

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND ROLE¹

George O. Folarin

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics is a vital but neglected aspect of scholarly research. Catholic, protestant, and evangelical scholars rarely address it. On the other hand the African pentecostal christians, like their counterparts in other places, not only emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit but often affirm their total dependence on the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation.

In this write-up, the difficulties which result from the total dependence on the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation are identified. Next, the paper discusses the proper role of the Holy Spirit in *sacra hermeneutica*. The paper further examines the weaknesses of the interpretation of non-Christian scholars. It examines the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible. The paper ends with suggestions for various bodies on the issue.

2.0 THE PROBLEM

Zuck rightly points out that "... the task of Bible interpreters is to seek to ascertain the meaning of Bible passages to their original hearers and readers and to determine how that meaning relates to readers today."² Some scholars hold that this is the exclusive domain of academics. Some others hold that such a task is exclusive to mystics. Others again argue that such a task is exclusive to church leadership. Reformers (e.g. Martin Luther, John Calvin) and their followers reject the extreme views identified above. They argue that the Scripture should be interpreted historically and linguistically, under the control of the Holy Spirit.³ Bromiley summarizes the stance of the Reformers thus: "... the Spirit's testimony (accompanies) hard study of the text."⁴

This view of the Reformers is underscored by the doctrine of "perspicuity of scripture." This doctrine teaches that the Bible is clear in its messages and its meaning could be understood if diligently studied by the believer, under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Despite the noted importance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible, Pinnock points out that the Evangelicals have played down His (Holy Spirit's) role in hermeneutics.⁵ When the Spirit's role is mentioned at all, it is briefly. This apathy probably results from the danger which subjective and reader-driven interpretation poses. Scholars appear to be afraid that some mystics may claim access to "hidden meanings" of scripture passages which would be inconsistent with the literal interpretation and sense of the passages.

Some thorny questions raised about involving the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible are surveyed by Zuck.⁶ These questions highlight the difficulties which Bible scholars are trying to avoid in playing down the role of the Spirit in interpretation. Some of the questions are listed below:

1. If true learning comes by the Spirit's inner working, does this mean that one's understanding of Scripture is ultimately a subjective matter?
2. If one senses the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, does he automatically know the correct meaning of a Bible verse?

3. If the Spirit interprets the Word privately to individual believers, how can one determine the correct view among several interpretations?

4. If two people prefer to be taught by the Spirit and yet hold differing views on some Scripture passages or issues, which view is valid?

5. If human interpretation confuses the clarity of the Word, is the Bible no longer authoritative?

6. Is a person inconsistent if he allows the right of private judgement and at the same time claims that his interpretations are right and another's wrong?

7. Can a Christian claim infallibility for his interpretation of a Bible passage simply by affirming that the Holy Spirit "taught" him the meaning?

8. In what sense does the Holy Spirit give insight into the Bible's meaning? Does the "light" come suddenly or is it the result of study?

3.0 SOME RECENT CHALLENGES TO CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Only two challenges to contemporary biblical interpretation are highlighted in this section: the challenge of the receiving culture, and the dynamic role of the Holy Spirit.

Ntrelh observes that in 1963, the All African Conference of Churches resolved, among other things, that African biblical scholars should write Bible commentaries from African perspective.⁷ In 1976, the West African Association of Theological Institutions formally approved the "African Bible Commentaries' Project." In 1980, the Conference of African Theological Institutions adopted the same project. The goal of the project is that contributors will "... look afresh at the Bible with an African insight, relating their interpretation to the African past, and the prevailing situation of the church in Africa and African societal problems."⁸ But as K. A. Dickson contends, "... many of these socio-religious aspects, are not essential to the main Biblical message."⁹ Rather, they help the interpreter better identify the problems and priorities of his people to which the Bible would be applied. Abogunrin explains:

The right contextual approach in Africa today must take seriously into view the Biblical text, the cultural context which originally gave birth to the Bible, the influence of the West, and the cultural context of Africa where the message is preached today. Biblical scholars in Africa... (Should) come to the text... with the awareness of the concerns stemming from their cultural background, contemporary situation, and responsibility to the church.¹⁰

Even here, caution is needed. There are varying degrees of similarities and differences in cultures across the globe, which a Bible interpreter should be aware of. There are aspects of Hebrew, Western and African cultures that are similar. There are aspects that are common only to Jewish and African cultures. It is also significant to note, as Newbigin does, that "culture is changing. Some aspects of yester-year African culture are no longer contemporary. The Bible interpreter therefore needs to pay more attention to the contemporary problems and priorities of his people."¹¹

In his write-up, Ntrelh highlights two difficulties to achieving the laudable goal of writing sound African Bible commentaries:

1. Many African Bible scholars are trained by Westerners and so are trained in Western methodology. They are therefore often ill-prepared in African culture for the new task.

2. Currently, the effort of African-trained Bible scholars is often limited to comparing of biblical and African cultures, and interpreting biblical culture in the light of African culture.

The laudable objective of African biblical scholarship is fraught further with "... lack of widespread genuine biblical scholarship on the part of African theologians."¹² One of such is that many African scholars who engage in biblical interpretation are not biblical scholars: Many of them are trained in church history, African Traditional Religion (ATR), ethics, comparative religion, education, sociology, or philosophy, but not in biblical studies. Two, even many of those "trained" in biblical scholarship in many African institutions of higher learning have a poor or no working knowledge of biblical languages that can equip them for such a task. Genuine efforts should therefore be made by African scholars to correct these weaknesses.

The second challenge to contemporary biblical hermeneutics is the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. In ATR, the gods may be invoked in the interpretation of dreams, or strange events or transmission of sacred knowledge, but not in the interpretation of sacred texts. This is because ATR has no written texts.¹³

That pentecostal or charismatic churches in Africa affirm the importance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible has been demonstrated by certain scholars. Gaiya opines that "To the Aladura, Bible knowledge... is gained by the illumination of the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ Omoyajowo also cites the constitution of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church to support this position thus:

... believers shall study the Scriptures diligently, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit of God to guide them and give them correct and true meaning of the Scriptures... (through) a careful research and prayerful reflection...¹⁵

But it is one thing to have laudable principles (like depending on the Holy Spirit in, and the application of critical study to, the interpretation of the Bible); it is however a different thing to have the ability to apply the principles. It is problems like these that Nigerian scholars of pentecostal background are now trying to correct in their churches. The high rate at which they attend renowned theological seminaries in and outside Nigeria confirms this. In many of these institutions, they are some of the best in biblical studies. This is salutary.

The emphasis of the African Indigenous Churches on the importance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible shows that this hermeneutical principle is common to all pentecostals whether they are found in the West, East, North or South of the globe.¹⁶ Although most pentecostals accept simple, uncritical explanations of the Bible, a new crop of scholars of pentecostal background are now emerging. They are vigorously canvassing for the inclusion of pneumatic dimension in critical biblical interpretation. Johnston, quoting Helmut Thielicke, states that this set of scholars are of the view that the Holy Spirit "... grants accessibility to revelation affecting the miracle of divine self disclosure (and) of participating in God's self knowledge."¹⁷

Ervin is also critical of the hermeneutics that denies the Holy Spirit its rightful place. She says "...rationality by itself is inadequate for the task of interpreting the words of Scriptures. It is only as human rationality *joined* in ontological union with '... the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16), and is quickened by the Holy Spirit, that the divine mystery is understood by man..."¹⁸ According to her (i.e. Ervin), the testimony of Scriptures is that it is not possible to penetrate to the heart of the message of the Bible apart from the Holy Spirit. This is the fundamental inadequacy of orthodox hermeneutics; it lacks a clearly discerned pneumatic dimension. Since the Bible spells out clearly the initiative of the Holy Spirit in miracles, neglect of a clearly enunciated pneumatic dimension in orthodox hermeneutics leads to a demythologizing of miracles

and conversely the demythologizing of miracles renders the Holy Spirit irrelevant.

"Pneumatic hermeneutic" as Ervin calls it,¹⁹ should not be limited to the spiritual insight of a particular interpreter. Rather, the Bible should be:

... read within the pneumatic community of faith...and that community is much larger than the Post Reformation communities of the West. There is a growing sense of accountability to and for the cumulative consensus of the Church to the deposit of the faith once for all delivered. Part of Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to the Church is that "He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... He would guide you into all the truth" (John 14:27; 16:13). This hermeneutical enterprise must entertain seriously the insight in the church... It is the testimony of Scripture that the understanding of its words is not possible apart from the agency of the Holy Spirit who first breathed them.²⁰

Statements, such as those cited above show that the contemporary biblical scholars of pneumatic persuasion reject two extremes: The view that fails to involve the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation, and the view that rejects the application of critical methodology to the study of the Scriptures. Scholars of pneumatic persuasion however reject the negative critical method which is employed for the purpose of discrediting the Bible because it contains unpalatable truth.

4.0 IDENTIFICATION OF THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Bible indicates that the Holy Spirit helps the submissive believer in ascertaining the correct meaning of Bible statements, commands, and questions.²¹ He is "the Spirit of truth" in that He guides into "all truth" (John 16:13). The identification of "the truth" into which the Holy Spirit guides, and the person (to be) so guided is a matter of scholarly debate. Barclay states that the truth referred to in this text is comprehensive, and as such, is both spiritual and scientific.²² He (Barclay) further claims that this revelation is not limited to the first apostles but available to the present day believers. He underscores that revelation is still being given. Tasker²³ and Hunter²⁴ however limit the role of the Holy Spirit indicated in John 16:13 to the first apostles in their writing of the Scripture. That task, they claim, has stopped. Tasker particularly rejects the notion that the Spirit guides into the "truth of all subjects."²⁵

It is the opinion of the present writer that the context of the text shows that John 16:13 concerns spiritual truths. The primary recipients of the promise in the text under discussion were the first apostles whose role it was to point out specific truths about the person of Jesus and to work out the significance of what He said and did. Paul should be accommodated as one of the primary recipients of this promise. This guarantees infallibility to the messages of the apostles. But the text also applies to a secondary target: All the "disciples of Jesus" (past and present), though at a different level. The promise guarantees the secondary target ("other disciples") dependable but fallible interpretations if they diligently seek the meaning and significance of the scriptures (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15).

First John 2:27 affirms that the Holy Spirit teaches believers "all things." Those addressed in the epistle are variously called "children" (Gk: teknia) (2:1), and "babies" (Gk: paidia) (2:18). The implication of this usage is that if the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit extends to paidia ("babes") in Christ, how much more would the teaching ministry of the same Spirit be available to "mature Christians" who sincerely need His

service? Further more, by extrapolation, the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers in Christ who would allow the Spirit to teach them. The "anointing" in 1 John 2:27, is the Holy Spirit. By metonymy the act of anointing stands for what is given in the anointing, namely "the indwelling Holy Spirit."²⁶ The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit includes granting the meaning and the significance of the Word of God to believers who search for it. Paul makes such claim in 1 Cor. 2:12. Bromiley comments:

The Bible viewing itself as God-breathed seems to state plainly that proper interpretation is to be done in the Holy Spirit... The student can certainly give an objective account of what the Bible says if he follows... (certain) general and technical principles... But he cannot by himself come to full understanding of what is read and expounded. It is the Holy Spirit who grants His ultimate apprehension as He alone can do so in view of the divine nature of the factuality of the issue at stake.²⁷

Evangelicals (and Pentecostals) identify the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics as "illumination." This is different from "inspiration." Inspiration "... describes the work of the Holy Spirit on human writers of the Scriptures to convey, without error what God wants mankind to know of Himself."²⁸ It guarantees the infallibility of all the claims and words of the original autographa of the Bible. "Illumination" on the other hand describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit to draw "... Readers deeper into the world of the text (the Bible), deeper into the kingdom of God, closer to God's heart."²⁹ It ("illumination") refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in the interpreters of the Scriptures.

The illuminative ministry of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation is three fold. First, He guides the diligent Christian interpreter in ascertaining the meaning of biblical texts. Next, the Holy Spirit makes the believer receptive to the truths discovered in the texts. Third, the Holy Spirit leads the believer to apply the truths discovered to his life. This is why Pinnock states that the goal of illumination in hermeneutics is the transformation of the readers of the sacred book.³⁰

Padilla cautions against reducing biblical hermeneutics to mysticism under the pretense of depending on the Holy Spirit in interpretation.³¹ Mystical (or intuitive?) approach emphasizes immediate application rather than thorough study of biblical texts before application. The main dangers of mystical approach to interpretation are that such reduces biblical interpretation to 'proof-texting' and "allegorization". Such approach often leads to heresy in doctrine and inconsistency in action. Again, it is difficult if not impossible to control such interpretation. All these show that mystical "interpretation", though well intentioned, could be unfaithful to biblical texts and could therefore be misleading. In extreme cases, mystical "interpretation" has led to cultism.

The most basic problem confronting mystical interpretation of the Bible is that of validating the correct interpretation. Often, conflicting interpretations are given to the same texts by those who claim to depend entirely on the Holy Spirit for the interpretation of the texts. This divergent interpretation often results from the failure of interpreters to fully follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in their interpretation. It is unfortunate that the most mature Christian does not consistently follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. Harbin states that the reasons "...for this are the depravity of man, presupposition one may hold before regeneration, and cultural values which are often difficult to sort out."³²

Protestants have proposed three tests (controls) to validate correct interpretation of biblical passages.¹¹ Only two of these are relevant to the present work. The first of the two relevant tests is the historical-grammatical (or literal) study of texts. Interpretation purportedly given by the Holy Spirit must not contradict, and in fact must be supported by the literal sense of the texts. The second test is the "...interpretive tradition already sparked by the text."¹² Another scholar calls it "the combined testimony of the body of believers." Harbin presents the issue thus:

Classical texts like the Bible...project an effective history of interpretation in which the intended meaning get enriched, sharpened and enlarged. The reader is not reading alone but participates in community of readers over time. There is a community of readers, living and dead, who weigh what is said by present day interpreters (1 Cor. 14:29).¹³

Harbin underscores that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a common experience of all Christians. Christian interpreters should therefore depend on the Holy Spirit when interpreting the Bible, and should compare their interpretation with the interpretation of other Christian scholars.

5.0 CONCLUSION

What particularly makes biblical interpretation Christian is that it is conducted under the control of the Holy Spirit and is faithful to the text. Such interpretation is characterized by divine reverence; the willingness to understand and accept what God is communicating through His Word. This spiritual disposition is inspired by prayer and godly lifestyle (cf. James 1:5; 3:13; Eph. 1:7ff). Since God used human language to communicate with man, interpretation should pay serious attention to the linguistic and historical context of the sacred text. Christian interpretation, especially, should do this.

On the other hand, non-Christian scholars could, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, discover the historical and linguistic sense of the Scriptures. Their findings would however be purely academic. They would not understand the implication of such texts (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). At times, they may even find their own discoveries ridiculous and nonsensical. In such situations, non-Christian scholars are quick to conclude that the text is "wrong."

The following propositions are suggested in appropriating the help of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Scripture:

a) The Holy Spirit does not impose on biblical texts the meaning not grammatically found in the text. Such temptation should be rejected.

b) The role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation is limited to "illumination."

c) Spiritual preparedness is needed by the Christian interpreter to maximize the help of the Holy Spirit in his Bible study (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6ff). Zuck states:

"A Christian who is in sin is susceptible to making inaccurate interpretations of the Bible because his mind and heart are not in harmony with the Spirit."¹⁴

d) In adequate exegetical procedure, historico-grammatical study and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit interrelate. "The Word and the Spirit work together in true interpretation."¹⁵

e) The best way to involve the Holy Spirit in interpretation is through

the inductive study of the sacred text. Commentaries should only be consulted after the Christian has carried out his own study of the text. Depending entirely on commentaries or other literature limits the participation of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of biblical texts.

f) Since no human interpretation is infallible (even when carried out under the control of the Holy Spirit), it is necessary to compare one's interpretation with others.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested to enhance the practice of Christian hermeneutics:

a) Scholars should study the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics more carefully; Universities and seminaries should particularly emphasize this aspect.

b) Christian interpreters should, of necessity, involve the Holy Spirit more actively in their exegetical effort.

c) Dedicated Christian scholars should be more active in the writing of Bible Commentaries. The field should not be surrendered to non-Christian Scholars.

d) Conferences or Seminars should be organized for Christian leaders and lecturers of Christian religion in higher institutions on how to interpret the scripture historically and linguistically under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

e) Informed church leaders should educate their members on how to relate the ministry of the Holy Spirit with the historico-grammatical interpretation of the Scripture.

End Notes

¹This paper was presented at the 13th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), which held at ECWA Guest House, Challenge Area, Jos, between 11th and 14th July, 2000.

²Roy B. Zuck, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 141, No. 562 (1984): 120.

³J. P. Callahan, "Claritas Scriptural: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1996): 361.

⁴Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Interpretation of the Bible", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, edited by Frank Gaebelin *et. al.* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1979), p. 72.

⁵C. H. Pinnock, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 36., No 4 (1993), p. 491.

⁶Zuck, p. 121.

⁷B. A. Ntrel, "Towards an African Biblical Hermeneutics", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1990), p. 247-254.

⁸WAATI minutes of 1980 cited by S. O. Abogunrin in the "General Preface" which he wrote in *African Bible Commentaries: Revelation*, R. S. Burney (Author) (Ibadan: Daystar, 1988), p. viii.

- * K. A. Dickson cited in John Parratt, "Africa Theology and Biblical Hermeneutics", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1983), p. 90.
- ¹⁸ S. O. Abogunrin, "Biblical Research in Africa: The Task Ahead", *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1986), p. 14.
- ¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 152.
- ²⁰ Parratt, pp. 88 cf. 91.
- ²¹ See K. A. Dickson, "The Old Testament and African Theology", *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 4 (1973), pp. 31-41; C. I. Ejizu, "The Challenge of Oral Sources in the Study of African Indigenous Religion", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 1 (1972), pp. 21-36.
- ²² Musa A. B. Gaiya "The Bible in Aladura Churches", *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (1991), p. 107.
- ²³ J. A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim* (New York: NOK, 1982), p. 91.
- ²⁴ M. D. Mclean, "Toward a Pentecostal Hermeneutics", *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1984), pp. 35-56.
- ²⁵ R. K. Johnston, "Pentecostalism and Theological Hermeneutics: Evangelical Options", *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1984), p. 63.
- ²⁶ H. M. Ervin, "Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option", *Pneuma: The Journal of the society for Pentecostal Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1981), p. 8.
- ²⁷ Ervin, p. 17.
- ²⁸ Ervin, p. 23.
- ²⁹ Cf. Zuck, p. 120.
- ³⁰ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pp. 194-196.
- ³¹ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: Tyndale, 1960).
- ³² A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).
- ³³ Tasker, p. 181.
- ³⁴ Zuck, p. 120.
- ³⁵ Bromiley, p. 78.
- ³⁶ Pinnock, p. 491.
- ³⁷ Pinnock, p. 494.
- ³⁸ Pinnock, p. 493.
- ³⁹ C. R. Padilla, "The Interpreted Word: Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics", *Themelios*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1981), pp. 18-19.
- ⁴⁰ M. A. Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 143, No. 571 (1986), p. 251.
- ⁴¹ Harbin, pp. 251-252; Pinnock pp. 495-496.
- ⁴² Pinnock, *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ Harbin, p. 495.
- ⁴⁴ Zuck, p. 125.
- ⁴⁵ Bromiley, p. 72.