



Book Review

The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues Between Postcolonial African and British Biblical Scholars Johanna Stiebert and Musa W. Dube (eds.) London: T&T Clark, 2020.

'Why bother with the Bible in the postcolonial situation?' (p. xii) This question, posed in the Foreword, lurks behind the various contributions that comprise this edited volume, making it an excellent book to stimulate critical reflection on issues of postcoloniality that demand attention in contemporary biblical studies.

The contributors are a balance of established biblical scholars and emerging voices in the field, predominantly from the two 'centres' of southern Africa and the UK that engaged in a three-year dialogue, funded by the British Academy International Partnership Fund. The book is arranged in three main parts, in each of which two main essays elicit a reflective response from a third scholar.

While they should not expect this to be a primer in postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, careful readers – alert to such matters – will find that the basic tenets of a postcolonial approach are exhibited: the problem of uncritiqued structures such as whiteness and patriarchy (chapter 5); the unavoidable influence of power dynamics in the way the Bible is read (chapter 7); the entwinement of the translation of the Bible with colonial structures and missionary activity (chapter 11); and the need for first-hand encounter with contextually produced biblical interpretation in order to challenge the tendency of 'othering' that which is different (chapter 12).

That last point is important. One of the recurring themes of the volume is that African biblical scholarship 'is accountable to "ordinary" African readers/users/hearers of the Bible' (p. 118). As such, since contemporary African biblical scholarship seeks to make sense of the Bible in the midst of ordinary African experience, it is less concerned to pay homage to Western hermeneutical methodologies. By contrast, postcolonial biblical scholarship in the West – despite its good intentions – might be in danger of exploiting African readings, commodifying them for its own purposes, in a fateful reiteration of coloniality (p. 123-4).

There is therefore some irony in this volume. In seeking to narrate a scholarly engagement between African and British biblical scholars, the essays somewhat undermine the 'ordinary' context that is the stated natural habitat of African biblical hermeneutics. The writers, though, do seem on the whole to be aware of this irony, and it is that self-conscious humility – recognising both the compromised nature of all attempts to read the Bible, and the reality that every 'centre' of interpretation is a 'margin' for some other 'centre' – that makes this volume a worthwhile study for serious biblical scholars today. There is not a single unified postcolonial biblical hermeneutic presented here, but rather a series of careful engagements with biblical, African and Western voices that matter.

Ghanian scholar Mark Aidoo notes that contemporary biblical scholars need to be like the *okyeame*, the Akan spokesperson, who speaks with eloquence and wisdom in order to provoke a community to greater engagement and action (p. 111). In bringing together a range of voices to explore African and postcolonial readings of the Bible, this volume is one such *okyeame*, perhaps to encourage all biblical scholarship – African and Western – to become accountable to the 'ordinary'.

Andrew Stobart