70). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
[24]West, G. O. (1995). Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: Modes of reading the Bible in the South African context (2nd rev. ed.). Cluster Publications; Orbis Books.

and Adamo (2001,a,b; 2015a,b)[25] develop this insight in different ways by insisting that African experiences, questions and cultural resources have legitimate roles in the interpretation of Scripture.

The implication is that African contextual hermeneutics should not be understood merely as the application of previously established biblical meanings to African situations. Rather, African context participates in the interpretive process by generating questions that may illuminate dimensions of the biblical text that have received limited attention in other interpretive settings. This represents an important contribution to New Testament scholarship because it recognises the plurality of interpretive locations from which biblical meaning is explored.

African Context as an Interpretive Resource

The analysis further demonstrates that African contextual hermeneutics treats African social and cultural experience as an important interpretive resource. Ukpong's inculturation approach emphasises the interaction between biblical texts and concrete African realities, while Adamo foregrounds African indigenous worldviews and cultural categories in biblical interpretation. West, from a liberationist perspective, places particular emphasis on the experiences of ordinary African readers and communities, especially those affected by structures of oppression.

These approaches differ in emphasis, but they converge in challenging the assumption that legitimate biblical interpretation must be controlled exclusively by interpretive traditions developed outside Africa. African contextual hermeneutics consequently contributes to the diversification and decolonisation of biblical scholarship by recognising African readers as active participants in the production of biblical meaning.

However, the analysis also reveals a significant methodological qualification: **African context cannot be treated as a single or homogeneous category.** Africa encompasses diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious, historical and socio-political contexts. Consequently, an interpretation arising from one African community cannot automatically be generalised to the continent as a whole. Nyiawung (2013) draws attention to the dangers of ethnocentrism and anachronism, making contextual specificity essential to responsible interpretation.

[25]Adamo, D. T. (2001a). *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
Adamo, D. T. (2001b). *Reading and interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
Adamo, D. T. (2015a). The task and distinctiveness of African biblical hermeneutic(s). *Old Testament Essays, 28*(1), 31–52. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC171694
Adamo, D. T. (2015b). What is African biblical hermeneutics? Black Theology, 13(1), 59–72. https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047

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Negotiating Text and Context

A central finding of the analysis is that the principal methodological challenge lies not in choosing between the biblical text and African context but in determining how they should interact. West's liberation hermeneutics gives considerable attention to the experiences of readers and communities, while Ukpong and Adamo demonstrate how African realities can generate new interpretive questions. Yet excessive emphasis on context may create the possibility of allowing contemporary concerns to determine the meaning of the biblical text.

Ellington (2021)[26] is particularly relevant to this issue in advocating the integration of contextual interpretation with inductive attention to the literary context of Scripture. Similarly, the hermeneutical perspective derived from Gadamer (1960)[27] suggests that interpretation involves dialogue rather than the unrestricted projection of the interpreter's assumptions onto the text. Context therefore should neither be excluded from interpretation nor allowed to function as an unquestionable authority.

The findings suggest that responsible African contextual hermeneutics requires a **reciprocal relationship**: the African context raises questions of significance to the interpreter, while the biblical text critically engages, confirms, challenges or transforms assumptions within that context. Such reciprocity protects contextual interpretation from both cultural absolutism and textual isolation.

Methodological Rigor and the Problem of Generalisation

The analysis identifies methodological rigor as another major concern. Uwaegbute (2023) notes continuing methodological challenges within Nigerian African Biblical Studies, while Nyiawung (2013) highlights the dangers associated with ethnocentrism and anachronism. These concerns suggest that contextual relevance alone cannot establish the validity of an interpretation.

An African contextual reading therefore requires explicit identification of the context being represented, justification of the cultural categories employed, attention to the historical and literary features of the biblical text, and a clear explanation of how the movement from text to context and from context back to text is undertaken. This methodological transparency is particularly important where interpreters employ concepts such as 'African culture', 'African worldview' or 'African experience,' since such categories may conceal considerable internal diversity.

[26]Ellington, D. W. (2021). The promise of attending to literary context for contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa. *Acta Theologica, 41*(Supplement 32), 111–131. https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.sup32.8

[27]Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer& D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

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Towards a Dialogical Model of African Contextual Hermeneutics

The findings support a **dialogical model of African contextual hermeneutics** in which neither the biblical text nor the African context is treated as an isolated interpretive authority. The model can be represented as a movement through four related stages: **textual grounding, contextual interrogation, critical dialogue and contextual re-appropriation.** First, textual grounding requires attention to the historical, literary and linguistic features of the New Testament passage. Second, contextual interrogation identifies the concrete African questions, experiences and cultural assumptions brought to the text. Third, critical dialogue places these two horizons in sustained conversation, allowing the biblical text to illuminate African realities while also allowing African questions to expose dimensions of the text requiring renewed consideration. Finally, contextual re-appropriation concerns the responsible application of the resulting interpretation to the contemporary African community.

This model synthesises important insights from Gadamer (1960), Ukpong (1995, 2002a), West (1991/1995) and Adamo (2001, 2015), while responding to the methodological concerns identified by Nyiawung (2013), Ellington (2021) and Uwaegbute (2023). Its principal contribution is to position African contextual hermeneutics neither as an uncritical celebration of African culture nor as a simple adaptation of Western exegetical methods, but as a critically controlled dialogue between **text, context and interpreter.**

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that the principal contribution of African contextual hermeneutics lies in its insistence that biblical interpretation is historically and socially situated. Its engagement with African cultural realities expands the interpretive possibilities of New Testament scholarship and gives greater visibility to African readers and communities. Nevertheless, the analysis also shows that contextual relevance must be accompanied by methodological discipline.

The study therefore argues that the future development of African contextual hermeneutics depends less on choosing between contextual and historical-literary approaches than on developing a productive relationship between them. Historical-literary exegesis provides essential control for engaging the biblical text, while African context supplies contemporary questions, experiences and interpretive perspectives. When these dimensions are brought into sustained critical dialogue, contextual interpretation can remain both **culturally meaningful and exegetically accountable.**

The resulting position is that African contextual hermeneutics should be understood as a **dialogical, reciprocal and critically controlled process of interpretation.** Its validity does not derive simply from its African location; rather, its contribution to New Testament scholarship depends on the clarity of its methodology, the adequacy of its engagement with the biblical text, the

specificity of its contextual claims and its capacity to generate interpretations that are both contextually meaningful and hermeneutically defensible.

Data Analysis Based on Research Objectives

The analysis of the selected primary and supporting texts is organised according to the four research objectives of the study: (1) to examine the methodological foundations of African contextual hermeneutics; (2) to identify its major methodological challenges; (3) to evaluate its contribution to New Testament interpretation; and (4) to propose a balanced model for negotiating African context and the biblical text**.** The findings are presented thematically in relation to these objectives.

Objective One: Methodological Foundations of African Contextual Hermeneutics

The first objective sought to examine the methodological foundations of African contextual hermeneutics. Analysis of Gadamer (1960/2004), Ukpong (1995, 2001, 2002), West (1995), Adamo (2001, 2015) and Nyiawung (2013) reveals that African contextual hermeneutics rests on the recognition that biblical interpretation is historically and socially situated. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides the broader theoretical foundation by understanding interpretation as an encounter between the horizon of the text and that of the interpreter. Within African biblical scholarship, this insight is developed through approaches that give interpretive significance to African experience, culture, social location and community.

Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics emphasises the interaction between biblical texts and concrete African realities, while West's liberation hermeneutics foregrounds ordinary readers and communities, particularly those experiencing marginalisation. Adamo's African cultural hermeneutics further legitimises African cultural resources and indigenous worldviews as interpretive resources. Nyiawung (2013) similarly argues for an approach in which the context of the subject of exegesis becomes an important dimension of biblical interpretation. These perspectives demonstrate that African contextual hermeneutics is fundamentally concerned with the interaction of **text, interpreter and context** rather than with the text considered in isolation.

Findings 1: African contextual hermeneutics is theoretically grounded in a dialogical understanding of interpretation in which African social and cultural contexts participate actively in the production of biblical meaning. Its methodological foundation is therefore not simply cultural adaptation but a sustained interaction between biblical texts and the contexts of their African interpreters.

Objective Two: Major Methodological Challenges

The second objective examined the major methodological challenges associated with African contextual hermeneutics. Three principal challenges emerge from

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the analysis: contextual diversity, the possibility of cultural over-generalisation, and insufficient attention to textual and literary control.

First, the category 'African context' cannot be treated as culturally uniform. African societies differ significantly in language, ethnicity, religion, history, political organisation and social practice. Ukpong (2001) explicitly identifies the diversity of African contexts as one of the challenges confronting African biblical critics, while Nyiawung (2013) cautions against assumptions of cultural superiority in biblical interpretation.

Second, the use of African cultural categories can create the danger of ethnocentrism or anachronism when contemporary cultural assumptions are projected uncritically onto ancient biblical texts. Adamo's emphasis on African cultural resources is therefore most productive when such resources function as interpretive questions and perspectives rather than as unquestionable authorities.

Third, the analysis identifies the danger of allowing contextual concerns to overshadow the biblical text. Ellington (2021) specifically argues that a reader-centred approach may allow the voice of the community to become louder than that of Scripture. Thus, he advocates combining contextual interpretation with inductive attention to literary context. Uwaegbute (2023) similarly identifies methodological rigor as a persistent concern within Nigerian African Biblical Studies and connects methodological weakness with limitations in the wider recognition of Nigerian New Testament scholarship.

Findings 2: The principal weakness of African contextual hermeneutics does not lie in its attention to African context but in the possibility of inadequate methodological control. Contextual interpretation becomes problematic when 'African culture' is treated as homogeneous, when contemporary assumptions are projected onto ancient texts, or when contextual concerns displace historical and literary exegesis.

Objective Three: Contribution to New Testament Interpretation

The third objective evaluated the contribution of African contextual hermeneutics to New Testament interpretation. The analysis shows that its major contribution is the expansion of the interpretive location of New Testament scholarship. Rather than assuming that questions generated within European or North American intellectual contexts adequately represent all readers of the New Testament, African contextual hermeneutics brings African experiences, cultural categories and existential concerns into the interpretive conversation.

Ukpong (2001, 2002) demonstrates how African questions can generate distinctive approaches to New Testament texts, while West (1995) demonstrates the interpretive significance of ordinary readers and communities. Adamo (2001, 2015) extends this contribution by showing how

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African cultural and indigenous resources can function as legitimate categories for biblical interpretation.

The significance of these approaches is not that African interpretations should replace other forms of New Testament scholarship. Rather, they broaden the range of questions through which New Testament texts can be understood. African contextual hermeneutics consequently contributes to a more plural and globally representative biblical scholarship.

Findings 3: African contextual hermeneutics contributes to New Testament scholarship by legitimising African interpretive locations, experiences and cultural resources as significant contributors to biblical understanding. Its contribution is therefore both contextual and epistemological: it expands not only the questions asked of the New Testament but also the range of readers recognised as participants in biblical interpretation.

Objective Four: Towards a Balanced Model of African Contextual Hermeneutics

The fourth objective sought to develop a balanced model capable of maintaining contextual relevance while preserving exegetical responsibility. The findings support a dialogical and critically reciprocal model comprising four interconnected movements: textual grounding, contextual interrogation, critical dialogue and contextual re-appropriation**.**

Textual grounding requires attention to the historical, literary and linguistic features of the New Testament text. **Contextual interrogation** identifies the questions, experiences and cultural assumptions that African readers bring to the text. **Critical dialogue**places the textual and contextual horizons in sustained conversation, allowing the biblical text to illuminate, challenge or transform aspects of the contemporary context while allowing contextual questions to disclose dimensions of the text requiring renewed attention. **Contextual re-appropriation**involves relating the resulting interpretation responsibly to the contemporary African community.

This model draws on Gadamer's understanding of interpretive dialogue, Ukpong's text-context interaction, West's emphasis on community, and Adamo's use of African cultural resources. It also responds directly to the methodological concerns raised by Nyiawung (2013), Ellington (2021) and Uwaegbute (2023).

Findings 4: A viable African contextual hermeneutics should neither isolate the biblical text from African experience nor allow African context to determine interpretation uncritically. Its methodological strength lies in a reciprocal dialogue in which text and context critically interrogate one another**.**

The findings highlight that in African contextual hermeneutics, the key issue is not the inclusion of context in New Testament interpretation, but the method of its incorporation without compromising textual accountability. The analysis

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advocates for a balanced dialogical model that acknowledges the historical and cultural locations of interpreters, while ensuring critical engagement with the biblical text. This model aligns with Ellington's emphasis on the dialogue between text and context and addresses Uwaegbute's call for methodological rigor in scholarship. Ultimately, the study concludes that African contextual hermeneutics is strongest when contextual relevance, textual accountability, and critical reflexivity coexist, positioning context as a crucial element in a reciprocal hermeneutical process.

Summary of Findings

The study examined the methodological foundations, challenges and contributions of African contextual hermeneutics to New Testament interpretation. Four principal findings emerged. First, African contextual hermeneutics is founded on the recognition that biblical interpretation is situated and that African readers approach Scripture from particular historical, cultural, linguistic, and social locations. Ukpong, West and Adamo develop this principle through inculturation, liberation and African cultural approaches respectively.

Second, the study identified methodological challenges involving the diversity of African contexts, the danger of cultural generalisation, ethnocentrism and anachronism, and the possibility that contemporary contextual concerns may overshadow the historical and literary dimensions of biblical texts. These concerns are particularly significant in light of the methodological weaknesses identified in Nigerian African Biblical Studies by Uwaegbute (2023).

Third, African contextual hermeneutics makes a significant contribution to New Testament scholarship by expanding the range of interpretive voices, questions and cultural resources brought into engagement with biblical texts. It, therefore, contributes to the diversification of biblical scholarship without requiring the rejection of established exegetical methods.

Fourth, the study proposes a dialogical model based on textual grounding, contextual interrogation, critical dialogue and contextual re-appropriation**.** This model seeks to maintain a productive relationship between the historical-literary integrity of the biblical text and the lived realities of African communities.

Conclusion

African contextual hermeneutics represents an important development in contemporary biblical interpretation because it insists that the meaning and significance of the New Testament cannot be explored adequately without considering the contexts in which African readers encounter Scripture. Its major contribution lies in bringing African experiences, cultural resources and existential questions into sustained engagement with biblical interpretation.

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At the same time, contextual relevance alone cannot guarantee methodological adequacy. The analysis demonstrates that African contextual hermeneutics must remain attentive to the diversity of African contexts and guard against cultural generalisation, ethnocentrism, anachronism and the displacement of the biblical text by contemporary concerns. The methodological concern identified by Uwaegbute (2023) and the emphasis on literary context advanced by Ellington (2021) reinforce the need for such critical control.

The study, therefore, concludes that the most productive direction for African contextual hermeneutics is neither the rejection of historical-literary exegesis nor the uncritical privileging of African cultural experience. Rather, it is a dialogical hermeneutical process in which text and context remain in critical and reciprocal relationship**.** The proposed model of textual grounding, contextual interrogation, critical dialogue and contextual re-appropriation provides a methodological framework through which African contexts can contribute meaningfully to New Testament interpretation while preserving exegetical responsibility.

The significance of this model lies in its attempt to reconcile two legitimate demands of contemporary biblical scholarship: the need for interpretation to be contextually meaningful and the need for it to be methodologically accountable**.** African contextual hermeneutics is therefore best understood not simply as an African alternative to established biblical interpretation, but as a methodological conversation through which African questions and experiences can enrich the continuing global interpretation of the New Testament.

The Proposed Dialogical Model

This study proposes a dialogical model for African contextual New Testament interpretation comprising three dimensions: the biblical text, its original context, and the contemporary African context. Central to this model is the understanding that contextual interpretation remains biblical interpretation, necessitating awareness of the historical and literary context for responsible exegesis. The African context contributes contemporary questions, leading to a dialogical process rather than a linear one, where African inquiries can prompt re-evaluation of the biblical text, and vice versa. This approach represents a balanced perspective, avoiding the extremes of exclusively relying on Western exegetical methods or prioritising African cultural experience as the sole authority in biblical interpretation. The model emphasises critical assessment through dialogue between the text and contemporary context.

Recommendations

African scholars should enhance contextual approaches to New Testament interpretation that reflect the realities of African communities while rigorously engaging with the biblical text. Theological institutions must support students in integrating both African and international scholarship to foster informed participation in scholarly debates. Adequate attention must be given to historical and literary contexts without replacing exegetical work. Additionally, African cultural resources should be critically employed, recognising their value

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while evaluating cultural practices against New Testament teachings. Future research should use a dialogical model to analyse specific texts in concrete African contexts, demonstrating how these interpretations relate to contemporary African realities and the life of the African Church.

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