Elizabeth Mburu, African Hermeneutics, Carslie, Cumbria, United Kingdom, HippoBooks, Langham Publishing, 2019, ISBN 978-1-78368-464-9, 234 pages.

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What is African Hermeneutics? How does it relate to Biblical hermeneutics? Is there an intersection between the African worldview, the Western worldview, and the biblical worldview? How do these worldviews interact in biblical interpretation? This book helps scholars answer the above questions and apply hermeneutical issues in the African context. The author, Elizabeth Mburu, guides readers through a lucid, logical articulation of African and biblical worldviews and the contextualisation of hermeneutics in Africa. She is an Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek at International Leadership University, Africa International University, and Pan-African Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya. She is a seasoned scholar with a PhD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina, USA.

The book synthesises contextual hermeneutics and is divided into two parts. The first part covers the general principles of hermeneutics (pp. 1-91), and the second covers specific principles (pp. 93-214). It purports to 'provide the reader with a contextualised African intercultural approach to the study of the Bible' (preface). Also, it was written to 'provide an intercultural model of hermeneutics that will help arrive at a reliable interpretation of the scriptures' (p. 1). It defines hermeneutics as 'the art and science of interpreting the Bible' (p. 1).

In part one, although the author does not, *per se,* define African hermeneutics, she nevertheless outlines what it entails, *inter alia*, drawing on aspects of African culture to facilitate understanding of the practical meaning of the Bible and using culturally appropriate instruments of God's saving grace. She also draws on African folklore, using the principle of moving from known to the unknown as Jesus did in the parables. She draws on African culture, closer to the biblical worldview than Western culture, to bridge the knowledge gap and promote biblical understanding, incorporating African spirituality to ground abstract thinking in concrete realities. (p. 6-7). The author notes that the goal of African hermeneutics is to help Africans integrate African and biblical worldviews, enabling African Christians to understand and apply the biblical text to their lives (p. 7). It further argues that Paul's speech at Athens in Acts 17 is a good model for contextualised hermeneutics, in which Paul used his understanding of the Greek philosophical context to expound scripture without compromising the scriptures' Christ-centred worldview (p. 10), demonstrating 'how to use culture and worldview when presenting and interpreting the biblical message. Paul uses several points of contact as effective bridges between his worldview and the worldviews he encounters' (p.11), using the principle of moving from the known to the unknown. It shows how Paul used the phrases 'unknown god' and 'we are his offspring' to connect with the God of the Bible in the biblical worldview and Greek philosophy. By going to the very heart of his hearers' worldview, Paul established a common starting point (p. 15). By implication, the author appeals to African scholars to emulate Paul, demonstrating that faith and reason are complementary and must be used together to form a cohesive worldview (pp. 16-20). The author unpacks the theological aspects of the African

worldview, drawing on the analogy of blind people's views of the elephant to argue that scholars read and approach the Bible from different perspectives. Worldview is defined as 'a set of beliefs and values that guide one's thinking about all of life – the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things' (p. 22). The biblical worldview is the self's orientation to all of life in relation to God. (p. 22); and the communal nature of all worldviews is, 'the fingerprints of culture are evident in every worldview' (p. 25).

African worldview's general acceptance of the existence of the Supreme Being positively influences their hermeneutics; nevertheless, its utilitarian, transactional relationship with the Supreme Being negatively influences it, as evidenced by the proliferation of the prosperity gospel in African Christianity. Secondly, the African worldview's non-separation of the sacred from the secular is a positive aid to scriptural interpretation, as it acknowledges the Supreme Being as the creator of both the spiritual and the physical realities (p. 33). Thirdly, belief in spirits is second nature to the African worldview, rendering biblical texts such as Hebrews 11 and 12:1 literal in African thought. The third factor positively contributes to the phenomenal growth of African Instituted Churches within African Christianity. Nevertheless, it negatively promotes syncretistic doubling in witchcraft to acquire the power! The *ubuntu* philosophy in the African worldview aligns with the biblical worldview (Deut. 25:5-10) and thus positively influences African hermeneutics (pp. 33-43). The remaining part of section one (pp. 45-89) evaluates African social values, epistemology, morality, suffering, character, integrity, honesty, and respect for the elderly, which resonate with the biblical worldview and inform African hermeneutics. Africans' reverence for community moral norms, taboos, and ancestors resonates with Achan's story in Joshua 7 and similar passages. Also, the Africans' linkage between suffering and retribution finds dynamic equivalents in the Old Testament, except in the Book of Job (pp. 55–56). The African folklore of the tortoise-and-hare race, in which the tortoise won, highlights the value of cooperation and solidarity over individualism and shows how Africans culturally appreciate the story of Babel in Genesis 11. Africans' love of dancing is reflected in their appreciation of the Book of Psalms, 2 Samuel 6:14, and biblical poetry (pp. 59-63). The core of the first section, chapter 4, is the book's central theme: the representation of African hermeneutics as a four-legged stool. The author deviates from the established understanding one finds in most textbooks of hermeneutics, suggesting three necessary approaches: historical context, literary and reader-response, or one's presuppositions, summarised as three worlds: 'The world behind the text, the world within the text and the world in front of the text'.[1] The author boldly champions a fourth one – parallels to the African context or the context of the reader as the first leg of the stool. By deviating from the norm, the author prioritises the first stool, consistent with the principle of moving from the known to the unknown and argues that this approach guides the identification of points of contact with the biblical text (p. 68). The second leg of the stool is theological reflection from African perspectives; when combined with the first, the author argues, this should be the starting point. The argument in the third and fourth legs - literary and historical contexts of the text echo similar arguments one finds in other conventional textbooks of hermeneutics (pp. 70-74).

Section two provides concrete examples of how to apply the four-legged stool theory. It argues that the Bible should be studied thematically, identifying six themes and four genres in the OT and seven themes and three genres in the NT. It describes interpreting stories as 'artistic arrangement of specific content to communicate meaning or emotions through the unfolding of scenes or episodes' (p. 107). It argues that African stories convey moral values, provide information, contain myths, and offer entertainment. Also, contrary to Western storytelling, African storytelling emphasises that the whole story conveys the message and that

[1] R.W. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008

every part plays a role; there is no clear identification of the story's moral import. The writer asserts that the book of Ruth in the OT has substantial cultural-dynamic equivalents in African cultures (pp. 128-134). Chapters seven and eight evaluate the Wisdom literature and songs and assert that most OT proverbs and riddles exhibit similarities in African contexts. Wisdom is defined as practical knowledge, and African wisdom sought to inculcate values that fostered unity and harmony within the community. African proverbs are described as 'short, colourful, memorable statements that communicate wise living in a community' (p. 139). While African proverbs emphasise communal living, biblical proverbs extend beyond the community to encompass the relationship and obedience to God (p. 152). Both Biblical and traditional African worldviews concur on seeing life in terms of retribution and reward. In traditional African communities, the breakdown of relationships with the deity, ancestors, and community members results in punishment that resonates with the story of Achan in the OT book of Joshua 7 (p. 154). Chapter eight provides detailed evidence that African songs are imbued with connections to traditional culture and worldview values necessary for hermeneutics. It demonstrates how such resonates with the OT books of Psalms, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations, as well as with a few other scattered passages in the Bible, including doxologies. The chapter cautions the interpreter of songs to note that songs employ figurative language (pp. 179-190). Chapter nine examines the interpretation of letters and acknowledges that, while letter writing was not common in the traditional African worldview, some of Paul's letters were written to combat error and false teaching and urges African leaders not to be shy about confronting syncretistic practices in the church. The book concludes with a pithy chapter ten that emphasises the need to depart from 'Western approach to the biblical text that fails to consider the African culture and worldview' (p. 211).

While the author adequately points out the significance of taking the cultural and theological African contexts as priority, the author seems to overlook the criticism labelled to the Western reader-response approach and the compromise of reading one's presupposition to the biblical text leading to reading into the text (eisegesis) rather than reading out of the text – exegesis, which in the African context leads to syncretism that the author warns against. Nevertheless, the author's bold suggestion to start with reader-response (the world in front of the text) is strongly advocated in the book, and its merits warrant exploration, with the eisegesis caution referred to above. Although the book contains coherence lapses and repetitions, it is illuminating, worth reading, and highly recommended for those seeking a new hermeneutical approach that takes the African context seriously.