



AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS



ELIZABETH MBURU

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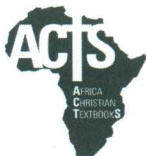
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NAIROBI, KENYA



25471





Langham
PUBLISHING

© 2019 Elizabeth Mburu

Published 2019 by HippoBooks, an imprint of ACTS and Langham Publishing.

Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS), TCNN, PMB 2020, Bukuru 930008, Plateau State, Nigeria. www.actsnigeria.org

Langham Publishing, PO Box 296, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA3 9WZ, UK
www.langhampublishing.org

ISBNs:

978-1-78368-464-9 Print

978-1-78368-538-7 ePub

978-1-78368-539-4 Mobi

978-1-78368-540-0 PDF

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78368-464-9

Cover & Book Design: projectluz.com

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Caxton, and our three children, Bryan, Michelle and Paul. They have been an invaluable support throughout the research and writing of this book, often offering helpful suggestions and testing the material.

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FOREWORD

Without communication there cannot be a relationship, and without relevance in communication there would not be meaningful relationship.

The African believer has been invited into a relationship with God, as expressed in the Scriptures. Yet the Scriptures have remained to a great extent without the desired impact. This raises the question whether those of us who have been called to teach or preach the Scriptures have managed to cross the boundary between the content of the Bible and the relationship to the everyday life of the African Christian.

Professor Elizabeth Mburu does not only raise this question in *African Hermeneutics*, she also provides a way forward on how to achieve this. She lays down for us a methodology that certainly will make a difference.

The four legs of a stool approach, as Mburu proposes, guards against syncretism while at the same time giving the African worldview the place needed if the Scriptures are to be made relevant to an African's everyday life experiences and challenges.

We cannot but agree with the author that a stool that is missing one of its legs will not serve the purpose it is meant for. The African preacher and teacher needs to appreciate the many contributions (most of them from the West) in the areas of theological, literary and historical contexts, but also to acknowledge that these three legs will not go far in passing on the message of the gospel to the African believer when the fourth leg, namely the African context, is neglected.

In this work, Mburu illustrates how this fourth leg needs to be brought in when dealing with the different genres in the Bible – whether it be narrative, wisdom literature, epistle, or even apocalypse. This is done with excellence in both handling the teachings of Scripture and drawing from the riches there are in the African beliefs and practices.

This is a book every preacher or teacher who desires to see the message of the gospel have the needed impact on the African continent must read, learn from, and build on. Mburu may not have said all that can be said (both the Scriptures and the African contexts are too wide to get all aspects covered in one book) but she lays before us basic principles we can all build on as we heed her call to bring the African believer to that level where life is not dichotomized but lived for the glory of God in its totality.

Samuel M. Ngewa

Professor of New Testament,

Dean of Graduate School,

Africa International University

November 2018

PREFACE

Interpreting the Bible is always a challenging task. To be more precise, interpreting the Bible *accurately* is a challenging task. And yet the Bible is meant to be understood and applied in the daily lives of believers if it is to be a guide for faith and practice.

African readers of the Bible face the additional challenge that most of the models and methods of Bible interpretation, or hermeneutics, are rooted in a Western context. This is not surprising given that Christianity came to Africa from the West, the churches and theological institutions that were founded were missionary led, and most of the theological resources are produced by Western writers. Millions of Africans therefore use “foreign” approaches to the interpretation of the Bible. This may be one of the reasons why many African Christians experience a dichotomy in their Christian lives. While the content of Christianity may be known and perhaps even understood, practice is not often consistent with this knowledge. This book is an attempt to address this problem by providing the reader with a contextualized, African intercultural approach to the study of the Bible.

Part I provides a foundation for this intercultural approach by outlining principles that address the issue of this dichotomy and provide a solution through a contextualized hermeneutic. Since Bible interpretation can never be done in a vacuum, this contextualized hermeneutic begins with an exploration of African worldviews. Part I also presents a four-legged stool model that guides the reader in examining the text using four interrelated steps. Specific application of the biblical text to the African context is viewed as the logical endpoint of this process. The review questions at the end of each chapter in Part I are intended to help the reader think more critically about the African contextual issues that affect accurate interpretation of the Bible.

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Part II applies the principles developed in Part I to the main genres of the Bible. Each genre is addressed in a separate chapter, and specific literary techniques used in analysing African literature are woven into the interpretation of the text. An example from African literature is given in each chapter and a biblical text is then interpreted using the model developed in Part I. A key aspect of this approach is the recognition that the biblical writers wrote from particular theological, literary and historical/cultural contexts and that they intended to communicate a message to their readers. It is this message to the original readers that we must endeavour to understand and then apply in our own contexts. There are no review questions in Part II as it is assumed that readers will have examples from their own contexts that they can relate to the biblical texts.

Recent reports indicate that most Christians today live in sub-Saharan Africa. This means that the church of the future will be defined within the scope of African Christianity. If Christianity is to maintain its integrity as defined by biblical revelation, it is imperative that we endeavour to understand and apply the Bible accurately, as the authors of the biblical text intended. It is hoped that this book will contribute to this task.

Elizabeth Mburu, PhD

Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The people of Kenya have a Kiswahili word that truly expresses the essence of communal life in Africa. It is a word that is found in our loyalty pledge and that has been used for decades to identify activities that require community support. This word is *harambee*. It means “pulling together.” A book such as this has only come to fruition because of the *harambee* efforts of my family, friends, colleagues and students. Many thanks go to my husband, Caxton, and my children, Bryan, Michelle and Paul, for the tremendous support they have given me in the years that it took to envision and write this book. In addition to their moral support, they patiently served as “test subjects” for the material and graciously gave me much needed feedback and encouragement. A special thanks to Caxton who shared and confirmed some of the content with the rural pastors he trains, and Michelle for her artwork of the African stool. I also wish to acknowledge Dr Kariba Munio who provided some of the African material. I owe him a debt of gratitude for his contribution. My heartfelt appreciation goes to the entire team at Langham Literature. In particular, to Pieter Kwant who heard my passion for contextualized hermeneutics and challenged me to write this book; to Isobel Stevenson who worked tirelessly to edit and refine the contents of this book from its inception; and to Dahlia Frasier who participated in editing the finished product. Any mistakes are entirely my own. I wish to convey my appreciation to all the students I had the honour of teaching (at International Leadership University, Pan Africa Christian University and Africa International University, Kenya) for their feedback as I tested the material on them in the classroom. And finally, I thank God for providing the resources necessary to write this book. My prayer is that it will be a useful tool for the growth of the church in Africa and beyond.

ABBREVIATIONS

Bible Translations and Dictionaries

CSB	Christian Standard Bible
GNT	Good News Translation
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>

Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen, Exod, Lev, Num, Deut, Josh, Judg, Ruth, 1–2 Sam, 1–2 Kgs, 1–2 Chr, Ezra, Neh, Esth, Job, Ps/Pss, Prov, Eccl, Song, Isa, Jer, Lam, Ezek, Dan, Hos, Joel, Amos, Obad, Jonah, Mic, Nah, Hab, Zeph, Hag, Zech, Mal

New Testament

Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Rom, 1–2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1–2 Thess, 1–2 Tim, Titus, Phlm, Heb, Jas, 1–2 Pet, 1, 2, 3 John, Jude, Rev

Interpretation of Scripture occurs within one's worldview and culture, which enhances our understanding and ability to apply Scripture in the world. However, few books address Bible interpretation from an African perspective and no other textbook uses the intercultural approach found here. This book brings both an awareness of how one's African context gives a lens to hermeneutics, and also how to interpret texts with integrity despite our cultural influences.

African Hermeneutics was born of Prof Elizabeth Mburu's frustration at only having textbooks that predominantly followed a Western worldview to teach her African students. Mburu's approach to hermeneutics is one that begins in Africa, moving from the known to the unknown as students learn to apply her 'four-legged stool model' to biblical texts, namely examining: the parallels to African contexts, the theological context, the literary context, and the historical and cultural context. This textbook will help students and pastors interpret Scripture with greater accuracy in their own context, allowing for faithful application in their local contexts.

Elizabeth Mburu lays down principles for a four-legged stool model of an intercultural biblical hermeneutics in Africa and applies it to both Old Testament and New Testament texts. Her contribution deserves close attention from any reader who is interested in the development of intercultural hermeneutics in Africa.

—JEAN-CLAUDE LOBA-MKOLE, PhD

This new book will certainly redirect the course of biblical scholarship, especially in Africa, where this new approach will resonate with African emphasis upon the traditional value of storytelling as a sure and valid tool of biblical interpretation.

—YUSUFU TURAKI, PhD

It is my privilege to commend this helpful and readable work. Communicating clearly and logically developing observations from African life and the biblical text, Elizabeth Mburu articulates a sound and fruitful African hermeneutic. She skilfully compares African and biblical worldviews, offering foundations for contextualization in a way that brings together the interpretive horizons.

—CRAIG S. KEENER, PhD

Elizabeth Mburu was the first woman to gain a PhD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, North Carolina, USA. She is an Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek at International Leadership University, Africa International University and Pan-Africa Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya. Dr Mburu is on the board of the *Africa Bible Commentary* and is the editorial coordinator and New Testament editor for its revision. She is also the Africa Regional Coordinator for Langham Literature.

ISBN 978-1-78368-464-9

