

BOOK REVIEW

African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning

Edited by Hans de Wit and Gerald O West

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This publication is the result of a four day conference initiated by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and hosted at the University of Stellenbosch in 2006. Theologians from Africa and Europe participated, resulting in a publication that has a strong dialogical character. The conference intended to stimulate debate between African and European readers of the Bible, and to “reflect together on how readers from radically different contexts – professional and ordinary alike – may become allies in an ethically accountable way of relating the biblical text to their current (global) situations and how a process of mutual learning may be established.” (cf. back cover). In turn the publication serves as stimulus for further discussion and this intent is exemplified by the structure of the book, namely that each essay is responded to by one of the participants of the conference. This is a sensible approach, given that the matter of intercultural Bible reading and appropriation is an ongoing debate. In as much as it is an ongoing debate, it is of course not a new debate. Surprisingly enough some of the European participants confessed their ignorance regarding African ways of reading and interpreting the Bible, i.e. contextual hermeneutics.¹ Simultaneously some African theologians boldly reject historical-criticism as a (useful) means of interpreting and appropriating the Bible, thus in effect ignoring the contribution of their European counterparts. Such self-inflicted ignorance and methodological isolation encountered in different corners of the globe is disturbing.

As stated, the debate between African and European readers of the Bible on the topic of cultural hermeneutics is not new, but many professional readers of the Bible, from both continents, have not yet entered into it. For this reason credit is due to the initiators of the congress for making a conscious effort to bridge the gap between African and European biblical scholars in order that they may become more acquainted with and appreciative of each others approaches to reading, interpreting and appropriating the Bible in their specific contexts. But given that interpreting and appropriating the Bible is so context specific, it remains a serious question whether some sort of hermeneutical integration is possible. Part of the vitality of the Bible is that it can mean different things to different people at different

¹ In this regard, see e.g. RS Sugirtharajah ed., *Still at the margins: biblical scholarship fifteen years after Voices from the margin*. London: T&T Clark, 2008.

times in different contexts. In the end it is not a matter of either or, though this seems to be the viewpoint of some scholars. Both African and European approaches to the Bible are necessary, and necessary for both is a critical self-awareness. More than just an awareness of each other's approaches to reading the Bible is required and to argue "to each his / her own" is merely avoiding the problem. A critical awareness and willingness to learn, dialogue, and interact is essential if endeavours such as this publication are to bear any fruit in the long term.

In general this publication is well edited with a clear structure, but contains some minor grammatical errors such as "in what followings" instead of "in what follows" (p. 85). But such minor errors do not detract from the value of this volume. In addition to the body of the work, it also includes a helpful subject index. The book is divided into four parts. The first is entitled "The Debate: An Hermeneutical Overview" and includes essays by Hans de Wit, Gerald West, Knut Holter, and Hans Snoek. In the second part entitled "Methodological Insights" contributions are provided by Louis Jonker, Kune Biezeveld, Eric Anum, Klaas Spronk, and Frances Klopper. The third section is entitled "Exegesis and Context" to which Eep Talstra and Reinoud Oosting, Makhosazana K. Nzimande, Gerrit van Ek, Mmapula Lefa, and Jurie le Roux contribute. In the fourth section which is entitled "Hermeneutics and Context" Paul Decock, Maarman Samuel Tshehla, Anne Marijke Spijkerboer, Jeremy Punt, and Knut Holter contribute essays. The last mentioned essay by Knut Holter provides some concluding reflections on the debate operative in the book, and he also points to a number of difficulties (such as lack of funding and limited facilities at seminaries) in the African context that inhibits the furthering of an African hermeneutic. That is, doing theology in Africa. As stated earlier, each essay is responded to by one of the conference participants. The intent is to further stimulate debate and in the context of a conference such a *modus operandi* is certainly sensible, but this is not necessarily the case in the context of a publication. In some instances the respondents do little more than to reiterate the main points of the contributor's argument, and this does not really serve to stimulate further debate. Nevertheless the willingness of participants to engage in dialogue is encouraging.

It remains to be seen to what extent the nature of this endeavour can be characterised as fruitful, i.e. whether it will contribute, in practice, to closer collaboration between African and European biblical scholars. As the old adage goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, but at least this publication offers an appetising foretaste of that which may still come. The uncomfortable suspicion exists however that the ideal of intercultural Bible reading will remain limited to projects, conferences and publications.² Professional participants mostly return to their own corner of the global village after all has been said and continue to read, interpret, and appropriate the Bible as required (and dictated) by their contexts. Lay readers of the Bible rarely get to participate in the greater debate in any event, and continue to read and appropriate the Bible as they see fit for their immediate situations. While this is a point of concern, given the "quest of a shared meaning," it points to the absolute necessity of such projects, conferences and publications and as Knut Holter rightly argues, one of the responsibilities of readers of the Bible who engage in this debate is to create "contexts for a dialogue" (p. 414). In all contexts the ultimate challenge remains to be responsible and accountable readers of the Bible, even if a greater integration of African and European hermeneutical approaches does not materialise. As such this publication may be commended and indeed recommended to all interested parties. Perhaps some might even take up the challenge and enter into the debate.

² See e.g. H de Wit *et al.*, *Through the eyes of another: intercultural reading of the Bible*. Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004.