

# **Dividing the Word Correctly: An Evaluation of Exegetical Models**

by

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There is confusion in the academic and the pastoral world in respect to exegesis. In many circles proper exegesis is not being practiced. In other circles exegesis is confused with hermeneutics.

Forty years ago Prof. John Bright lamented the demise of biblical preaching in the United States. He felt that biblical preaching in America had become “the exception rather than the rule.” He said that “one again and again hears sermons that, having taken a text, thereafter say very little about it.” Sermons were preached that “are oriented upon some personal problem, some question of current interest, and only superficially upon the Bible.” Sermons were “based vaguely on the Bible”; but, “the proclamation of the Word with authority—I would go far out of my way to hear it.”<sup>1</sup>

Bright defines “biblical preaching” as “the exposition of a biblical text or of some segment of the Bible’s teaching, and the proclamation of that as normative for Christian faith and practice.”<sup>2</sup> He clearly states his conviction and his longing: “there can be no substitute, Sunday in and Sunday out, for preaching that expounds the biblical text itself.”<sup>3</sup>

I want to suggest that we have a similar problem in Nigeria. Sermons here too are often based superficially or vaguely on the Bible. The exposition of the text is not regularly heard. Sound exegesis is not regularly done.

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine was married in the chapel of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria. The Pentecostal preacher’s sermon was based in part on Genesis 24:64, where Rebecca “got down” from her camel to meet her new husband, Isaac. From this text, we were told that all wives must “get down” and submit to their husbands. While this may be Pauline theology, this is not the message of this Genesis text. This verse is part of a historical narrative and should be treated so; to allegorize this verse reflects poor exegesis and obscures this particular word of God.

A presupposition of this paper is that the Bible—objectively—is the Word of God. But if Scripture is interpreted wrongly, then we can not hear that particular word of God for us. The task of biblical preaching and exegesis is to allow God to speak through his Word to people in our time and culture. If biblical preaching does not happen, then God’s people will not hear the word of God proclaimed from an individual text.

The same applies to academic circles. If a Biblical text is said to have many meanings, then one wonders where the Word of God really is. For this reason, it is imperative that we revisit the question of hermeneutics and exegesis.

## **A “Modern” View of Exegesis and Hermeneutics**

The Bible is a book made up of words usually formed into sentences. These words and sentences were written in languages foreign to us and in a culture or cultures different than our own. The task of exegesis is to understand the original meaning of these texts.

Fee and Stuart define exegesis as “the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Preus seems to agree: “Exegesis means ‘bringing out the meaning’ of a text, e.g., determining what the author meant to convey to his readers.”<sup>5</sup>

Implied in these definitions is the assumption that a text—any text—has one intended meaning. When a young man writes a girl and says, “You are the most beautiful girl in the world,” this text has an intended meaning. Taken literally it probably is not true; but if its context and content are properly exegeted, the meaning is clear. Or, if Jesus calls Herod a “fox” (Lk. 13:32), Jesus had a meaning in mind. One has to discover what a fox connoted to the first-century Palestinian. A standard Greek-English lexicon suggests that a fox in ancient Greek refers to a crafty person. So the meaning of the text would be that Jesus thought Herod to be a crafty person. (One might also want to know whether a jackal [*dila* in the new Hausa translation] in the Nigerian context is seen to be a crafty animal. Perhaps a *zomo* [hare] is more crafty than a jackal, which tends to be destructive. And maybe for the Yorubas the tortoise is the crafty one.)

John Bright puts it clearly: “The text has but one meaning, the meaning intended by its author; and there is but one method for discovering the meaning, the grammatico-historical method.”<sup>6</sup>

The early and medieval church spent considerable time searching for hidden, spiritual meanings, using methods like typology and allegory or the four-fold sense; but it was Luther and Calvin who insisted on a single literal meaning of the text. Luther wrote:

Only the single, proper, original sense, the sense in which it is written, makes good theologians. The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and speaker in heaven and earth. Therefore his words can have no more than a singular and simple sense, which we call the written or literally spoken sense.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these words, the temptation for Lutherans and others is to search for additional spiritual or Christological meanings. But even Dr. Sid Garland, who looks for Christ throughout the Old Testament, agrees that “responsible exegesis” tries “to understand the original meaning and intention of the author.” Thus: “Christian interpreters are not to read Christ *into* the Old Testament. Rather they are to bring out (exegete) what the Spirit of God intended, namely, to point to Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

If exegesis is understanding the original meaning of the text, then hermeneutics is usually defined as relating the text to our current situation. Fee and Stuart suggest that hermeneutics seeks “the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.” It is concerned with “questions about the Bible’s meaning in the ‘here and now.’”<sup>9</sup> For Preus, hermeneutics “answers the question, ‘What does this text mean to us today?’”<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the text of Scripture will have relevance in different ways to people in different cultures and situations. But the meaning of the text is one. Figure # 1 is an attempt to show what I term the “modern” approach to exegesis and hermeneutics. A text has one meaning but many applications (A<sup>1</sup>, A<sup>2</sup>, A<sup>3</sup>). It has been used on and off for about 500 years. Figure #2

shows what happens when the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics is blurred. Here a text may have an infinite number of meanings (M<sup>1</sup>, M<sup>2</sup>, M<sup>3</sup>).

### **Figure 1. Modern Model**

### **Figure 2. Postmodern Model**

## **Blurring the Distinction between Exegesis and Hermeneutics**

Today, though, the classical distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics is being called into question. There is a conscious or unconscious assumption both on the academic level and the practical level that a text has more than one meaning. We offer a few examples here.

### *1. Popular Preaching*

John Bright, writing in the American context, says that “many a hard-pressed pastor has complained that it is unrealistic to expect him to perform [the exegetical] task and has asked to be excused from it.” Such pastors ask: “Is there not some shortcut?” But Bright insists that “biblical preaching . . . begins in exegesis.” Thus, “there can be no shortcuts.”<sup>11</sup>

I think that in Nigeria, as in America, many preachers take shortcuts. They do not take the time to do serious exegesis. Thus, they go directly from the text to the interpretation, by-passing the exegesis. The congregation, then, does not hear God speaking through the text; instead, they hear a preacher speaking his own message. But then the preacher loses his authority.

Bright says: “Biblical preaching is the only kind that carries with it authority. And the preacher needs authority.” If the preacher does not preach the Bible, then he loses his authority. So, either “it is biblical preaching or no preaching with authority.”<sup>12</sup>

### *2. Post-Modernism*

Postmodernism is the belief that knowledge and truth are inherently subjective. It is a rejection of the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. For postmodernists, “there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate.”<sup>13</sup>

When applied to hermeneutics, postmodernism can lead to confusion. Does it really matter what the biblical author meant if a text has an infinite number of possible meanings? What is the function of an authoritative text in such a situation?

Walter Brueggemann is a classic example of postmodernism. He refers to the Old Testament God as an “unsettled Character”; and unsettlement characterizes the present hermeneutical situation. In the Old Testament there is a pluralism of faith affirmations, a pluralism of methods and a pluralism of interpretive communities. Thus, there is “no going back to a singular coherent faith articulation in the text.”<sup>14</sup>

Brueggemann says that “the great new fact of interpretation is that we live in a pluralistic context, in which many different interpreters in many different specific contexts representing many different interests are at work on textual (theological) interpretation. The old consensus about limits and possibilities of interpretation no longer holds.” Thus, “there can be no right or ultimate interpretation, but only provisional judgments.”<sup>15</sup>

Brueggemann claims that the Old Testament text is “powerfully polyphonic” and “elusive.” “The elusive quality of the text . . . invites interpretation that is free, expansive, and enormously imaginative. Thus I insist that expansive, imaginative interpretation is not an illicit abuse of the text. It is rather activity permitted and insisted on by the text.”<sup>16</sup>

James Barr bemoans Brueggemann’s “total surrender to the postmodern *Zeitgeist*.” His work is “a total surrender to postmodernism,” especially “the sort of liberal/postmodern mixture influential in the so-called ‘liberal’ churches and theological schools.”<sup>17</sup>

For Brueggemann the Old Testament is only rhetoric. His theology is set up as a court of law: there is testimony, counter-testimony, unsolicited testimony and embodied testimony. But is there no reality behind the testimonies? Barr thinks that this is a strange court where testimonies are heard but no conclusions about real events are reached.<sup>18</sup>

Barr’s last great work makes a plea for objectivity in hermeneutics. He says: “We cannot take an ancient passage or ancient work like the Bible and say that its meaning has to be up-dated, brought into the modern world.” Rather, we must “sink ourselves increasingly into its *past* meaning. In the doing of this, that past meaning, which is the only meaning, interprets and criticizes our modern life as it comes into contact with our modern thoughts, traditions, experiences and histories.”<sup>19</sup>

Barr is not a conservative evangelical. But one must appreciate his concern for objectivity in the exegesis of the biblical text.

### 3. *Lutheran Christological Hermeneutics*

My friend Jonathan Preus has written a couple of works on hermeneutics. We have already considered his definition of exegesis as bringing out the meaning of a text. This suggests a concern for the original meaning of the text. He writes: “exegesis begins with the attempt to understand the original meaning of a passage.” But he then says that Scripture’s “message can not be limited to its supposed ‘original meaning.’”<sup>20</sup>

In his book on hermeneutics, Preus says that since “Jesus is alive, and the Bible is a living Word . . . the plain and obvious meaning may not be the only meaning.” Since Jesus *is* the Gospel, “all Scripture must be read in relation to him.”<sup>21</sup>

Preus freely acknowledges his Lutheran tradition. He says: “For the heirs of Luther, the Bible proclaims Jesus Christ. Everything in the Bible finds its place in relation to its central message, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, “the task of interpretation is to reveal the spiritual meaning behind the literal words.”<sup>23</sup>

This might suggest that a text for Preus would have two meanings, a literal one and a spiritual one. But he does not stop there. “Who establishes what the Bible means?” The author, the original actor or speaker, the church and myself all determine this. “The Bible is God’s message to each person individually, so its true meaning is what it means to me.”<sup>24</sup>

I don’t think Preus is a true postmodernist. I think rather that he is a christological Lutheran with some existentialist leanings. Sometimes when he speaks of “meaning,” I think he is referring to existential meaning. At other times, he seems to be thinking of a christological or spiritual meaning. I have deep respect for his Lutheran christological tradition. I wonder,

though, whether Martin Luther, who insisted on one plain meaning of the text, would endorse all of the “meanings” that Preus seems to allow.

#### 4. *African Inculturation Hermeneutics*

African exegetes are strongly interested in the relevance of a text for our situation today. This is to their credit. Many European and American commentaries are highly scientific and erudite, but in the end there is often little practical relevance for the preacher or the believer. African exegesis and preaching tend to be much more practical.

An Ibibio proverb says that when a bird flies, its legs always point to the ground. Thus, according to Prof. Teresa Okure, scholarship must always be done in service of life. She writes: “Biblical criticism took off from the ground and remained poised in flight for a greater part of the twentieth century. In the process it all but lost touch with life on the ground . . . . Scholarship now needs to land on the ground, reconnect with life and critically assess its aerial view findings for the benefit of life on the ground.”<sup>25</sup>

A study was recently made comparing African and North Atlantic (European/American) commentaries on the story of the bleeding woman (Mk. 5:25-34, par.). The work focused on three issues in the story: miracle, woman and blood. In all three cases, the African commentators were more ready to relate the story to their situation. The researcher concluded: “African scholars insist on drawing out the hermeneutical implications of their exegesis. The exegetical task is considered incomplete unless real life issues of the readers are addressed.”<sup>26</sup>

One should praise African scholarship for correcting this deficiency in North Atlantic scholarship. The Bible was written so that we might have life, and abundant life. The God of the Bible still works in our context today. Exegetical studies should explain how God acted then, and how he can still act today. The practical relevance of a text needs to be stated.

But in the process, there is sometimes a blurring of the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics. Okure, for example, reacts against such a separation. She believes that no one can stand outside of the hermeneutical circle. All exegesis should be hermeneutical or relevant to one’s contemporary context.<sup>27</sup>

Justin Ukpong moves in the same direction. In an interesting study, he reinterprets the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-13) from the perspective of peasant farmers in West Africa, and probably southeast Nigeria in particular. He concludes that the manager was socially oppressed and was trying to fight for survival in an unjust world. Thus, the rich man was the rogue, and the manager the hero.<sup>28</sup>

Ukpong calls his methodology “inculturation biblical hermeneutic,” which is “an approach that consciously and explicitly seeks to interpret the biblical text from socio-cultural perspectives of different people.”<sup>29</sup>

Ukpong agrees with Okure that “classical Western Bible reading methodologies” are “*intellectualist*” while African readings are “*existential and pragmatic* in nature, and *contextual* in approach.”<sup>30</sup> Again, one commends the African concern for the relevance of a text. But he enters into dangerous waters when he removes the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics.

Ukpong says that his methodology “eschews the idea of one universally valid interpretation of the biblical text.” He rejects the “hitherto dominant classicist approach, which supposes the biblical text to have only one universally valid interpretation.” Instead, “the inculturation biblical hermeneutic supposes that the biblical text is plurivalent and can be validly understood differently according to different contexts and perspectives.”<sup>31</sup> Again, he says: “the meaning of a text is a function of the interaction between the text in its context and the reader in his/her context. Thus, there is no one absolute meaning of a text to be recovered through historical analysis alone.”<sup>32</sup>

While I have strong appreciation for the inculturation hermeneutic efforts of Okure and Ukpong, I take issue with this last statement. Every Bible text has an author who wrote words with a meaning in his mind. We may not always be able to determine the original intention of the author, but we should always attempt to discover this intention. Otherwise, we fall into the deep sea of subjectivism.

## Conclusion

We live in a global community. We need to hear the voices of every geographic part of the church. The African perspective on a text will give new light to a text that has thus far only been understood only through European eyes. But in the end a text has only one original meaning. Let us work together as Africans and Europeans and Asians and Americans to understand the intended meaning of God’s Word.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967; reprint ed., Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982; reprint ed., Jos: Potters House, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Preus, *Reading the Bible through Christ* (Bukuru: TCNN Publications, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Bright, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1897) VII: 650, trans. R.C. Johnson; cited by Bright, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Garland, “Preaching Christ in Africa Today,” *TCNN Research Bulletin* 47 (March 2007): (16-36) 17, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Fee and Stuart, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Preus, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Bright, p.169.

<sup>12</sup> Bright, p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, pp. 61-63.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, p. 731.

<sup>17</sup> James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 557, 561.

<sup>18</sup> Barr, pp. 548-49.

<sup>19</sup> Barr, p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Preus, “Reading the Bible through Christ,” in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 26 (Oct. 1993): (1-20) 6.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Preus, *Reading the Bible through Christ*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Preus, “Reading the Bible through Christ,” p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Preus, *Reading the Bible through Christ*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Preus, *Reading the Bible through Christ*, p. 12.

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<sup>25</sup> Teresa Okure, "I will open my mouth in parables': A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics," *New Testament Studies* 46/3 (2000): (445-63) 463; quoted by Grant LeMarquand, *An Issue of Relevance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> LeMarquand, p. 220.

<sup>27</sup> LeMarquand, pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 189-210.

<sup>29</sup> Ukpong, p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in a World Context*, ed. W. Dietrich and U. Luz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), (pp. 17-32), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager," pp. 190-91.

<sup>32</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa* ed. G. West and M. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), (pp. 11-28), p. 24.