

THE PLACE OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Biblical languages are indispensable in the study of theology particularly biblical and Christian theology. The relevance of these languages for daily use of the Bible cannot be overstated. The researcher intends to identify the rudiment of studying and interpreting the Christian Scripture and the implication of elucidating the Bible text(s) without at least basic knowledge of the two major biblical languages. The research method adopted by the researcher in this study is the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis. It is observed that one of the principal factors responsible for the production of quack teachers and preachers of the theological messages of the biblical texts is inadequate proficiency in the knowledge of Hebrew and Greek languages. Eixegesis which usually leads to poor hermeneutics has been advocated by quack users of the Bible. It is observed that even in some so-called theological schools in Nigeria, the so-called students of theology are not well exposed to accurate exegetical approaches and applications. This has culminated in the deception of the congregation and the introduction of confusion into society. It has led to wrong practices and dogmatism in some Christian denominations and individual practices of religiosity. Biblical languages are very expedient in the promotion of standard theological education in Nigeria. Any theological institution which does not take at least basic Hebrew and Greek as priority is substandard and should not be given license to operate as they would produce nothing but quacks. Every theological education must endeavour to focus more on the exegesis of the texts and their application in the right contexts.

Keywords: Biblical languages; Christian theology; theology; theological education; Nigeria.

Introduction

Thorough study of Hebrew and Greek languages has remained a prerequisite for the standard establishment of any theological education in Nigeria. There cannot be standard theological education without consideration of basic biblical languages as mandatory courses of study. Theological education according to Marbaniang (2016) is education that one receives in the discipline of theology. It is that avenue or field of study that has as its objective a clear understanding of the Christian faith. It may be defined as the discipline that aims at an appropriate understanding, interpretation, defence, and application of the Christian faith in the world. It is worthy of note to recall that interpretation of any biblical text is a herculean task. It requires the effort of a polyglot. It is this that theological education provides through the teaching of biblical languages and exegesis.

For decades in Nigeria, theological education has been abused. It is becoming common to use church Sunday school and evening bible study as equivalent to theological education. This is so

because there are numerous so-called theological schools which do not have Hebrew and Greek Language courses in their curriculum. Although, some may have these language courses in their curriculum but do not have human resources to handle them. It is a very wrong approach in the real sense of it. Any so-called theological institution operating in that manner is just a bible school where people read the bible and discuss their personal views on the text they read irrespective of whether it is within the context or not. This kind of avenue has created room for the production of quack teachers and preachers of the bible in large quantities in Nigeria.

Uncountable numbers of church members have been deceived, molested, brainwashed, and defrauded by these products of substandard theological institutions in Nigeria. They do not usually possess adequate and yielding knowledge of the Christian scripture with which they could feed the congregation. They lack the skills for investigation of the biblical text from its original context as well as proper application of the biblical text in a particular contemporary setting.

As a result, they usually leave their congregation in perpetual ignorance and confusion while they exploit them as they desire. There is indeed an urgent need for the establishment and retention of standard theological education in Nigeria to curb the menace of quack theologians. The thrust of this paper is to publicize the need for a thorough study of biblical languages as well as the danger of their deliberate omission in theological education in Nigeria.

The researcher adopts the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis in this study. Obiorah (2015 p.90) avers that the “Historical-Critical method takes cognizance of the historical development of the biblical passages, which have diverse audiences over time. It also takes into consideration the modern readers of the Bible who are thousands of years apart from the text.” In the views of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993), the historical-critical method seeks to shed light upon historical processes which gave rise to a biblical text. Textual, literary and form criticisms are parts or aspects of the Historical-Critical method. The textual method determines the best translation closest to the original text; the literary method studies the beginning and end of a biblical pericope; and form criticism seeks to identify the *gattung* as well as the social milieu of a biblical text. Historical-Critical method in essence studies the historical significance of a text. This method is apt for this study because it accounts for the development of biblical languages in the study of biblical texts and its relevance in contemporary times especially as regards theological education in Nigeria.

Overview of Theological Education

Theological education is an aspect of religious-based education. Religious education according to Marbaniang (2018 p.1) is “education given by any religion to its adherents.” Theological education has branches including Jewish theological education, Christian theological education, Islamic theological education and African Traditional Religious theological education among others. In the context of this paper, theological education will be considered from the point of view of Christian-based religious education. Theological education in this regard is described in the context of Christian theology. It takes into consideration the Christian understanding of the Supreme Being and interpretation of the Christian Scripture.

Christian theological education is a kind of religious education, but it is more advanced and clerical (i.e., about the clergy work) in nature. It is that theological education which is formally offered at Seminaries and related Colleges. A certification in theological studies is considered a pre-qualification for the ministry of doctrinal teaching. Of course, a certificate alone does not qualify a minister (Marbaniang, 2018). Adequate knowledge is a strong supplement to give a theologian or church minister eligibility for operation. “Theological Education is not for all, usually results in special service and leadership and usually takes place in a College or a Theological Education programme centred beyond the church” (Banks, 1999 p.2). Christian theological education is not the same as Sunday school class nor is it the same with Church based Bible School. Whereas Church-based Bible school bases their teaching on Christian faith and church dogma, Christian theological education encompasses the study of the original context of belief and practices from the onset of Christianity.

Biblical Languages

Biblical language(s) also known as language(s) of the Bible is a nomenclature used to describe the original language(s) used in the Bible. It designates the actual language(s) employed by the human literal authors of the biblical narratives and/or texts. There are few early languages used while composing and translating the Bible for public use. However, the two major original languages of the Christian Scripture (The Bible) are the Hebrew language for the Old Testament and the Greek language for the New Testament. Other early languages which came in contact with biblical texts include Aramaic (a close language to Hebrew), Ethiopian language, and Latin among others.

Biblical languages are paramount in the study and application of the biblical narratives and injunctions to daily living. They must be given priority in any reputable and standard theological College or University. Villeneuve (2017) posits that Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek studies are the *sine qua non* of biblical and theological studies in any serious academic institution. The study of Sacred Scripture cannot go far below the surface without at least a basic knowledge of the biblical languages. *ThoughtHub* (2015) contends that Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic are the languages God chose to communicate his inspired word to man. Therefore, it must be taken into serious study by man to understand this inspired word. Biblical languages and their adequate knowledge remain the single and the most important starting point for biblical exegesis. Ugwuowo (2018 p.4) posits that exegesis requires proficiency in biblical languages including Hebrew for the Old Testament and Koine Greek for the New Testament. This insinuates that one cannot communicate properly the message of the Old Testament and the New Testament without adequate knowledge of the Hebrew language and Greek language.

Hebrew Language and the Old Testament Studies

It is recognized that in every discipline, there is a mandatory theory, apparatus or language which is approved as a basic and compulsory requirement for study in that discipline or field. In the study of the Old Testament, Hebrew is such a pre-requisite.

When an Old Testament student decides that Hebrew is not important enough to study, he is cutting himself off from the best source of content and theory he can ever get. Hebrew is the primary document of the Old Testament and Christian faith and practice (Ugwueye, 2012 p.124).

The study of the Old Testament is not enough if the Hebrew language is not given priority. This language must be given priority irrespective of faith and culture across the globe. Any user of the Old Testament across the universe must make an effort to be familiar with at least basic Hebrew. The danger of ignoring to take the study and understanding of Hebrew as a priority is in line with Ugwueye's (2007) assertion that if Hebrew is ignored, the Old Testament student/user destines himself/herself for an enterprise of second-hand knowledge. Ugwuewo (2020 p.1) contends that:

Biblical Hebrew Language is crucial in the study of the Old Testament even in the contemporary time. In the OT texts, there is the possibility of one being confused; misinterpretation of the text is inevitable especially during analysis of a text if one remains a visitor to Hebrew.

Stuart (1984) authenticates this assertion as he avers that one may find it confusing to begin with the textual analysis of Old Testament passage if one's knowledge of Hebrew is not yet adequate. The ancient *TaNak* which is called the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Hebrew is the language of the culture, religion and civilization of the Jewish people since ancient times. Akao (1999) posits that the Hebrew language is one of the indispensable tools for the study of the Old Testament. For any Old Testament or biblical scholar, a sound or working knowledge of the Hebrew language is a prerequisite.

Biblical Hebrew represents the Hebrew language spoken by Jews between 1200 and 200 B.C. Although the language did not remain constant over the years, the form in which we now have it in the Old Testament is the standardized form spoken during the Monarchical period, when most of the biblical writings were compiled or written. It may be mentioned in passing that, in the post-exilic era, spoken Hebrew came under the strong influence of other languages like Aramaic, Persian, and later Greek. But Biblical Hebrew was almost unaffected because it had already assumed literary form. This point becomes glaring when biblical Hebrew is compared with Rabbinic Hebrew of the *Mishna*. Biblical Hebrew has affinities with other cognate Semitic languages. It belongs to the northwest ancient Semitic language family which includes Babylonian, Assyrian, Arabic, Ethiopia, Aramaic, Ugaritic and Phoenician. A comparison with any of these language systems helps at times to throw light on a difficult situation arising in the course of exegetical analysis. Excavation in Syria and Palestine since the First World War has helped a lot in aiding textual, epigraphically and comparative philological study of Hebrew and other Semitic languages (Ugwueye, 2012).

Wisse (2004) strongly argues that in the practical experience of being a Jew and an Old Testament student, Hebrew plays an important role in building confidence. Knowing Hebrew is like knowing how to drive. You can take the car out at any time and go wherever you like in Jewish studies, in exploring the Bible Land of Israel and its culture, in plumbing Jewish history. Being without Hebrew means always having to rely on a tour guide. Proficiency in Hebrew is the democratizing force in modern Jewish life. In the contentious words of Ugwueye (2012, pp 127-128),

When Paul told Timothy that 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and teaching in righteousness' (11 Timothy 3:16), he was talking about the *TaNakh* (Old Testament). It is the Hebrew text that Paul told Timothy, 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of

truth' (11 Timothy 2:15). Studying Hebrew may not be necessary for salvation; it certainly is necessary to plumb its depths. It is the best means and method to remove the clothing from the Bible.

Buttressing further on the value of Hebrew in the study of the Old Testament, Botkin (1999) argues that learning Hebrew idioms can help a reader to better understand the Bible. Moreover, the knowledge of Hebrew prepares one to take a private investigation of any proposition or teaching from the Old Testament text. It gives one a better opportunity to scrutinize every teaching from quack users of the Old Testament. Hebrew offers Old Testament students and exegetes direct information about the world of the Old Testament people and institutions. This herculean but interesting study of the Hebrew language gives one access to the appropriate use of concordance and commentaries, archaeological discoveries and other related documents which shed light on the knowledge of the Old Testament.

The study of Hebrew about understanding the Old Testament text is very obvious in the use of grammar in the Old Testament texts. It is conspicuous in the Old Testament to detect varieties of Hebrew words translated with the same spelling and meaning in English rendition. For instance, Hebrew has about four words for man, which has different meanings in their context and application. These Hebrew words translated as "man" in the English version of the Old Testament are *ādām* in Genesis 1:26; Genesis 2:15,18; Ezek 34:2; 35:2; 37:3 which means human being (male and female, old and young); *ʾîš* in Genesis 2:24 which means a single man who is husband of a woman (a married man); *ʾénôš* in Psalm 8:4 which means a mortal human being, human being who will die; and *Geber* in Proverbs 28:21 and Deuteronomy 22:5 which means a warrior, a soldier.

The above Hebrew words mean different things according to their context as illustrated above. But many English translations of the Old Testament use the word "man" for all of them without commenting (s) on their disparities in meaning and application. This kind of deterioration of Hebrew grammar and misplacement of thought is common and copious in English translations/versions of the Old Testament. It is only one who develops an interest in Hebrew and devotes time to the study of Hebrew grammar that would enjoy the advantage of such discovery.

Greek Language and the New Testament Studies

New Testament Greek belongs to Middle Koine (1st-3rd centuries AD). Within the framework of this chronolect, the Greek of the New Testament belongs to a specific topolect, that of near-eastern Greek, which was under the influence of Semitic languages. It could be called Semitized Koine, because its Aramaic and Hebrew substratum distinguishes it from the Greek spoken in the 1st century AD anywhere else, such as in Greece itself, as indicated by the Greek of Plutarch of Chaeronea (46-120 AD) (Rico, 2010).

The Greek language is so important in the study of the New Testament that without the language, the New Testament cannot be well articulated and absorbed. On this note, *the Minister and His Greek New Testament* (1977) contend that the real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament. It is good that the New Testament has been translated into so many languages. The fact that it was written in the koiné, the universal language of the time, rather than in one of the earlier Greek dialects, makes

it easier to render into modern tongues. However, there is much that cannot be translated. It is not possible to reproduce the delicate turns of thought, the nuances of language, in translation. The freshness of the strawberry cannot be preserved in any extract.

The Greek of the New Testament is one of the two major languages of the Bible which boosts Christian's understanding of Christian beliefs and practice. It also enhances a better understanding of other users of the Bible. The Greek language gives the students of theology and well-trained theologians access to original documents/manuscripts of the New Testament as well as the essence of those documents in the interpretation of the theology of the texts of the New Testament. Possession of adequate knowledge of the New Testament narratives and epistles such by a trained Bible teacher can be obtained from no other source than through the study of classical Greek. It equips a preacher who passed through theological education to win the confidence of those who listen to him or her to a fuller and larger degree and make an impact in their lives too. *Deeper insight* into the message of the New Testament is facilitated through the possession of at least basic knowledge of Greek. This implies that the knowledge of Greeks equips theologians to unfold the message of the New Testament to even the educated class of society with ease (Loasby, 1956).

The knowledge of Greek enhances students' understanding of the thought and grammar of the New Testament. It prepares students of standard theological institutions to detect corruption of manuscripts in various English renditions of the New Testament. Buttressing further, Loasby (1956) observes that in the New Testament, there are eight different Greek words each one of which is at times translated as “judgment” in the English Bibles. The minister of the Word ought to be very sure that he is giving the correct idea. This word “judgment” in English may be the translation of, unlike Greek words that mean a judgment stated the active carrying out of a judgment or sentence, a court of judgment, an opinion, advice, purpose, or an estimate. Of these Greek words, each with its peculiar meaning, one may be used only once, or ten times, or thirty or even more than four hundred times in the Greek New Testament. As a minister, one has the responsibility of making proper discrimination.

The Indispensability of Biblical Languages to Users of the Bible

Communication of ideas and training of a child or an apprentice is effective when a common suitable language is applied. If one is a nascent occupant of a certain foreign place, one needs to learn the language of such a place to flow with the daily activities in that place and to be carried along too. Therefore, the beginning of learning and understanding the culture of any people is first learning to know the language of such people. This necessity is required in the study and understanding of the Bible. Every daily user of the Bible must endeavour to learn Hebrew and Greek languages to have a proper elucidation of the texts of the Bible without tears. Besides this, Christian theologians including students of standard theological College/University must take the study of Hebrew and Greek languages as their primary duty. It is highly necessary because they cannot be better teachers and counsellors without at least basic knowledge of these languages.

In a similar vein, it is noted that knowing Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Greek unveils the interpretive options of a given text—and assists in properly adjudicating among them. Knowing Biblical Hebrew and Greek gives the interpreter useful access to invaluable exegetical tools. Certain passages of Scripture have multiple possibilities for meaning. Some translations footnote

(usually one of) the grammatical options, but many do not. When, say the King James Version differs from the New International Version, how will you determine which of them gives the best sense? For this, readers need a knowledge of the Biblical languages and access to grammar, lexica, and scholarly commentaries that deal directly with the original text, little of which will make any sense to those unschooled in Biblical languages. Reading the text in the original Biblical languages develops and reinforces a careful, detailed hermeneutical approach. Reading the Biblical text in the original Hebrew or Greek languages also identifies the authors' emphases (*ThoughtHub*, 2015).

Recommendation

The researcher recommends the following:

1. Nigeria leadership through any office in charge of theological education should make a policy which would encourage the teaching of biblical languages in all theological institutions, especially Christian theological institutions.
2. A monitoring team should be formed to check the teaching and learning of biblical languages in theological institutions in Nigeria.
3. Any theological institution which does not teach biblical language as a strong course in its curriculum should not be allowed to operate.
4. Every denomination which establishes theological school must endeavour to make the study of biblical languages a priority.
5. Users of the bible should be encouraged to submit themselves to learning Biblical languages to understand the thought and theology of the bible.
6. Experts in biblical languages should be empowered through attractive incentives to give their best for the development of theological education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning biblical languages in the course of theological education in Nigeria should be a mandatory exercise in all established theological institutions across the nation. The place of these languages in the interpretation of the Christian Scripture cannot be overstated. The harm caused by quack users and teachers of the Bible speaks volumes of the urgent need for the basic knowledge of these languages. To curb the influx of wrong teaching and misappropriation of biblical texts, adequate knowledge of biblical languages is required.

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