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BOOK REVIEW

AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS.

Mburu, E. (HippoBooks, ACTS and Langham Publishing, 2019), 252 pp. Price: R500 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-78368-464-9

“I was, and still am ... ‘an African in Western garb’.” (p. 7). Building on what Elisabeth Mburu says about herself in this sentence, I want to propose that *African hermeneutics* is a colonial epistemology in African garb. Looking at the cover of *African hermeneutics*, I immediately recognised the beautiful patterns, colours, and designs found on clay houses in rural areas of Africa. However, the cover page is where the African in *African hermeneutics* ends. And that is precisely what this book is: Decorated with Africa, but undoubtedly colonial.

That being said, let me first clarify what I mean by a colonial epistemology, for not all Western thought is underscored with a colonial epistemology, and not all African thought is without a colonial epistemology. A colonial epistemology is a logic that proclaims itself to be the normative and key to understanding the world. A colonial epistemology thus excludes all other centres of interpretation as invalid and not worth considering as interlocutors. It is colonial in its relentless pursuit to showcase its centre as the sole carrier of the truth.

There are three grounds on which I claim *African hermeneutics* to be a colonial epistemology in African garb.

1. *African hermeneutics' raison d'être* is neither an exclusively African problem, nor does the solution lie in an intellectual moving of the hermeneutic centre.
2. *African hermeneutics'* methodological claims of contextualisation are inconsistent with Mburu's usage of truth within said methodology.
3. *African hermeneutics'* most significant flaw lies not in what it asserts, but in its ignorance.

Mburu states the *raison d'être* of *African hermeneutics* lies in the problem that "Africans are still trying to imitate foreign ways when it comes to reading, interpreting and applying the Bible" (p. 4). Because of these foreign hermeneutic ways, Mburu argues, Africans "live dichotomized lives ... [where they] keep faith and life in two separate compartments" (p. 3). Mburu completely fails to recognise when she proposes that "a Western tradition of interpretation" (p. 5) is responsible for dichotomised lives in Africa, it would imply that Christians in the West do not live dichotomised lives. After all, if Western hermeneutics is responsible for the inconsistency between faith and life in Africa, it must cause coherence between faith and life in the West. Moreover, the purpose of *African hermeneutics* is to "correct this problem [of dichotomised lives] by considering a contextualized approach" (p. 211). It will be quite a tragedy if this dichotomy is also present where Western Christians interpret the Bible through Western hermeneutics, implying that Mburu's contextual African approach is not the silver bullet she thinks it is. And if James Smith's proposal of the "Godfather problem"¹ is any indication, this dichotomy between worship and life is not an African problem, but a human reality.

What is, however, strikingly problematic is Mburu's understanding of ontology. Although she claims to understand ontology as holistic and embodied (pp. 22-23), her hermeneutic method is saturated with intellectualism. There is no body; there are no human needs and desires; there is no liturgy; there is no complexity, no paradox, no liminality, no journey, and no hermeneutic struggle. There is only the mistaken conviction that right knowledge will lead to right living. Stated differently, as much as she takes the African lived experience seriously, so much more she restricts lived experience in favour of a biblical truth located in the original meaning of the text:

1 J.K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming public theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017):165-208. Smith asks the telling question: "If liturgy forms us by conforming us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), then why are Christians so often conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2)?"

Those [African] assumptions that agree with biblical truth can be used positively, and those that contradict biblical truth are confronted and corrected (p. 212).

Thus, as the second point, Mburu's hermeneutic methodology negates the whole endeavour of "moving from the known to the unknown" (p. 19). For, if we already know the unknown (the message of the biblical text) and the known (African understanding), we must either conform or be reoriented towards the unknown, why not simply begin with the already known unknown? Why claim that this hermeneutic is contextual and African when the problem lies in the very fact that any hermeneutics which claims itself to have the truth (even if it is biblical) is the colonial project which *African hermeneutics* is supposedly dismantling?

Furthermore, to propose "consciously identify(ing) our own context and discover(ing) the points of contact between it and the biblical context" (p. 70) as a novum in Africa is ludicrous. The colonial project could just as much be defined as the discovering (and fabrications) of contact between the colonial project and the biblical context. And from there, the dismantling of African culture and imagination through colonising the mind with what is constructed as the universal truth.² Thus, in an attempt to create an African methodology for hermeneutics, Mburu is merely outfitting colonial epistemology as *African hermeneutics*.

At the same time, *African hermeneutics* is not interested in the well-being of African people. It is interested in biblical orthodoxy. The conclusion most conspicuously concedes all pretence of the uniquely African quality of *African hermeneutics*. Mburu concludes with a virtue list of what is needed for African scholars to "correctly handle the word of truth" (p. 213):

[T]o invest in theological sound Bible commentaries ... Bible atlases, Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias ... Become a student of people, ask questions, watch the news, read books that address African issues and so forth ... Finally, invest in yourself ... To truly understand what the Bible says, we need the Holy Spirit to help us. Prayer, fasting, and meditation are all necessary for your spiritual growth (p. 213-214).

Except for the idea of gathering information "that address African issues" (p. 213), everything on Mburu's list is recommended at all institutions of theological education, irrelevant of location. Moreover, *African hermeneutics*

2 For further reading on how the colonial project was inherently a project of colonising the mind through literature which imagined a world in which the subjugation of African people was ordained by God, see Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986).

misses the opportunity to locate the presence of an epistemological struggle of biblical hermeneutics, merely because Mburu is convinced that she already has the biblical truth. In my reading of *African hermeneutics*' insistence on biblical truth, I only encounter Mburu's religious and confessional agendas.³

Finally, the third point I want to make is that the most significant shortcoming of *African hermeneutics* lies in what is ignored throughout the conversation on moving the hermeneutical centre towards Africa. First, in moving the hermeneutic starting point towards "parallels to the African context" (pp. 67-70), *African hermeneutics* treats the African context as if it is not part of a global world where a plurality of contexts intercede and influence one another. *African hermeneutics* is thus ignorant of the necessity to contemplate not only an African context as the starting point, but the relationship between contexts, both in their conflicting and equivalent views. Secondly, throughout *African hermeneutics*, the identity of African people is purported as fixed, whilst identity is better understood as malleable, ever-changing, and dynamic in the influence others have on us. Finally, *African hermeneutics* overlooks the necessity to grapple with power structures within the methods employed in biblical interpretation. *African hermeneutics*' proposal of merely starting from the African context does not do justice to the complexities of power structures in the reception history of biblical interpretation.

To my mind, *African hermeneutics* represents a failure in moving the hermeneutic centre. This is a great gift for those who are concerned about responsible biblical interpretation towards the well-being of people within their lived experience. It is a gift, because it stands as a monument of how not to practise hermeneutics in Africa.

3 R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444396652>, 23-24. According to Sugirtharajah, the problem of the historical-critical method of biblical hermeneutics lies in the language it employs without taking note of "the varied colonial contexts which provided the language for biblical texts".