



6 | TO CAST FIRE UPON THE EARTH (LUKE 12:8-12): AN APPRAISAL OF TERESA OKURE'S BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN A NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Theological discourse in Africa has been less than liberating for women because of its transient attention to feminine sensibilities. Indeed, the paucity of African women's voices in theological debate exasperates the situation. But a hand full of African women theologians continue to interrogate the abnormality by proposing theologies that embrace all of life, those of women and men alike. This essay, which celebrates the theological thoughts of a West African woman theologian, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ, represents one such remedial approach. The paper discusses the theological contributions of this West African theology matriarch in the light of her hermeneutics grounded in a contextual approach to biblical studies. Teresa's work exposes strong theological ideas women bring to the praxis of theology, particularly in Africa. Her brilliant contributions to theology in West Africa through the contextual and feminist rendering of the biblical text offer an interpretative framework for reading and re-reading the Bible amidst the voices that shut off the marginated and tend to empty Scripture of its redemptive character. This essay explores the cultural and religious context that motivated Teresa's work, and her adept knowledge of Scripture, sources which enriched the quality of her interrogating a variety of life-giving and life-denying circumstances in the Nigerian context, primarily for the purpose of the abundant life for all (John 10:10). Teresa's hermeneutical approach questions and reassesses received androcentric interpretations, with leanings which leaves little room for women's appropriation of the full import of the Word Incarnate. Teresa Okure's hermeneutic of life which echoes inclusiveness, in a special manner contributes to the quest for renewal of life in Africa and the World Church beleaguered with gender disparity.

Keywords: Teresa Okure, Feminist Theologian, Hermeneutic of life, contextual, abundant

1. Introduction

An Appraisal of the biblical Hermeneutics of Teresa Okure is akin to evaluating what the Igbo call *nnukwu nmanwu*, (literally, *nnukwu* = very big; *nmanwu* = masquerade) meaning a pre-eminent masquerade. Mbonu (2010a) contends that one cannot take in the full significance of such a prominent masquerade from a single angle of vision but must find a creative way to have a 360-degree view of the phenomenon in order to appreciate its full import. Hence, the essay on Teresa Okure is only an attempt at an appraisal of this Nigerian-born genius of theology. The African cultural text, infused with the Holy Spirit (Fire, wind, water), provides the flora and fauna with which Teresa weaves her theological tapestry. Text employed here includes but is not limited to symbols, rituals, practices and customs, myths, documents, structures of power, kinship, and social set-ups. With such a rich resource, Teresa can interrogate a variety of life-giving and life-denying situations in the Nigerian religious context. Although many contemporary Nigerian Christian claims to be on fire with the Word of God there remains much to be desired to make the Word alive and active (Heb. 4:12) in relation to religion on the ground. Making the word alive and active in the African cultural context is at the heart of Teresa Okure's hermeneutics (Okure, 2000). Undoubtedly, the indigenous context remains the source of cultural value and meaning, which Teresa so well explores in most of her works. In her theologising, Teresa takes seriously the Pontifical Biblical Commission challenge (Béchar, 2001) to women biblical scholars to put new questions to the biblical text which in turn occasions new discoveries. Her findings show how Scripture speaks to, and about women's contributions in building up the body of Christ—the church, both locally and globally, thus she frequently contributes new and penetrating insights to the interpretation of Scripture and rediscovers features that had been overlooked as in the case of Lydia in Luke-Acts 16, the women of Samaria (John 4: 1-26) among other texts.

To elucidate some of Teresa's contributions up to this point, this study is poised to answer the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her hermeneutical approaches? How did her theological propositions address gender discrimination? What

could be identified as the purpose of her theology? How can her hermeneutics contribute to the world Church? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding the redemptive character of the work of a West African Feminist/womanist theologian, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ.

The rest of the chapter is laid out in six sections beginning with a brief biography of Sister Teresa Okure, then follows the contexts that inspired her works, her theological propositions, and the gender conundrum in theology. The main purpose of her theology and hermeneutical contribution to the world church. Worthy of note is the use of the first name in this study. Because this essay celebrates a matriarch, a woman theologian, and her special theological contributions, I employ her first name, Teresa, rather than the last name, Okure, in the discussion.

2. Brief Biography of Sister Professor Teresa Okure

Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ, a native of Anua Offot, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, is a Roman Catholic Religious Sister and Professor of New Testament and Gender Hermeneutics. She is the first African member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ). Sister Teresa made a profession of religious vows (Poverty, Chastity, Obedience), in England in 1965, over five decades ago. She earned her doctoral degree at Fordham University; her doctoral thesis was titled: *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Okure, 1988).

A renowned theologian, teacher, writer, and public speaker, Sister Teresa Okure is the First Scholar-in-Residence at the Catholic Institute of West Africa where she taught for more than thirty-five years and served in various leadership roles at the Institute, including the Academic Dean of Faculty, Dean of Students Affairs, and Head of the Department of Biblical Studies. She is a member of many national and international theological, missiological, and biblical associations. Sister Teresa is the founding president and current president of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria and a foundation member of the Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE). A well-known biblical scholar, Sister Teresa has lectured widely on five continents. A contextual theologian deeply rooted in culture, Sister advocates holding in tandem theology and one's

cultural realities for a more holistic living. These thoughts suffuse most of her literary works.

Sister Teresa Okure's literary works are voluminous. She is co-editor of the biblical commentary series *Texts and Context* and *Global Bible Commentary*. She has authored, co-authored, edited, and co-edited several works including commentaries, church documents, and academic theses. Her latest WorldCat Identities include Works: 29 works in 61 publications in 7 languages and 1,295 library holdings. A more comprehensive listing of her works can be accessed through her Google profile: Teresa Okure and Sr. Teresa Okure.

Sister Teresa's congenial disposition attracts her fond nicknames. She is known among her Sisters (SHCJ), associates, and colleagues as Aunty/Auntie. Her SHCJ religious Sisters nicknamed her "John 10:10" on account of her frequent reference to the passage, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly," the *raison d'être* of the Incarnation. The Johannine text is foundational to her numerous reflections, presentations, and writings. Teresa's deeply rooted Catholic family parentage, upbringing, and abiding identity greatly impact her profound theological endeavours. Her background exposes the rich cultural and religious contexts that motivated the numerous insightful theological works of this erudite matriarch, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ.

3. Cultural and Religious Contexts that Motivated Her Works

Like a typical African youngster, whose upbringing is the product of the entire village community, Teresa draws from the experience of her culture-centered nurturing, having drunk deeply from the well of her ancestors. Her reflections on the Bible and theology bear the mark of these multiple influences—familial, cultural, social, and religious. Her rich familial context predisposed her call to respond to the call to the vowed religious life early in life as well as to theological studies. Teresa's Ibibio culture provided the flora and fauna to embrace a programme of life, grounded in the text of John 10:10. Thus, she theologizes with the authority of experience.

For a long time, theological discourse, particularly in Africa, was considered an exclusive preserve of men. Women were excluded from theological studies but indoctrinated or encouraged to pursue service-oriented disciplines. As a result of the absence of a feminine voice in theological discourse, biblical interpretations became ponderously androcentric. Such interpretations became normative for relationships both in the life of the individual, church life, and civil society. Women were subjected to appropriate androcentric rendering as the “word of God” regardless of the impact on their lives. Undoubtedly, the outcome of such appropriation sustained women’s discrimination. This way of doing theology equally fueled underdevelopment and as well exacerbated the gender conundrum, a factor that one can surmise as motivating Teresa’s interest in gender hermeneutics. Indeed, the doyen of African women theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Oduyoye, 2004), decries the subordination and marginalization of women inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Teresa’s experience of life as a woman and as a woman of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition provides a robust background to respond theologically to discrimination within the Church-cultural context. Moreover, her work and those of other women theologians help to assuage the overdependence on men theologians for women’s theological reflections, thereby fostering feminine sensitivity. Bécharde (2001) puts it thus, “feminine sensitivity which helps to unmask and correct commonly accepted interpretations that were tendentious and sought to justify the male domination of women.” The foregoing section offers but a partial characteristic that shaped the preeminent theological masquerade that Teresa’s hermeneutics and theologizing have evolved. We now turn to her theological propositions.

4. The Sources of Teresa’s Findings Leading to her Theological Propositions

In her theologizing, Teresa responds to many unanswered questions as it pertains to women in the community called Church. With a focus on biblical women characters, Teresa extends the frontiers of theological discourse to include those who received biblical interpretations placed almost permanently on the margin of society, the women. Teresa’s (Okure,

2009) insightful hermeneutics on biblical women's characters represent the central piece of her witnessing God's good news to the poor as represented in her work on the Woman of Samaria and other such biblical characters. The poor includes not only women but in actuality and metaphorically, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed as well. For Teresa (Okure, 2000) ardent faith means a life-centered understanding of the Word of God that has come down to us through the sacred text, the Bible. So, to bring the good news to the marginated consists of doing what the Word said and not merely hearing it (cf. James 1:22), and that is so because the word is not moribund; it is alive and active.

Teresa remains actively engaged in bringing to life the mission of the word to life. She maintains (Okure, 2000) that since life was the warp and weft of what became the Bible, the experience of life remains the hermeneutical key to reading the sacred text. Such reading enables the reader to discover what the text means for our present context. Teresa (Okure, 2000) puts it thus, "events recorded in the Bible happened in life first or were lived before they were recorded in the Bible as a Book," an allusion that the Bible is a product of humankind culture. In this regard, Teresa (Okure, 2000) found out that the authors of the New Testament took their faith and life concerns to the story of Jesus just as the authors of the Hebrew Bible took theirs to the Torah traditions. She argues that if that is the case, readers make a commitment to bring their life's questions and experiences into the study and rendering of the Bible (Okure, 2000). It is through the prism of contextual reading that we can listen to and hear the biblical message for our life's context as individuals and as a community in the present. Thus, her hermeneutics of faith aims at restoring meaning to the text. Because the Bible is not to be read anachronistically, being alive and active abundantly suggests that one cannot expect the biblical authors to answer the life questions of our time and place.

According to Teresa (Okure, 2002), our life experience is the tinder, twig, and log that enkindles the fire embedded in the Bible, that fire cast upon the earth that engulfs all that is on its path. She totally embraces the mandate of *Dei Verbum* (Béchar, 2001) in grounding her theological reflections in African sensibilities; *Dei Verbum* supports the idea of contextual the reading of text in the sense that the Word (a seed), extracts from the earth (the context) in which it is planted the elements that are

useful for its growth and fruitfulness (Béchar, 2001). It is this cultural reality that will provide the soil for the appropriation of the Word of God as it comes across in the works of our matriarch, Sister Teresa Okure. Outside this reality according to Mbonu (2001), the Gospel will continue to be a stranger in Africa; a stranger who must someday depart (Mbonu, 2011). Teresa (Okure, 2000) sees this mission of enkindling the light of the Gospel on the African continent as embodying the hope that readers of the Bible would be mindful of Jesus' concern that the whole earth should catch this fire; the fire of love, the Holy Spirit who renews the face of the earth, ushering in a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a celebration of oneness in Christ.

5. Specific Areas where her Hermeneutical Propositions have addressed Patriarchy

Teresa's lived experience as a baptized African woman, permeates her approach to the biblical text. For her (Okure, 2021), Paul's insistence on the equal dignity of man and women in Christ (Gal 3:28) through baptism challenges androcentrism among believers in the Word Incarnate. The Galatian text harkens back to Genesis 1:27, 5:2 – male and female he created them (Okure, 2021), and failure to appropriate this new identity makes one an inauthentic human being. Inauthenticity is suggestive of rejection or denial of a person's God-human character, that is, being created in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27). In arguing for inclusiveness, Teresa (Okure, 2000) insists that Jesus' by his broken body on the cross, destroyed all the barriers separating peoples (Eph 2:16) and in so doing, gathered automatically into one, all God's children scattered by the endemic of sins of racism, sexism, patriarchy, greed, lust for power and prestige. In other words, the impervious gender conundrum hinges on this lack of faith in God's image and likeness in all of humanity. And again, where every adherent of the biblical faith tradition believes in a common humanity of God's people, all barriers of gender, ethnocentrism, and social stratification would break down. The collapse of division among God's children because of our common faith in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-16), is a theological position that upholds the dignity of all, women as well as men.

One of the earliest African women theologians, Teresa, joins her peers to universalize theology by gently unmasking its feminine face, which androcentrism seems to have eclipsed in the theological discourse. Because theology is often voiced through a male perspective, received theological rendition has not been without bias, favouring masculinity, depriving women and indeed all of Christ's faithful, women and men alike, of the fullness of theological reflections. This idea comes across well in Teresa's doctoral thesis titled: "The Johannine approach to mission: a contextual study of John 4:1-42", a grounded holistic theological discourse. Her work highlights her perceptive hermeneutical study of women and inclusive mission theology. This groundbreaking study featuring an ordinary village woman of Sychar in Samaria stamps Teresa's advocacy for inclusiveness. Teresa's study of the woman of Samaria reverberates with imageries of the aliveness of the word on fire enlightening all around it, a perfect example of the mission.

Curiously, the author of the Gospel according to John sought out an ideal environment to launch Jesus' mission outside his Jewish territory. The writer chooses a watering place, a well, a motive common to both Jews and Samaritans alike. A well occupies a significant place in the land of the Bible and is seen as a domain of women. During this epoch, young women typically had the daily chore of drawing water from wells to supply the family household or water the family livestock. (Gen 16:6-14), (Gen 21:19), Genesis 24:15; Gen 29:1-11, (Exod. 2:15-22). Note also in the Song of Songs, the woman is praised as a "garden fountain, a well of living water" (4:15). In many contemporary African villages as in ancient Israel, fetching water at the well for the use of the household is and was a true women's routine. The import of a watering place and the role women play in this life-giving domain was not lost on the Johannine Jesus. Scripture has it that at the point of meeting with the woman, Jesus was already "tired out by the journey" and sat at Jacob's well (John 4:6), to refresh. It was not strange that the central point of the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well was about water, a life-giving element.

At the end of the fortuitous encounter with Jesus, the unnamed woman of Samaritan emerges as a missionary. She is not unlike another Bible character, Mary of Magdala, whose similar encounter with Jesus

confirms her as a missionary to announce the Resurrection to the disciples and to the entire world (John 20:17-18). Tellingly, while Jesus was preparing a Sychar village woman to become his mission torch bearer to a Samaritan audience, His [*chosen male*] disciples (John 1:35-51) were in the city foraging for food, “had gone to the city to buy food” (John 4:8). It is no coincidence that as water is life-giving and symbolizes creation and new beginnings in Scripture, Teresa (Okure, 2009) notes that God would choose water sources as places for revelation, as well as food (John 6:56), indispensable elements for life; concerns of the Samaritan woman and the hungry disciples respectively, become fundamental symbols of Jesus’ life-giving mission.

Furthermore, Teresa (Okure, 2009) reads the life-giving encounter of Jesus and the woman at the well in light of the social ills afflicting women in contemporary African society. She first highlights the rejection, prejudice, and isolation of the two main characters, Jesus and the woman, in their own contexts, and their contribution to John’s account of how the woman leads her village to the “living water” of faith in Jesus. Teresa posits that Jesus’ visit with the woman of Samaria calls African women to recognize and claim the Christological grounds for their right to participate along with men in all aspects of society and church life. On a broader scale, contemporary African women’s encounter with Jesus would no doubt challenge the male clerical church to be open to and let go according to Teresa (Okure, 2009) of their scandal at “what Jesus wants with women.” What Jesus wants with women is not different from that which he is desirous of from men, that is, to further the reign of God, in their life context within their communities and beyond.

Teresa (Okure, 2000) underscores life as the primary locus of God-human encounter. In emphasizing life as the principal point of entry and context of doing theology, women theologians add a dimension missing or at least not obvious among Third World male theologians, namely the need to begin with the theologian’s life experience. For Teresa (Okure, 2000), “this emphasis is not just a passing fad; she perceives life as “the *terminus a quo* and *ad quem* of doing theology and interpreting scripture, otherwise, we may be dead researchers claiming to be alive.” As bearers of life, therefore, women’s theological inquiries that do not privilege life’s

experience cannot be liberative. I employ the term liberative to include actions that unburden, lift or promote the humanity of persons, individually or collectively, as exemplified in the narrative of the case of Lydia in Luke-Acts, 16:11-15; 40.

Teresa's (Okure, 2017) work has moved forward the conversation on women's role in Scripture and its appropriation in the world Church. Her article, "the challenge of Lydia's leadership (Acts 16:11-15) for the Contemporary Church, is most appropriate. Where most scholars (men) stress the conventional women's role, the hospitality, of Lydia to the apostle Paul and his collaborators and downplay her leadership role, Teresa (Okure, 2017) highlights the leadership role of this first documented European convert to Christianity, Lydia of Thyatira in Philippi. After she and her household received baptism, Lydia stepped into her Christian leadership role, exhibiting the transformative power of baptism, boldly and emphatically, calling out Paul to live out the theology of oneness in Christ that baptism confers, "if you judge that I am a true believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house" (Acts 16:15). Teresa (Okure, 2017) reads Lydia's terse address to Paul as a challenge to him to live the theology of baptism personally, physically, and not just theologically or ideologically. That is to say, Paul should put his body where his theology was. And she "prevailed upon" Paul and his companions. Appropriation of Lydia's deployment of charismata remains the challenge for African Christian women struggling to birth life in a milieu of unredeemed patriarchy.

Moreover, she contends that the attitude of the hierarchical church, which continues to legislate for the exclusion and silencing of women or gives them only token considerations is anti-gospel and anti-*Christos*. If the church in Africa today wants to participate in what God wants with women for the redemption and transformation of the continent, both genders will need to revisit long-held derogatory attitudes toward women and learn to celebrate the gifts that God gives to them for their good as persons, and for the good of all. God's gift of the Holy Spirit to a woman, Mary in the gospel of Luke (1:35) is expressed in prophecy (Luke 1:40), which another woman, Elizabeth equally shares (Luke 1:41). Raymond Brown (1990) notes that the Lukan Mary was "the first disciple to meet Jesus' standard of hearing the word of God and doing it." Mbonu (2010)

bemoans the fact that the role of Mary of Nazareth as a woman, who hears God's word and does it, eludes the generous comment of most biblical scholars, depriving Christian women of a model of gospel discipleship. Because biblical interpretation represents not just religious discourse for and among Christians, meanings derived from biblical interpretations also can influence public and political discourse, thus Teresa keeps exploring new grounds from the New Testament perspective that valorizes women as in the case of Lydia and the unnamed woman of Samaria discussed above.

6. Main Purpose of her Theology

The focal point of Teresa's theology is abundant or fullness of life (John 10:10). The thought of living life to its fullest is evident in her numerous writings and presentations. Little wonder her SHCJ Community Sisters nicknamed her "John 10:10". The Fullness of life is a concept replete in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The prophet Micah, for example, articulates the abundance of life as a people enjoying God's love, sitting under their own vines and under their own fig trees (4:4). And the Johannine Jesus images such abundance in the teaching of himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), who not only shows that in his unconditional concern for the sheep but also in his willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. A key to appreciating the teaching of the Good Shepherd is found in the preceding chapter, chapter 9, where the establishment (Pharisees) fiercely opposed Jesus' association with the poor, represented in the man born blind. Here, sightlessness, be it spiritual or physical, is seen as militating against the fullness of life in its totality. But Jesus, whose liberative agenda is assumed by Teresa's quest in engaging the Bible, urges the contemporary reader to show the same passion for the poor. The fullness of life heralded by good news to the poor remains the *raison d'être* of the Incarnation, which is the heart of theology. To this end, rendering the gospel of abundant life which is consistent with Jesus' mission (Luke 4:18-19; 19:10; John 6:51), becomes Teresa's theological passion.

7. Teresa's Hermeneutics Contribution to the World Church

According to Teresa (Okure, 2000), concern for life is the primary hermeneutical key and context for reading the Bible. This assertion is perhaps her greatest contribution yet, to the world Church. Life for her comprises physical, spiritual, cultural, and psychological. Life remains the locus of the God-humankind encounter and one cannot meaningfully engage the Bible outside of life's experiences. Engaging the biblical text with a grounding in concern for life enables the reader to discover hitherto unexpected and enriching meanings, which received interpretations seem unable to unveil. The significance of beginning the reading of the Bible from life's experience cannot be overlooked because as Teresa (Okure, 2000) argues life is a starting point and abiding context of hermeneutics, life is a reality that imposes itself. Consequently, reading the Bible is not the preserve of students of the Bible, the sacred text is the Church's book and thus within the reach of every Christian. But Teresa is not unaware of the struggle that comes with the contextual reading of the biblical text.

She describes the challenge as striking the match more than once for the fire to ignite (Okure, 2000). Here, she identifies inherited prejudices based on sex, race, class, and fear of being ridiculed by scholars who still believe in doing "a purely objective and scientific" theology and biblical study. Whereas there is no such thing as a purely objective and scientific theology and biblical study. All of the theology including Scripture itself is wholly about meaning, hence, it is entirely about interpretations and historico-contextual constructions. And every interpretation emerges out of a "standpoint," a perspective. Even the so-called scientific study is always rooted in a certain intellectual or theoretical tradition.

Androcentric and patriarchal standpoints have dominated theological and biblical reflections for far too long and thus tend to enjoy the appearance of a natural, normative, objective, and taken-for-granted phenomenon. In reality, there is nothing natural or normal, or even objective about them. They are simply what they are, male perspectives. It is high time that women's standpoints from their particular lived experiences were allowed to speak for themselves, that women were allowed to represent themselves in shaping their own narratives, and herstories (not histories), and that they are granted visibility in the theological hermeneutical

landscape. Herein lays the significance of this work on our West African matriarch, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, whose doggedness in valorizing women's biblical characters ushers a new dawn, a renewal, in the African religious sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study is but the tip of the iceberg of what represents Teresa's theology and hermeneutics. Fundamentally she applies a wide range of hermeneutical tools in reflecting God-presence among us. Her numerous works provide insights into seeking biblical truths in the readers' context for a more effective engagement with the church and society. In particular, Teresa challenges readers of the Bible to do so with more openness, listening to what God says to the individual and to the community. She aligns her voice with that of other African women theologians to uncover, recover, and make contemporaneous contributions of biblical African matriarchs whose dynamism enlivens the People of God all in an effort to nourish God's children in the contemporary African Christian milieu. Our West African matriarch, Teresa, calls on African women believers to rise up and bridge the gap both in the theological space and leadership space in church and society. In so doing, she passionately argues for collaboration in the mission of Christ devoid of gender superiority and seeks to heal the unredeemed patriarchal culture that militates against human flourishing and fullness of life for women and men as well, on the continent and elsewhere.

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