



Reading the Bible in Contemporary Africa

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THE BIBLE, I AM TOLD, IS THE MOST WIDELY READ BOOK IN AFRICA. ALREADY enjoying great influence, the Bible continues to be translated into an ever increasing number of African languages. It finds broad acceptance as Scripture, the word of God.

I. THE APPEAL AND USE OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA

The Bible has manifold appeal to Africans and is used in a variety of ways.¹ First, to many African Christians and even to some non-Christians the Bible is seen as a symbol of God's presence and protection. A mother puts a Bible in a cot beside her sleeping child to fend off evils. People sleep with the Bible under their pillows in order to be assured of God's protection in the night. A theologian finds credible

¹The present observations are based on my earlier work: Fidon R. Mwombeki, "Biblical Interpretation in a Current African Situation: The Case of Blood" (Ph.D. diss., Luther Seminary, 1997).

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Africans read the Bible in many ways, some of them constructive and others perhaps less so. Trained teachers (in the western world as well?) must take all these readings into account—and the situations that produce them—as they seek to present the clear meaning of God's word.

reasons to lay a well-wrapped Bible in the foundation of a new house. Some bishops and pastors are buried with the Bible in their coffins. In these uses, the Bible is seen as a symbol of God's presence, providing the assurance of divine protection. People walk with Bibles in their hands or carry them in their luggage as they travel.

Second, Africans read the Bible for practical utilization. It is a book of life, neither a book of fiction nor one of history. It is not read for curiosity or fun. In this book, the reader listens to God speaking: giving comfort, instruction, exhortation, even condemnation. Today! As Timothy was taught, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Many people read the Bible daily. Many know specific verses for particular situations. When a pastor visits the bereaved or the sick in bed or a family caught in some form of tragedy, the Bible must be visibly seen in his hand, and he or she must read it to them publicly before prayers. If pastors do not, they must face the embarrassment of being asked to do so by ordinary parishioners. In times of joy as well, the Bible is crucial. A pastor is usually invited to open various parties—weddings, a new house, ground breaking, baptisms—and a reading from Scripture is expected.

Third, the Bible does not always have to be understood rationally. It is quite alright if the complicated verses are simply read, even without explanation, and a prayer is said. People will feel the presence of God and say "Amen!" The biblical reading is appropriated spiritually, emotionally, mystically. The historical setting of a text is not significant, and even less the identity of its author. African spiritualism supersedes intelligibility. Most often, the Bible is appropriated worshipfully, by heart, not necessarily by mind.

Fourth, some settings do, of course, demand intelligibility. In Bible studies, where questions and answers are encouraged, there is a lot of discussion. Difficult questions are not ignored, and people enjoy the discussion. This is particularly true in youth groups. As more and more people come into contact with western culture and rationalism, pastors need to be more intellectually equipped than before.

I personally remember a day when a seven-year-old boy, a firstborn child, asked me why an angel from God would come to slaughter the firstborn children of Egypt, children who themselves had done nothing wrong. On another occasion, a high-school student, after seeing a movie on the death of Christ, asked why God would allow such horrible torture to his child (whom we claim he loved) in order to forgive others. Is God unable simply to forgive, if he is as merciful as we say? While assuredly the inquirer had no acquaintance with serious theological debates from old times—including Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?*—the influence of Islam was absolutely obvious, which argues that it is ridiculous to think that God needed to have his sinless son killed. Muslims insist that God is *al-Karim*, unquestionably merciful, one who simply forgives. If God really needs someone to die in order to provide forgiveness, this is not grace.

Moreover, once Africans have read the stories of Abraham, David, Solomon, Elkanah, and many others, trying to argue for monogamy on biblical grounds proves quite daunting. The simple assumption that polygamy is pagan or non-Christians is quickly challenged. One has to find a meandering route to defend monogamy.

Another young person, an intellectual, asked a pastor in a town-hall-styled Bible study why we Africans identify with Israel, praising God for killing innocent non-Israelites. Why, in our reading of Scripture, do we not identify with Egyptians, Jebusites, Philistines, and other peoples who were wiped out and driven out of their lands to give way to the migrating Jews?

Clearly, such challenges require significant biblical and theological literacy on the part of pastors and other church leaders if they are to respond in helpful ways.

Fifth, there is strong affinity between the religious and cultural context of the Bible and that of contemporary Africa. Unfortunately, in the current globalized society, Africa lags behind other continents in every aspect. Most Africans are frustratingly poor peasants and pastoralists. They literally do not know for certain whether, next month or even next day, they will have something to eat. Too many children are undernourished, and too many die in infancy. Many biblical stories sound familiar to Africans: people going out to fish for that day's breakfast, beggars and prostitutes in the streets, women carrying the family's load, exclusion of women and children in counts and censuses, light from oil lamps, neighbors going to ask for bread to feed an unexpected guest in the middle of the night, free "all-you-can-eat" weddings for all relatives and friends, demon-possessed men, women, and children. The list goes on and on.

At the same time, there is strong affinity in social arrangements between African and biblical culture—lineage, age-groupings, the value of royalty, birthrights and inheritance laws, the value of the elderly, emotional attachment to ancestral lands. These affinities make the Bible sound true and relevant to the reader.

II. TEACHERS OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA

African Christians have assumed ownership of the Bible. They view it as God's book for them, one that everyone has the right to read and interpret. This ownership goes farther, extending into teaching as well. When looking at who actually teaches the Bible in Africa, one will be surprised.

Mainline churches have many formally trained teachers or theologians. Most of these are parish pastors, and they are expected to be the primary teachers. Often, however, time and the press of other duties do not allow them to do much teaching of the Bible, other than through a Sunday sermon—which is getting shorter and shorter as years pass.

Lay leaders teach the Bible in many Protestant churches. Some of these teachers are trained in Bible schools of different denominations, taking courses of various lengths, from as short as a few weeks to as much as three years. These

people—called evangelists, catechists, teachers, Bible women, etc.—are sent out to work under a pastor, but it is they who become the primary leaders and teachers in their respective congregations. They exert enormous influence in the daily reading and teaching of the Bible.

Apart from these trained lay leaders, every street or village has numerous untrained leaders teaching the Bible in small groups or homes. They are both male and female, and have no formal teaching in the Bible. Some of these people are appointed formally, and some pastors prepare material for them to use or give them some orientation.

Then we have revivalists. These regard their mandate to come directly from God, and they need nobody's permission to teach the Bible. Their teaching is informal, conducted anywhere, any time. They teach or preach at bus stations, at marketplaces on a special market day in a village, in busy town streets, or even house to house. Their theology is self-styled and often crude.

However, these charismatic leaders have played a very crucial role in the history of African Christianity; they work without pay, jeopardizing their own survival, but with unparalleled zeal for Christ and the word of God. In my area the gospel was not originally brought by a foreign missionary. Rather, nearly illiterate people, five men and one woman, working separately, heard of the gospel, received some rough teaching of the Gospel according to Luke, and came back, starting churches all over. Daniel Kaijage, for example, preached and started nine congregations in various islands in Lake Victoria before he was himself baptized. Most of these churches are today vibrant Lutheran congregations. Leaders like these are still around—often disliked by the mainline churches, but, for better or worse, doing a big job.

We see that the majority of Bible teachers in Africa have never had any formal Bible teaching themselves. It is crucial for theologians to recognize that their own influence and interpretive style are not the only ones available, and certainly not the most prominent. For survival, pastors need to cultivate a healthy interaction between themselves and the competing multitude of untrained readers of the Bible. Pastors need to help these untrained teachers, who for the most part have a closer touch with most of their church members. Otherwise, people can be misled or mixed up in what I call a simmering pot of traditions.

III. A SIMMERING POT OF MIXED TRADITIONS

Interpretation of the Bible in Africa today is like a big pot of chili simmering on the African three-stone firewood stove and engulfed in smoke. There are several traditions working simultaneously among the same people.

1. *Protestant confessionalism*

Mainline churches have taught their members their respective doctrines or confessions well. Protestants know *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia* quite

deeply. Teachers of the Bible and pastors always interpret the Bible in the light of the doctrines of their respective churches and try to convince outsiders to accept their interpretations as the most accurate. Catechists of the Catholic tradition are well versed in specific doctrines like mariology, the saints, the prayers, etc.

2. Evangelical fundamentalism

There are many denominations that fall into the category of evangelical fundamentalism, generally interpreting the Bible literalistically. Many people even in mainline churches read the Bible in the same way, quoting verses to support a few beliefs that their churches have taught them. These readings are most often legalistic, focusing on morality and eschatology.

I recently met a missionary with a Lutheran background who was sent by a mission organization that falls into this category. He distributes literature that he selects, translates, and publishes. He challenged me as to why I support the ordination of women. As I started making my case, he retreated, saying that he is not a theologian, but that he has read verses where Paul says that a woman cannot lead a man in any way. As I pushed further, he told me that he could not argue the case, but that he knows and respects many evangelical people who have all opposed women's ordination. There are many such people, strongly holding on to only a few verses that, in their opinion, support claims which they themselves cannot defend. That position informs their teaching or reading of the Bible.

3. Pentecostal utilitarianism

Pentecostal churches are a big force in Africa. They have sufficient American and Scandinavian funds to mount relentless media and literature campaigns, convincingly pushing their interpretation. In many countries they produce and effectively market books, videos, audiotapes, small tracts, and newspapers. In this way their interpretation reaches far beyond their own denominations. Their approach is utilitarian in that its aim is to show what Jesus can do for you in your current situation. It is very triumphalistic, promising miraculous victory over the forces of evil. It appeals to many in a continent where people are trapped in social and economic problems: People in Africa fear witchcraft. Real is the impending death from civil wars, AIDS, Ebola, starvation, malaria, and a multitude of preventable waterborne diseases. This is a place where maternal deaths are the highest, child mortality is appalling, mishandling in dilapidated medical facilities is commonplace. People need a God of power who promises to come and crush all these threats, at no immediate cost. And the Pentecostal churches do provide this message—to their own members and to others. It is quite common now to find the same kind of soothing interpretation in mainline churches. Some members of mainline churches move to the Pentecostal churches, often returning later when they realize that their problems are not so easily solved, even there.

This same mix is apparent in our local Lutheran churches. In Bukoba, a number of our very faithful members, who come to morning Sunday service in our

cathedral, go in the afternoon to a nearby public school classroom for Bible teaching. The teacher is a lay church elder of a rural Lutheran congregation, a delegate of our synod assembly, but who works for a Pentecostal foundation; his teaching is basically cautious pentecostalism. In other parts of the country we see that it is easy to have pastors who are African by nature, Lutheran by doctrine, fundamentalist theologically, and pentecostal charismatics in practice.

4. African literalism and spiritualism

Africans read the Bible as word of God, with reverence for spiritual appropriation. This becomes obvious in the way Africans pass on the Bible teachings—orally, and most significantly through music. Africans like to sing, and trained singers have no monopoly. Most songs that are sung by the choirs in every church are verbatim Bible passages or teachings. Children as well as adults learn the Bible through song. These songs reveal African literalism and spiritualism, much of which is often lively and life-giving, but which at times can become quite dangerous.

IV. THE CHALLENGES OF A TRAINED READER

In December 2000 I went to lead a series of three Bible studies at a synod assembly of one of the dioceses of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. The theme of the assembly came from Nah 1:9: “What do you plot against the Lord? He will make a full end; he will not take vengeance twice on his foes” (RSV). The NRSV puts it differently: “Why do you plot against the Lord? He will make an end; no adversary will rise up twice.” The translation in Swahili is equally problematic; it could be paraphrased in English like this: “What are you contemplating about [or concerning] the Lord? He himself will put an end, suffering [or torture] will not rise a second time.”

As I arrived at the assembly with my preparations already typed and produced, I found that my original suspicion was right. The intention was to interpret the verse as a word for the people of God, to give them courage that God will put an end to whatever is troubling them. It was supposed to be the guiding verse for the following two years. The artwork, the handouts, the banners spread around the assembly venue, all announced the “good news,” asking believers to sit and meditate, to reflect on the God who is present, coming to end the suffering of his people.

But the literal and historical message of the text is just the opposite. In this verse, Nahum is prophesying against Assyria, against Sennacherib, and therefore it is a word of judgment, a threat. An interpretive dilemma!

On the one hand, a communicator is taught never to speak against or violate the convictions of the audience. And as a guest speaker—one whom most of them had heard about but never heard, and one of whom expectations were very high—I certainly did not want to be labeled as one of the biblical intellectuals who are best left in college classrooms but not in the pulpit. I certainly did not want this invitation to be my last, especially because it was in the capital city, Dar es Salaam, with

people from around the country who would easily send information either of one's fame or notorious heretic tendencies. I wanted to make sure I did not offend the people.

On the other hand, I knew that as a biblical scholar I had to adhere to my professional ethics, to maintain professional integrity. How could I stand in front of people and interpret a threat as good news, because the people thought so? What is my role then, as a trained reader, if I go with what they want to hear, even if I am absolutely sure they are misreading the Bible because of their lack of exposure to more information on the subject? I had to make a choice.

To make matters worse, the day before my first speech, one elderly delegate shocked me by asking about the date of Nahum. He surely had done his homework, and had become conversant with the whole book of Nahum and with the history behind it. It was clear to me that this audience, with several university professors and faithful lay readers of the Bible, would not only be listening to me to say "Amen" when I finished, but that they would be checking me out to see if I had really graduated and done my homework.

I decided to explain this dilemma at the outset of the presentation, carefully working through the dissonance between their comfortable expectations and the integrity of the threatening text. It was also possible tactfully to identify the resonance between the message of threat to Assyria and the situation in that diocese that turned out to be quite relevant. It was very comforting for me to see how the message of threat could be good news in specific situations.

I believe the role of the trained reader, the theologian, is to work through what has been called the "hermeneutic of resonance"²—to identify the resonance of the biblical text with the theology of the church as well as with the situation of the readers. The situations vary, and each one must be taken seriously into account.

The second challenge is to face African realities. Unless one is in Africa, in the banana groves and the desert places, the stinking refugee camps, the crowded town neighborhoods without proper sanitation, and the hospitals without medicine, one cannot really appreciate how complicated reading the Bible is in such situations—and yet, how real.

For a long time, until the tragedy of the Rwandan machetes was a reality, I could not imagine how so many people in the books of Joshua and Judges could be killed with crude instruments over very short periods just for the land. Then we saw the Kagera River dumping thousands of floating bodies into Lake Victoria to be food for fish and hippos. Reading of diseases killing people en masse could be easily doubted until we came face to face with stories of the Ebola epidemic in northern Uganda in the last part of 2000. The significance of the admonition to care for orphans and widows can never be doubted once you have seen what we do

²Ibid., 62-76.

in a local program that serves more than 50,000 orphans, most of whom have lost their parents to AIDS.³ The story of Noah's ark becomes real when you know what El Niño rains did to most of the African countries.

In situations like these, I have found myself to be the chief spokesperson of the Tanzania Coalition on Debt and Development, which is the Jubilee 2000 campaign for Tanzania. The tragic situations challenge us in our reading of the Bible. How can we justify international debt payments when they literally require snatching food away from our innocent children, who never took part in the unjust negotiations of the corrupt governments? Questions of economics become primary interpretive postures. It is no longer acceptable for the pastor visiting a family with a child dying of diarrhea because they have no money to go to hospital, to claim that this is the will of God. How do you interpret texts like "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28) when you literally pass through the "valley of death" every day?

A Danish guest was asked when he visited one of our colleges, "Why are you rich and we are poor?" It took the Danish guest two weeks, he said, to contemplate a response, and to no avail.

African pastors, the trained readers and teachers of the Bible, have a daunting task. While they must maintain their professional integrity, they must speak realistically to the situations in which they read and teach, appreciating the fact that they are not alone. Their influence depends only on the relevance of their teaching, not on their official position. They must, therefore, work hard to gain and maintain this position of legitimate and relevant influence, since their competing untrained teachers are relentless. 

³See Fidon Mwombeki, "Are We of the Same God?" *The Lutheran*, August 2000, 50-51.