

21

LANGUAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Abstract

The language of the Old Testament remains a veritable tool in the study of religion as a course in higher institutions around the world. It has become a major concern to researchers and teachers of Hebrew language and other related languages that facilitate the study of the Old Testament, that the promotion of this language has dwindled in the 21st century. In many academic institutions such as Universities, Colleges of Education and Theological Universities and Colleges, the study of the language of the Old Testament is dormant, especially in Nigeria. The outcome of this conspicuous problem is the substandard of academic Departments and Institutions, the production of students without sound knowledge of the Old Testament in particular and Religious Studies in general. The researcher strongly avers that the language of the Old Testament should be prioritized in every academic institution where Religious Studies is an accredited Department so as to compete with the world across the globe.

Keywords: Language, Old Testament, Religion, Religious Studies.

Introduction

The study of Religion as an academic discipline requires proficiency in the languages of the Bible. In a similar vein, the study of the Old Testament requires proficiency in the Language to enhance a better understanding of the Old Testament. In most cases, the language of the Old Testament is Hebrew. This language of the Old Testament has been and has remained a functional vehicle through which the real information on the Old Testament is conveyed. Akao (1999) posits that 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 Hebrew language is a pre-requisite. Ugwuowo (2024) contends that the study of the Old Testament is not enough if 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 effort to be familiar with at least basic Hebrew.

It is observed that in the contemporary time, Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament is not adequately handled in academic departments and institutions expected to take it as a pre-requisite. In Nigeria, some departments of Religious Studies, especially in state-owned and private institutions, Universities and Colleges of Theology and some departments of CRS in Colleges of Education do not have thorough and consistent study on Hebrew from the inception of their departments/institutions. In most cases, the principal factor for this anomaly is unavailability of human resource. This aberration is usually caused by the non-proficiency of available academic staff in Hebrew including the poor management of institutions which culminates into their inability to employ experts in Old Testament Studies who have basic and advanced knowledge of Hebrew. As a result of this serious challenge, the language is left behind in some academic departments and institutions. In addition, students of such departments and institutions are not well bred in accordance with the accurate knowledge of the courses they do in Old Testament.

Historical critical method of biblical exegesis is used in this paper. According to Obiorah (2015), historical-critical method takes cognizance of the historical development of the biblical passages, which have diverse audiences in the course of time. It also takes into consideration the modern readers of the Bible who are thousands of years apart from the text. Historical critical method will be relevant in studying Old Testament text(s) when knowledge of Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament is well known by the researcher of any Old Testament work.

Old Testament as a Discipline

Over the years, Old Testament is one of the accredited courses in the standard department of Religious Studies and department of Christian Religious Studies respectively in a recognized University and in a recognized College of Education in both Nigeria and abroad. In some institutions, Old Testament is created as a unit under the department of Religion Studies. In some institutions where Religious Studies is too broad, Old Testament is created as a department. For instance, Roux (2009) asserts that the Old Testament at the University of Pretoria is a notable department, and that it grew along with the Faculty of Theology into a very prominent centre for Old Testament scholarship in South Africa. It presents courses to undergraduate students, supervises master's and PhD students, contributes many articles each year to national and international journals, and has important scholarly agreements with other international institutions. The department is also constantly evaluated nationally as well as internationally and is well placed within the South African university context.

From the findings of the researcher, the Old Testament as academic discipline is an independent unit in many departments of Religious Studies in virtually all the public universities in Nigeria. Among these public universities where Old Testament is a single unit in Religious Studies department include the following: Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Department of Philosophy/Religion and Cultural Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo; Department of Religion and Human Relation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan; Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt; Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife; Department of Religious Studies, University of Abuja; Department of Religious Studies, University of Lagos; Department of Religious Studies, University of Calabar; Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Uyo and so on. At Postgraduate levels of Religious Department in these Universities and others, Old Testament is a very strong Unit with Postgraduate supervisors, internal examiners and external examiners, as well as Postgraduate students including PGD, Masters and PhD students.

As an academic discipline, Old Testament is an aged course area in Religious Studies and Theological Studies. The academic study of the Old Testament is a global enterprise. In the world of academic research, giant scholars have been produced in the Old Testament across the globe. In recent time, there are numerous international journals of the Old Testament with contributions of Old Testament scholars from the Old Testament point of view. From the work of experts in the Old Testament, there are what is called Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutics. African scholars of the Old Testament have also gone a long way to come up with African Hermeneutics of the Old Testament. Using University of Pretoria as a case study, Van Huyssteen (1986) reports that over the past 70 years, the world

in which the Department of Old Testament functions has changed dramatically. Initially, its sole function was to train ministers for the Dutch Reformed Church, but since then, the socio-historical context has been revolutionised and universities have had to adapt to new goals and expectations. Coyle (2006) adds that the Old Testament scholarship now has to resonate within a much wider social context and has to become part of the international discourse. International standards has to be met and a wider audience has to be reached. Put differently: Although the connection to the church remains intact, the department (like the Faculty) adapted itself not only to the great world of scholarship, but also to the needs of the community. In other words, the department constantly has to re-invent and re-formulate its place in the world of science, the University and Africa.

As an academic discipline, Old Testament science has its own intrinsic laws determining its developmental direction. This intrinsic development is essential for the development of the science, but it must be accompanied by a link to practice. This link to practice can furthermore give indications to the researcher as to whether his research can come down to earth, and can convince non-academics of his hypotheses and whether he is on the 'right' track when his work is evaluated by people from other walks of life, with other frames of reference, including other academic fields (Swanepoel, n.d).

Through academic study of the Old Testament in reputable universities across the globe, peculiar and better understanding of Old Testament texts has been attained. Exegesis of the Old Testament texts and hermeneutics of the text in a desired context has been an ongoing exercise. Scholars of the Old Testament who passed through the tutelage of experts in the Old Testament from their early stage of the study of the Old Testament are veritable tools for proper communication of Old Testament narratives and poetic corpus. In addition, West (2008) contends that it is only through total dedication to Old Testament scholarship that sensitivity for the contexts of Israel and Africa can be understood, developed and nurtured. Körtner (2006) observes that Johann Jacob Rambach's work on hermeneutics in 1723 made a distinction between *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (exposition) and *subtilitas applicandi* (application) of OT texts. Accordingly, a text must first be explained and then applied. This sequence, however, must be changed. The one 'step' is never without the other and must never be separated from the other 'steps'. Interpretation calls for application and the exegete's life context determines the exegesis of a text. The exegete's own life context (or 'praxis') influences the exegetical process right from the beginning. Right from the onset, the exegete 'sees' things in the text and this is determined by his/her own life context. Exposition is thus embedded in real-life contexts and is consequently practical from the start (Albertz 1992; Gadamer 1990 and Kloppe 2008). Moreover the Department of Old Testament, University of Pretoria maintains that context and critical scholarship have always belonged together and will always remain the way in which the Old Testament must be approached and studied and its message formulated (Grondin 1994; Otto 2000; Thiselton 1980 and Von Rad 1971).

Language of the Old Testament

In the study of Religion, the language of the Old Testament is Hebrew Language. Ugwueye (2007) asserts that if Hebrew is ignored, the Old Testament student/user destines himself/herself for an enterprise of second-hand knowledge. This assertion speaks eloquently about the indispensability of Hebrew language in the study of the Old Testament. It is crucial to note that Biblical Hebrew language is not exactly the same with Modern

Hebrew. Buttressing further, McKenzie (1992 p.347) states that “in modern times, Hebrew has once again become a living language, and the official language of the state of Israel. But the Modern Hebrew spoken in Israel in the contemporary time “is a modern construction which differs widely from biblical Hebrew””. The emphasis on the study of Old Testament in any standard Religious Studies department must be on Hebrew language. This implies that expertise in the field of Old Testament is determined by the knowledge of Hebrew language. If one does not know at least basic Hebrew, then one does not know the Old Testament. One cannot claim to be an expert in the Old Testament if one does not have proficiency in Hebrew Language. Ugwueye (2015 p.1) describes “Hebrew language as the language of the culture, religion and civilization of the Jewish people since ancient times. It belongs to the northwest ancient Semitic family of languages.” The socio-cultural and religious life of Israel cannot be properly examined and accessed without adequate knowledge of Hebrew Language. This is so because the culture of a people is better understood in their practical language. Ugwueye (2015) goes further to aver that the dominant features of this language with a view to highlighting the richness of the language in imagery and picturesqueness furnish the Old Testament student with the nature of the language which immediately accentuates his interest in studying it. A peculiar feature of Hebrew Language is that it is written from right to left. This is common with Semitic languages of which Hebrew is part. To read the Hebrew Bible text, one would have to start from what one knows as the end of the book; and what one knows as the beginning becomes the end for a book written in Hebrew.

Academic reading and comprehension of Biblical Hebrew includes culturally relevant information for processing the pragmatic inferences of biblical texts. The study of Hebrew Language enables students of the Old Testament to understand the cultural, exegetical and theological implications of the biblical text (Miller-Naudé and Naudé, 2014).

Challenges of Studying Language of the Old Testament

Taking a study on Hebrew Language has been a big challenge in Biblical studies for decades. Having taught Hebrew Language for almost a decade, the researcher has discovered that most students of this course discontinue with it at their higher learning-postgraduate programmes (Masters and PhD) in the University. Most times students conclude that the learning of the language is very herculean, hence an uphill task. The difficult nature of studying Hebrew discourages most students, especially the lazy ones, from taking further studies in Old Testament. Virtually in every higher institution where biblical studies is prioritized, students who take further studies in the Old Testament are usually very few because of the difficulty in learning Hebrew Language. Buttressing further on this, Sutton (2023) notes that, in South Africa and in many other countries in Africa and around the globe, the demand for more Doctors of Philosophy (PhD) candidates has increased. With such a demand, a number of challenges also arise. In the discipline of Theology and Religious Studies, these challenges are becoming apparent in Old and New Testament Studies, where these fields are experiencing a declining number of students enrolling for biblical languages. This problem is enhanced as the current inherent requirement to study for a PhD in Old Testament is that one must have a knowledge of Biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic), and for New Testament, one needs Greek at an advanced level. Supervisors are challenged more and more to defend these requirements that are complicated by the developmental goals of institutions that require that the number of PhD

candidates be increased. It was further reported that in a recent meeting held on 26 October, 2022 between several South African tertiary institutions, an online *Indaba* on biblical languages was hosted by the University of Stellenbosch, during which the question was posed regarding the current state of biblical languages, students, and research in South African institutions. In that meeting, according to Sutton (2023), it became clear that the declining number of students enrolling for biblical languages is becoming a serious problem. Okode (2010 pp. 93-94) argues that “students do not learn the languages sufficiently well to be able to use them later in ministry.” However, it is not only in ministry that biblical languages are relevant. It is highly crucial in the daily living of every user of the Bible. Another conspicuous challenge faced by Department of Religious Studies is that biblical languages are not prioritized, and students are not usually exposed to the rudiments of basic Hebrew with which they will be prepared to take further studies subsequently.

It is observed that in some departments of Religious Studies in Nigeria, Hebrew language is made an option for undergraduate students. In such a Department, Hebrew is not prioritized, hence, the dwindling growth and survival of the study of Old Testament in such department. In some departments of Religious Studies in Nigeria, teaching Hebrew language is a very big challenge because of lack of experts in Old Testament who can adequately handle the course. Though Hebrew language is one of the approved courses in the course curriculum of some Religious Studies departments, students do not learn it because there is no available capable hand to handle the course. This has become a perennial problem in the study of Old Testament in Nigeria. This is the one of the major reasons Old Testament scholars remain very few in Nigeria. It is disheartening that students of Religious Studies could not be familiar with at least basic Hebrew as graduates of Religious Studies. The wrong approach adopted by administrative leaders of some department of Religious Studies in Nigeria remains a stumbling block to the study of Old Testament. This wrong approach is making biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) optional for undergraduate students.

It is also very insufficient for departmental boards to take the wrong decision of making Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) to appear just once in a semester for four years programmes and eight semesters for undergraduates. A semester for teaching and learning of Basic Hebrew is not enough for students to have at least fundamental knowledge of the language course. With this kind of structure, such departments of Religious Studies will not have strong Biblical studies, particularly in the Old Testament. They cannot also raise students who would be able to take further studies in Old Testament at postgraduate level. They cannot also produce experts in Old Testament who would be mentored as well as take over the department in the future, and ensure feasible posterity in the Old Testament. The study of Hebrew is herculean; therefore, a semester is not sufficient to exhaust teaching and learning of basic Hebrew. It is in this area that many departments of Religious Studies in the universities and many departments of Christian Religious Studies in Colleges of Education need to make urgent adjustment in the favour of biblical studies in general and Old Testament in particular.

Furthermore, the erroneous notion that Hebrew Language is too hard to learn is another challenge. Students are fond of giving others who are yet to study Hebrew such fallacy. If Hebrew Language is too hard to learn, why are there Old Testament exegetes across the globe? If it were so, translation of Old Testament texts into many different languages of the world would not have been a reality. In addition to this assertion, Lian (nd)

posits that there is a misconception that the study of Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) is for few gifted ones who are endowed with special understanding and knowledge. He went further to argue that, if it were so, there would have been few teachers and preachers of the Bible. It is this wrong notion and orientation that make most beginners in the learning of Hebrew to decline interest.

Another challenge observed in some cases is the way and manner in which some lecturers handle Hebrew. Some tend to rush the content of the course to give students examination without taking enough time to ensure that they do some practices which would enhance their knowledge of the course. Some Hebrew lecturers tend to forget that the essence of teaching Hebrew is not for students to pass examination but for them to be equipped to do basic Old Testament exegesis.

Provision of necessary materials or tools such as practical workbook for steady practice of the language by learners remains a tangible problem. If Hebrew must be effectively studied, learners must be equipped with such tools. The researcher observed from his years of experience as Hebrew lecturer that students tend to learn faster when they practice on their own using any relevant material. Many students tend to forget what they were taught in Hebrew easily after meeting with the lecturer. They find it more difficult to study on their own without the physical contact with the lecturer in the classroom. They get confused because most times, they do not take comprehensive note in the classroom while lecture is going on. But practical workbook can serve as a veritable tool for personal practical studies. In the case where such practical tool is not available, it makes the study more stressful and uninteresting.

Improving on the Study of the Language of the Old Testament

For decades, few scholars in the field of Old Testament have made incessant effort to ensure improvement in the study of Hebrew in tertiary institutions of learning. However, the effort made has not yielded required results. The researcher suggests the following as ways of establishing and improving teaching and learning of Hebrew Language for effective study of the Old Testament:

Experts in Old Testament should not relent in making further efforts, both personal and corporate, to retain and sustain effective and steady teaching and learning of Hebrew Language in the tertiary institution where they are. In order to improve on this herculean work, Old Testament experts can make salient efforts to provide a practical book for use by beginners of Hebrew Language. With the provision of such veritable practical material, practice of previous lessons by the students outside lecture room can be facilitated. It becomes a premise whereby students can visit their Hebrew almost every day. As lecture takes place each week of the semester, students should also practice their Hebrew by attempting exercises inside their practical book. It is capable of giving the students the opportunity for group learning. As such, it will bring about camaraderie among students of Hebrew, and such friendly interaction can improve learning of Hebrew easily among young learners.

It is necessary to posit that those who are not experts should not handle Hebrew Language at all. Experts must keep in mind that the essence of teaching Hebrew Language is to prepare students to attempt Old Testament exegesis as students of Religious Studies. It makes them unique among graduates of other disciplines who may have been equipped with peculiar knowledge in respect to their disciplines. In order to make it a reality, experts must

not teach beginners Hebrew as if they are teaching them language they are already familiar with. Most learners of Hebrew Language in the department of Religious Studies are novice to the course. It is usually a nascent exercise for most of them. On this note, experts who teach Hebrew are implored to sacrifice their time and energy out of love to sustain Old Testament studies for posterity. They are enjoined not to rush their lecture so as to make necessary impacts on the students. This is because it is those students that would take over from the already made experts in future. Old Testament discipline is a like a generation. A generation that does not have hope of replacement through survival of offspring would die off. If Old Testament, as an academic unit, does not have young ones who would take over from experts today in any department of Religious Studies, the future continuation of such a department, especially with respect to Biblical studies, is highly doubted. In recent time, some departments of religious Studies that lack experts in Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) in the eastern part of Nigeria were closed down for a session by National University Commissions, pending when they have experts. This shows the indispensability of Biblical languages in the study of Religion.

Board of any department of Religious Studies must incorporate Hebrew Language as a core course for undergraduate students. Hebrew must be prioritized in order to ensure producing future Old Testament scholars. In addition, teaching and learning of elementary Hebrew must take at least two consecutive semesters probably in the second year. Priority of Hebrew as a core course makes students to work hard at least to pass the course, and avoid the stress of repeating the course. Prioritizing Hebrew offers lecturers who specialize in Old Testament the opportunity to work on brilliant and industrious students who would take further studies in Old Testament at postgraduate level. This will offer easy access for academic mentorship in the Old Testament area of specialization.

Recommendations

1. The boards of departments of religious must endeavour to make basic Hebrew compulsory for undergraduate students for at least two consecutive semesters.
2. National University Commission are expected to check the required number of courses in Biblical languages in any department of Religion before approval. This is because any department of Religious Studies without compulsory study of Hebrew for undergraduate students is deviating from the core courses students should do.
3. Experts who handle Hebrew Language must be patient. They are expected to teach students of basic Hebrew as toddlers.
4. Students of basic Hebrew should accept the fact that is a fallacy that study of Hebrew is for few gifted ones. Anyone who has interest can learn it too.
5. Lecturers who specialize in Old Testament, as well as teach Hebrew Language must be appreciated through better incentives (either monetary or non-monetary) for motivation. Such incentive can be an external motivation for undergraduate students to pick automatic interest to take further studies in the Old Testament. The university management and government of the country can make it a reality.
6. Experts should endeavour to provide practical materials which would enable students to engage in steady learning.

Conclusion

Language of the Old Testament in religious Studies is Hebrew Language. The study of the Old Testament cannot be facilitated without proficiency in Hebrew Language. It is not proper to insinuate that Old Testament could be learnt if one does not know Hebrew. It is a fallacy. The sole purpose of studying Hebrew Language in Religious Studies is for exegesis of the Old Testament. Hebrew Language is a necessity for all students of Religious Studies. It is not a matter of choice. Therefore, it is wrong to make basic Hebrew optional for undergraduate students of Religious Studies. Experts in Old Testament must keep making serious efforts to ensure sustenance study of Hebrew Language in particular and Old Testament in general in the department of Religious Studies.

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