

## **Modification of Biblical Studies: A Response to Hector Avalos' *The End of Biblical Studies***

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### **Abstract**

There have been calls to end biblical studies the way it is. The major premise for this argument is the irrelevance of the Bible in the 21st century based on the discoveries of biblical scholarship and the response of biblical scholars to these discoveries. Amongst these findings is the fact that the Bible is a product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature and purpose of our world are quite alien to us, as such no longer relevant. Irrespective of such irrelevance, the biblical studies enterprise is still focused on maintaining the illusion of the Bible being relevant. This essay attempts to argue for the modification of Biblical studies through engaged learning. It also argues for the relevance of the Bible through all ages. Engaged learning is a set of learner-centred pedagogies that attend to a range of student outcomes, situated within a larger school culture that values and prioritizes student engagement in learning. For learning to be engaged it must be holistic, developmental, contextual and integrative. It is a descriptive study with deductions made from other publications. The author argues that for the Bible to be relevant in our contemporary time, an engaged learning process has to be adopted. To achieve its purpose, a review of works against the continuation of biblical studies as being done presently was carried out, the present curriculum for biblical studies was discussed with inherent loopholes identified, and a detailed analysis of the constituents of engaged learning also done. The essence of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation is not to find out the background of a biblical text, but the underlying principles in the passage. Principles never fade,

they are ever-green and relevant in all ages, as such the Bible is still relevant in our contemporary time.

### **Introduction**

Reading and interpreting the Bible in the 21st century has been characterized by some difficulties. Amongst which are the problems of the vast cultural and historical distances between the biblical and the present times, otherwise known as distancing (Ricoeur, 1975); and the divide between practical or rationalistic engagement with the biblical text as a historical document (critical descriptions) and non-rationalistic allegiance to the Bible as God's word (capricious faith) (Keifert, 2005). This has led some biblical scholars to argue for the discontinuance of Biblical studies the way it is. Amongst such is Hector Avalos (2007), who expressed this view in *The End of Biblical Studies*; where he outlined reasons for his position. His plea to end Biblical Studies as we know it is anchored on two main premises: The demonstration by modern biblical scholarship that the Bible is the product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature and purpose of our world are at variance with the present time, as such are no longer considered relevant, even by most Christians and Jews; and irrespective of such irrelevance, the biblical studies enterprise still focuses on maintaining the illusion of relevance through scholarly disciplines and infrastructures which supports biblical studies (Avalos, 2007).

Hector, further, hinges his argument on the irrelevance of the Bible for our present time based on discoveries of the dead sea scrolls and other enormous archaeological treasures found in the Near East in the last one and half centuries. Irrelevance, in this context, refers to a biblical concept or practice that is no longer considered as valuable, applicable and/or ethical. He consolidates his position by citing Michael Coogan, another biblical scholar, who admits that some biblical practices are so objectionable today that some churches try to hide parts of the Bible from their members (Coogan, 2003). The irrelevance of the Bible was further supported with empirical findings by the Gallup organization through their survey on biblical literacy. These surveys show that despite avowed adherence to the Bible, most Christians are either ignorant of the Bible or have a very limited appeal to it. In 1990, a detailed survey of American faith by Gallup

revealed that “eight in ten Americans are said to be Christians, but only four in ten know that Jesus, according to the Bible, delivered the sermon on the Mount” (Gallup & Castelli, 2007, p. 225). These surveys, if conducted within Nigeria may produce the same results. This is due to a dearth of Bible Study in Pentecostal churches and the avalanche of untrained ministers and members who are after miracles, rather than an intimate relationship with God.

This argument of ignorance, no matter how tenable negates two key doctrines of the Christian faith: The inspiration of the Bible and the inerrancy of scriptures. The inspiration of scripture supports the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the scripture writers which made their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which made what they wrote to actually be the word of God (Erickson, 2007). Howard Marshall opines that “The significance of the doctrine of inspiration is surely that the message of the New Testament rings true in every generation” (Marshall, 1977, p.16). If this is true for the New Testament, then it is applicable to the whole Bible. Erickson (2007) notes that the doctrine of inerrancy of scriptures upholds the truthfulness of all the teachings of the Bible. Whatever view one holds of inspiration, rationally, it involves the inerrancy of the Bible. Inerrancy is a product of the doctrine of full inspiration.

Biblical studies can simply be defined as the academic discipline or field of study of Judeo-Christian Bible and its related texts (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, n.d). Its emphasis is on the meaning of specific passages of the Bible or the biblical books. The rigorous scientific approach to the study of the bible resulting in the systematic advancement of novel knowledge criticized by professionals through various publications makes it an academic discipline. The ethos of biblical studies is historical-critical with the aim of describing as accurately and objectively as possible the social and historical context of biblical authors so as to ascertain the meaning of the text in its own time (Kittredge, n.d). Three worlds play a critical role in the interpretative process of a text: These three convey interlocking steps in the hermeneutical circle. Kittredge states that:

The world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. The world of the text includes observation of the text

itself, description and formal analysis; the world behind the text includes historical reconstruction, exploration of the sources and prehistory of the text and the world in front of the text includes the centuries of interpretation through which we read the text in the present, as well as our-own cultural –philosophical temperamental lenses and perspectives (Kittredge, n.d, p. 300).

The essence of the “world of the text” and “world behind the text” is not the discovery of cultures and values that are alien to the present time, but what the text meant to the recipients at that time, through which its meaning can be applied to the world in “front of the text”. This process makes biblical studies as presently constituted an indispensable component of theological education.

However, this paper seeks to argue for the modification of Biblical studies through engaged learning, a different premise from that of Hector Avalos. It also argues for the relevance of the Bible through all ages. Engaged learning is a set of learner-centred pedagogies that attend to a range of student outcomes, situated within a larger school culture that values and prioritizes student engagement in learning (Swaner & Ackerman, 2018). It is a descriptive study involving a systematic review of published articles relevant to the task of biblical studies, the Bible and engaged learning.

### **Methods of Biblical Studies**

The Bible can be looked upon as a historical book with the historical records of Israel and her neighbours expressed in human words through divine inspiration (Krentz, 1975). Since the Bible is historical, made of ancient text, it is exposed to, and will continue to be exposed to historical investigations and the products of historical research (Black & Dockery, 1991). The historical-critical approach is presently the most suitable one adopted by biblical studies for the interpretation of scriptures. It is “the disciplined interrogation of sources to secure a maximal amount of verified information” (Krentz, 1975, p. 6). Over the centuries, Biblical studies has been categorized into three basic interest groups: The first, those who focus on providing meaning for the text in the world behind the text; second, are those who focus on providing meaning for the text in the world

within the text; and the third, those that focus on providing meaning for a given text in the world in front of the text (Tate, 2008).

The interest of the first group, which is the primal method, is history – the historical reconstruction, investigation of the sources and prehistory of the text. The second lays emphasis on the text arguing that meaning can only be derived from within the text, not from external sources. It involves study of the text itself, explanation and formal analysis. The third, takes into cognizance centuries of interpretation through which the text is read in the present, alongside the cultural-philosophical temperamental lenses and perspectives of the reader in the present time. It should be noted that each of these categories is not an independent entity, our cultural affiliations influence our historical reconstructions as such are provisional, open to alteration and modification. For the scriptural text to have meaning and relevance in the present, it must explore each of the “three worlds” in the hermeneutical circle. Kittredge states that:

The text alone is not self-interpreting but requires a community of readers. To stay in the world behind the text risks losing both the text and its power to speak. Staying in the world in front of the text with one’s own associations, preoccupations, and expectations of “relevance” is to avoid the challenge of the text’s cultural and historical otherness, as well as its possibility to speak as God’s word. Exploring the world in front of the text will take into account modern canons of evidence and reason and critiques of the Bible, feminist analyses of gender constructions in the text, and interpretations of the text in Christian doctrine in different periods (Kittredge, n.d, p. 300).

The “world behind the text” comprises of the following Historical Critical Methodologies: Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, Historical Criticism, and Textual Criticism. The “world of the text” involves providing the meaning of a text through exegesis. A careful systematic unveiling of scripture to discover its original, intended meaning. This requires the knowledge of biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek); the Jewish, Semitic, and Greco-Roman backgrounds; determination of the original rendering of the text through critical study of the variants, etc. The “world in front of the

text” makes room for modern readers to bring in their own views and concerns to the text.

Presently, in biblical studies, historical criticism is carried out in its pristine form or in its modified form. The pristine form presumes the explanation of the supernatural or its safe ignorance. Most of the modified forms, however, seem to accept its inability to expose revelation to scientific investigation, as such make room for the supernatural (Adjei-Boadi, 2013). The essence of all these is the discovery of the underlying themes and concepts which constituted Israel’s religious heritage, rather than toward the atomizing of Israel’s religious documents into fragmentary sources, and the piecing of the sources into a presupposed evolutionary pattern (Forster, n.d.).

### **Relevance and Challenges of Historical Critical Method**

The relevance of the historical-critical methods in biblical interpretation cannot be overemphasized, even though it has its own challenges. Through this method, the amazing world behind the authors are brought to the fore (Olagunju, n.d.). It is free from dogmatism and its constraints since it examines scriptures with an avalanche of scholarly tools. As such it is appropriate for a modern, and even post-modern rationalistic age. Manfred Oeming (2006) opines that the Historical-Critical method has helped to take away from the text the burdens of being something they were never intended to be: factual reports. This method also complies with the modern autonomy of reason and are involved in a discourse with the atheistic world on the basis of reason. Oeming further argues that this method has revealed that the texts of the Bible is shaped by a lengthy process of growth and tradition, shedding more light on the history and cultural background of Israel, and the evolution of some obscured text, particularly from the Old Testament’ as such understanding this process is a prerequisite to understanding the texts. This method’s high intellectual sincerity and continuing courage to make enquiries has rooted the biblical text in honest exegesis (2006).

The protection of the Bible from being monopolized by fundamentalist further highlights the relevance of the historical-critical method. It has brought to the fore certain practices of the ancient world through archeological discoveries and other specialized

methods. It should also be noted that this method is intimately connected to the modern critical Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* and the Catholic's idea of aligning one's teaching around the witness of the saints and apostles.

Donahue (1993) outlines the following as the challenges to the pursuit of the historical critical method: The First, is the official acceptance and widespread use of this method. Most of its conclusions and leading practitioners have been objects of constant attacks from neo-integrist writers, as historical criticism is labelled as modernist or too bothered with the human elements of the Bible. Secondly, most practitioners argue that historical criticism is too preoccupied with the "world behind the text," to the exclusion of the "world of the text". Thirdly, the methods and achievement of historical criticism are not communicated anew to each generation. The fourth is the evolution of biblical studies into a specialty field. The fifth is the failure of vibrant biblical theologies and exegetes to be in dialogue with other theological disciplines. The sixth is the need to develop pastoral models for biblical studies. Sarah Hall posits that "most conclusions of historical criticism challenge traditional formulations of Christian faith and underlined the gap between the world views to be found in the biblical texts, especially those relating to miraculous events, and those of Christian readers today (Hall, 2005)." Adjei-Boadi notes that for historical criticism to be relevant in our present time, it must objectively dialogue with the Bible in an attempt to establish its place in biblical scholarship, making room for the divine aspects of the Bible (2013). These challenges, amongst which is the negative effect of the discoveries on the faith of the practitioners, is what may have led to the call to end biblical studies the way it is, and also the irrelevance of the Bible in the 21st century.

### **Engaged Learning and Its Dimensions**

In order to curb negative influences on the practitioners of historical criticism, a more comprehensive educational approach known as "engaged learning" is proposed. Lynn E. Swaner and Beth Ackerman define engaged learning as a set of learner-centred pedagogies that attend to a range of student outcomes, situated within a larger school culture that values and prioritizes student engagement in learning (2018). Christian education is centred around the declaration of God's

power to the next generation (Psalm 71:18) and the preparation of students to serve God's purpose in their generation (Acts 13:36). In the context of theological education, the foundation for engaged learning is the Bible and aligns with the biblical worldview and not humanistic educational philosophy. Truth is centred around the person of Jesus and the word of God (John 14:16, John 17:17, 2 Timothy 3:16) (Swaner and Ackerman, 2018). Ken Robinson notes that "engaged learning reflects not the old style of industrial education, which was designed to meet the needs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but a new style of education suited to the challenges we now face and the real talents" (Robinson, 2015, p. xxv).

Biblically, learning is a process by which people relate to God and God's way of truth, righteousness and peace; that they may in obedience practice that way in relation to each other and extending it to the nations (Werner, 2010). Phillip Potter (as cited in Werner, 2010) posits that learning does not simply mean acquisition of knowledge or skills, being intellectually equipped or just memorizing some catechism of faith. Rather it means entering with our whole body and with the people into a relationship with God through God's self-revelation, that our horizons are widened and our wills are strengthened to be right with God and with one another in word and deed. The dimensions of engaged learning are: Holistic, Developmental, Contextual and Integrative.

**Holistic:** Learning experience should not be limited to just one domain of learning, rather, a multiple domain is encouraged. Aspects to be considered are the cognitive, affective, behavioural and spirituality. The emphasis in most theological institutions is on cognitive development: the development of the student's ability to process information, perceptual skill and language learning skills. Emphasis is placed more on developing one's ability to process and understand, store and retrieve information. Spirituality is not given a place of priority. There is an imbalance between spirituality and cognitive development. Christian spirituality encompasses the relationship between the whole of a person and a holy God, who reveals himself through both Testaments, and supremely, in the person and work of his unique son, Jesus Christ (Ogunewu, 2017).



The spiritual formation of the students must be given equal attention as their cognitive development. Howard (2011, p. 35) notes that “Spiritual formation refers to the human means and processes by which spiritual growth is actually experienced in communities and individuals.” Whereas Christian spiritual formation is the process through which individuals and communities become fully conformed and united to Jesus Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling (Howard, 2008).

Holiness is a key requirement for anyone who desires an intimate relationship with God. Holiness occupies a significant place in God’s covenant with His people, as revealed in the covenanted invitation to God’s people and the command for His people to be holy as God is Holy. The command to be holy, and becoming holy can be seen as a cyclical act involving praise and prayers to God, obedience to God’s command, our responses to God’s act of love, and our understanding of the concept of God’s holiness and God’s holy love.

Dirk van der Merwe (2015) proposes adding the component of spirituality to the multi-dimensional methodologies of interpreting biblical texts. This should not be regarded as another linear component in the methodological process, rather, it should be seen as complimentary to each of the texture activities in a contemplative studying of scripture. This will help to facilitate the realization of the embodiment of biblical principles in the lives of many Christian. Merwe states that “correct discernment of Scripture (text) is enabled by the spirit to those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:14), not only by way of inductive impressions but also through the deductive activities of imaginative exegesis” (2015, p. 3). For enhanced spirituality, faith in God and his word should be the fundamental hermeneutical tool in the interpretative process. This faith in God should manifest in their obedience to His word to become lived experiences.

**Developmental:** This means that the learning process should encourage growth and development toward complexity and maturity in all domains. Areas of interest are the student’s thought pattern, reactions to events, feeling and faith. The learning process should help the student grow in his believing the word of God, rather than destroying his faith.

**Contextual:** This makes reference to the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. Since this is a discourse on biblical interpretation, being contextual has to do with interpreting the Bible to suit the environmental needs of the reader. Various methods have been developed to interpret the Bible contextually. Interpreters have employed their own interpretative approaches based on ancient, recent and contemporary scholarship. Several hermeneutical approaches have been identified amongst which are enculturation hermeneutics, folklorising method, post-colonial hermeneutics, liberation studies, evaluative studies and post-modern feminist studies. As Africans, there is the need to adopt dynamic methodology to biblical studies that is both theologically legitimate and contextually authoritative. This has led to the development of Africentrism in order to mobilize Africa-religio-cultural values and understanding in the interpretation of biblical text to meet the need of African Christians (Idamarhare, 2014). Africentric hermeneutics is contextual hermeneutics and involves the re-reading of the scripture premeditatedly with the view of Africa culture and heritage at the centre. Its aim is not only understanding the Bible and God in the African experience and culture, but also to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed (Yorke, 1995). Gosnell Yorke states that “African Biblical Studies is methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world view, culture and life experience with the aim of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected” (1995, p. 145). This approach makes the Bible relevant irrespective of the setting or environment where it is read.

**Integrative:** This involves helping students to integrate learning through various sites and sources. Activities that facilitate integration in active hands-on learning alongside ongoing opportunity for reflection, thereby enhancing the student’s ability to connect the dots and teens in their learning are encouraged (Swaner & Ackerman, 2018).

For engaged learning to achieve its results in a theological institution, the Bible must be at the centre of their curriculum. Michael Ogunewu notes that “The Bible contains all the principles that the learners

needed to understand to fit into God's programme" (2017, p. 154). The Bible is the basis and the foundation of Christian education and its philosophy as well. If the word of God is not the foundation for all that is done, taught, etc. then, theological education can be said to be on a very shaky ground (Okpoku, Addai-Mensah & F. Manu, 2014). Tommy L. Bridges posits that all elements of theological education curriculum should abide by the spiritual principles contained in the Bible. Every element in the curriculum should not only reflect biblical teachings but be based on and fully affirm the authority, authenticity, and reliability of the scriptures as the complete inerrant word of God (1998, p. 544). Rather than having a call for the end of Biblical studies, it should be modified making use of the engaged learning process. With a bible-based curriculum and adopting the dimensions of engaged learning, the relevance of the Bible in our contemporary time cannot be downplayed.

### **Conclusion**

The essence of theological education is to equip individuals who have a divine call for the purpose of fulfilling their various God-given ministries (Enyinnaya, 2008). This process, irrespective of one's specialization should build the faith of the students: faith in God and His word. Biblical Studies is amongst the areas of specialization and can simply be defined as the academic discipline or field of study of Judeo-Christian Bible and related texts. Its emphasis is on the meaning of specific passages of the Bible or the biblical books. Its ethos is historical-critical with the aim of describing as precisely and accurately as possible the social and historical context of biblical authors so as to ascertain the meaning of the text in its own time. It makes use of the scientific approach in determining the meaning of a text. The discoveries of this process could build one's faith or mar the faith of the individual. This has made biblical scholars, such as Hector Avalos, to propose an end to biblical studies the way it is. One of the reasons attributed for this is that the discoveries of biblical studies have revealed the irrelevance of the Bible for the 21st century Christians.

Rather than putting an end to biblical studies, which involves examining three different worlds, it should be modified by adopting an engaged learning approach with the Bible at the centre of its

curriculum, so as not to undermine the relevance of the Bible. The dimensions of engaged learning are holistic, developmental, contextual and integrative. Two amongst these four dimensions were discussed at length due to its significance in endorsing the relevance of the Bible. No learning process should destroy our belief in the Bible. Learning processes have to be holistic without subjugating the spiritual components of the learning. The spiritual reinforces faith in the word of God. The inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible are two fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. The discoveries of biblical study rather than prove the irrelevance of the faith is a proof of the authenticity of the Bible. The essence of research on any biblical text is the discovery of principles which should be applied in our contemporary time, and if such principles are no longer practicable in the present time, the discoveries will be a means of guiding members to do the right thing. Rather than put an end to Biblical studies, the hermeneutical process can be modified contextually.

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