

*Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* – Edited by Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkurature.

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The Bible in Africa, especially when accessible in African languages, is a non-negligible factor not only in the flowering of the Christian faith in Africa, but also in supporting liberation movements and the liberation struggle. First generation liberation fighters like Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah not only donned the mantle of Moses and Jesus but also were in some ways acclaimed as liberators in biblical terms. It is also confirmed by many critical studies of African Independent [or Indigenous or Instituted] Churches [AICs] that the Bible in African languages was the controlling variable in the confident move towards independency, indigenisation or institution of these churches over against the missionary established churches<sup>1</sup>. In general the African language communities, as Lamin Sanneh suggests, found in the Bible, accessible in their own language, a medium of cultural development and overall widening of the argument for their historical aspirations.<sup>2</sup> On the whole the Old Testament has had more influence on Christians in Africa than the New Testament. The reasons are not far to look for. The commonalities between the African worldview and the Hebrew (Semitic) worldview are very striking. This is especially so for rural, pastoral and agricultural peoples that have similar laws towards purity and danger. The whole of the Ten Commandments and other laws given to Moses who was reared in Africa reverberate with echoes similar to the laws and customs found in Africa.

The above remarks are to underline the great value of this book, *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa*, a collection of essays from papers read at the International Symposium on

Africa and the Old Testament, which took place in Karen, outside Nairobi, in October 1999. The meeting was under the patronage of the Ecumenical Colloquium of Eastern African theologians. The essays highlight, in the first place, the similarities in worldview and the inextricable ties between African and the Bible people; and secondly, the importance of reading the Scriptures in African languages and interpreting them from African perspectives.

The book is divided into five unequal parts. The first part looks at "Mapping out the Context of Old Testament Studies in Africa". Contributors distance themselves in no uncertain terms from the prejudices of Eurocentric interpretation of the OT and stress the importance of Africa and the context of the continent in biblical research and interpretation. Many handicaps, especially inadequate facilities, face the ongoing development of OT studies.

The second part discusses some of the issues that have constituted grounds of controversy between African researchers and their European colleagues – "Finding Africa in the Old Testament". The papers focus on the interesting hospitality that Africa gave to the people of the Bible – Hebrews or Jews – from Abraham to Jesus. Ambivalence appears to be the rule in this relationship – Egypt was both a place of sanctuary and of slavery, and was never regarded as a permanent home for the "chosen people". There is a very well informed discussion on Egypt, Cush, Ethiopia and how to interpret their use in the Bible. They form the basis for the understanding of the actual contribution of Africa to the Bible, the culture of the Bible, and the dependency of Bible people and culture on Africa. The contributions in this section are particularly averse to marginalizing Africa as a whole from a well-documented influence it exercised on the Bible. Some Eurocentric scholars would even put Egypt physically outside the African map. David Tuesday Adamo whose works have brought much clarity, and no less controversy, into the discussion of Cush<sup>3</sup>, argued very

strongly that wherever Cush is found in the OT it should be simply translated "African," instead of Ethiopian, Sudanese, Egyptian or Cush. This is because "there is no continent in the world whose achievement has been misunderstood, misrepresented and given to other nations like that of the continent of Africa... If Cush is rendered as I have suggested above, the implications are great. Africa and Africans will know that Yahweh has also done great things through their ancestors. It will destroy the satanic ideology that Christianity is a foreign religion. It will also disprove the racist ideas that some Eurocentric scholars have forced into the Bible in their interpretation." [p.73]

The third section addresses the issue of "Using Africa to interpret the Old Testament". This section is based on the commonalities between OT worldview and Africa. And so one could approach texts of the OT with variations of African perception of, for example, community, taboo, the importance of names, the covenant process, and so on.

In the fourth section contributors addressed the other side of the coin, "Using the Old Testament to Interpret Africa". The use of OT in interpreting the African condition by the churches has not favoured the condition of women in Africa, women contributors protest. Rather the churches have made use of the OT to further the subjugation of African women. Prejudice against women is part and parcel of OT as well as African traditions as a comparative study of Sotho and OT proverbs by Madipoane Masenya prove. Another interesting contribution to this section is the application of textual and historical method in analysing Jeremiah 22' – the condemnation of Johoiakim and the consequences of his selfish politics on Judah as a whole. This is applied with a certain level of success to Africa – challenging corrupt political officeholders whose selfishness is responsible for the incredible suffering Africans are undergoing today. Getui gives three possible hermeneutical presuppositions of approaching the Bible in Africa: the Bible may be seen as

revelation coming into “darkness”, or Africans may be presented as having known and practised the biblical message ever before the arrival of the Bible, or finally African cultures and religion may be seen as interacting mutually with the Bible. She favours the last two approaches as more beneficial to biblical studies in Africa.

The final section of this book examines the achievements, problems and prospects in “Translating the Old Testament in Africa”. This section begins with the affirmation that the first and second translations of the Bible were done on African soil – in other words the Greek Septuagint, and the old Latin version that was translated about 160-200 CE. Contributors stress the importance of knowledge of Biblical Hebrew. But where this is impossible, a literal translation [like the RSV] could be used. The indefatigable work of United Bible Societies is narrated. They have a project of putting the Bible in the language of groups that make up to half a million speakers by 2010. And there are also experiments in the production of “audio” and “video” Bible for people who cannot read and write. The most intriguing paper in this section is the contribution of Victor Zinkuratire on Hebrew “without toil” from the background of Bantu languages. He noted, from his experience in teaching Hebrew in East Africa, that difficulties with morphology and syntax arise from the structure of the English [or Indo-European] language. However, analysis shows that the morphology of Hebrew verbs is similar to the morphology of Bantu verbs. When used in instruction, the Bantu speaking students made greater progress in learning the Hebrew language. He believes that the situation may be similar among Nilotic and Hamitic peoples. He went further to conclude that the closeness of African and Hebrew languages “could encourage African Old Testament scholars to examine the potential of using mainly African Bible translations (instead of European ones) in conjunction with the Hebrew (and Greek) Bible”.

This is a book for students of the Bible, and of the Old

Testament in particular. It will be handy also for the general reader. Apart from Hebrew calligraphy – not put into Latin script and sometimes without punctuation for easy reading – people with general knowledge of Hebrew alphabet can read the book with profit. It certainly is important for students of theology and Christian religion in Africa.

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<sup>1</sup>See for example D. B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968)

<sup>2</sup>Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West. Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See his *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*, (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1998).