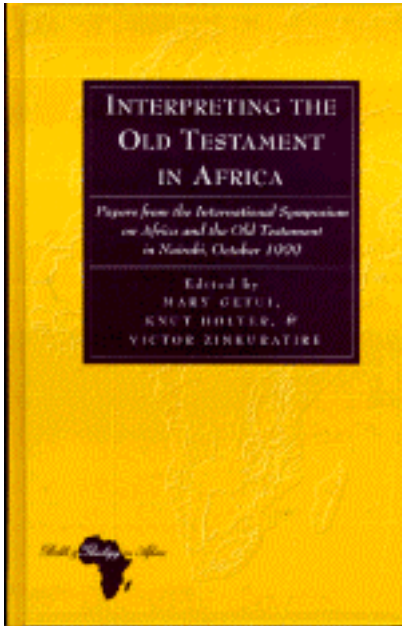


RBL 02/2003



**Getui, Mary, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkuratire, eds.**

***Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October, 1999***

Bible and Theology in Africa 2

New York: Lang, 2001. Pp. 246. Cloth. \$57.95.  
ISBN 0820449784.

Dirk J Human

Department of Old Testament Studies,  
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Africa desperately needs the voices of biblical scholars and theologians who can address the serious socioeconomic, political, military, and religious problems on this diverse and troubled continent. These scholars would have the obligation to navigate their various peoples and diverse religious communities to self-identity and self-understanding. These African academicians should build a firm academic and scientific foundation for religious reflection and solutions on the continent in order to free the continent from the bondage of poverty, severe diseases, lack of self-critical reflection, eagerness for political power, and an attitude that colonial powers outside Africa are responsible for all the wrongdoings and malpractices on the continent. In addition, religious fundamentalism could be thwarted and diminished.

*Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* is an initiative by African scholars/theologians to provide a defined hermeneutical framework for the reading of the Old Testament within the context of Africa and in the culture(s) of people in Africa. It could be described as African cultural hermeneutics. This anthology of essays is a collection of twenty-three exegetical and hermeneutical contributions on Old Testament themes that echoes the sounds of Africa. The book results from a symposium held in Nairobi (October 1999), where the main topic was: "What does it mean to interpret the Old Testament in Africa today?"

The academic quality, length, and character of the different contributions vary, due to the editorial policy to include all the conference papers. This collection represents predominantly Eastern African and selected South African perspectives on the Old Testament, fifteen contributors coming from Kenya, three from South Africa, two from Norway, and one each from Uganda, Tanzania, and Nigeria. Africa is not fully represented as a continent. One must therefore reckon with an exemplification and a strong regionally determined voice in these portrayed African interpretation(s) of the First Testament.

The academic and financial support received from Norway (NRC) and Martha Lavik (43–54) and Knut Holter (27–40) needs to be mentioned. Their intention to help establish and maintain a firm African exegetical and hermeneutical tradition contributed strongly toward the publication of the book.

Despite its diversity, the book exhibits a clearly demarcated structure. Five consecutive subdivisions reflect on the different responses to the central theme. First, a mapping of the social, historical, and academic context of Old Testament studies in Africa is given. Second, a few authors expose how Africa and the Africans are portrayed in the Old Testament. Third, it is shown how African socioreligious experiences could serve as comparative material for the interpretation of the Old Testament. In the fourth place, certain exegetes use the Old Testament to interpret Africa, and, fifth, various aspects are discussed regarding the translation of the Old Testament in Africa.

To dissect every essay critically would be futile. The critical discussion between contributors on several issues creates a sound basis for corrective and balanced viewpoints. These African hermeneutical essays could contribute to the general hermeneutical and exegetical debate in Old Testament studies. Being an African voice myself, I have read these essays in critical solidarity with Africa but also with a great sensitivity for non-African voices. An outline of some viewpoints also creates understanding for the different realities and problems experienced by people in Africa.

In the first section Mugambi (7–26) highlights various points of affinity between the Old Testament and Africa. This affinity is stimulated by factors such as the political appeal of the Old Testament, its legalistic moralism, and similarities between the Hebrew and the African cultural and religious heritage. He stresses the importance of understanding the (African) cultural heritage in which certain biblical texts originated in order to “comprehend and appreciate the biblical message” (10).

One, once again, becomes aware of the strong oral tradition in African cultures. Different hermeneutics underlie orality and textuality. Because similar processes precede written biblical texts, Africa (although not the only continent to do so) has something to offer biblical scholarship in the detection of these hermeneutical processes. This is one

example of the underlying call I detect in several essays: African biblical scholars/theologians wish to contribute to and to be taken seriously by the international scholarly community. They protest against a European dominance in biblical understanding and an imperialism “in which Africans were expected to receive rather than reciprocate knowledge with Europe” (15).

Two key words in African theological approaches are “liberation” and “reconstruction.” Mugambi’s indication that there is a shift from liberation to reconstruction (23) sketches Africa’s willingness, in the twenty-first century, to theologize in such a way that African people take responsibility for their social and physical realities. This is a positive development. These scholars’ intention to work multidisciplinary with a theology of reconstruction promises an era of prosperity in African self-development and identity, but African academics should not group themselves into an elitarian power for the sake of enjoying social and political privileges; they must serve their communities with their expertise.

A body of Old Testament scholarship has been established in Africa. The current state of this scholarship is analyzed by Holter thematically, institutionally, and contextually (27–40). Currently, the experiences and concerns of Africa form the main focus of this enterprise.

In the second subdivision, a few papers search for Africa and African texts in the Old Testament. The significance of the African presence in the Bible is then illuminated. Some contributors, such as Lavik (47–51), also consider how various African scholars interpret these texts. Emphasis is clearly placed on the meaning of Egypt (see Habtu, 55–64) and Cush (see Adamo, 65–74), but the mention of other places in Africa, such as Put, Lubim, Pathros, and Sheba (Seba), also brings a renewed sense of self-identity to African theologians. It creates a valuable message to Africans that Africa played a significant role in the formation of ancient Israel.

Although one could reflect positively on the geography and people of Africa found in the Old Testament, I can underscore the concern of Lavik (50) that we know almost nothing about how Africans related to Israelites at the time of the biblically described events. Should we read these so-called “African” texts as historical facts? More foreign people are mentioned in the Bible than those coming from Africa, and negative reflections about African countries (Ezek 30:5, 9; 2 Chr 14:9–15) also occur. Would this mean that non-African people, such as Americans or Australians, misunderstand Old Testament texts simply because they are not present in these texts? In other words, do African theologians have a better understanding of Old Testament texts because Africa is mentioned in the Bible? To my mind, all biblical readers bring their cultural understandings (prejudices?) to the reading of a text. Africa is an equal partner in the world choir of biblical interpretation.

Six contributors in the third subdivision elaborate on how Africa and the African religious-cultural tradition could be used to interpret the Old Testament. While correctly emphasizing the methodological diversity of contemporary Old Testament scholarship, Jonker (77–88) challenges African scholarship to pursue a “communal” approach to biblical interpretation. Along with West and others, he emphasizes the diversity of African biblical scholarship. However, he disagrees with Holter and West, who question calling white South African biblical scholars “African” (84). The disputation might be politically correct, but it does not do justice to white African biblical scholars who are part of Africa, who live in Africa, and who want to contribute on all levels to their own African environment. They are African as much as black scholars.

Mojola (89–99) encourages African biblical scholars to apply social-scientific methods to the study of the Old Testament. According to him, it would lead to a better understanding of biblical texts (97). Social-scientific criticism is a neglected paradigm in Africa. He thus challenges scholars to study the variety of Africa’s sociocultural, religious, and linguistic heritage thoroughly in order to apply these insights.

By means of practical application, a few contributors concretize how some African concepts could promote a better biblical understanding. These include concepts of history and time in Africa (Bosman, 101–12), examples of taboos on counting (Githuku, 113–18), aspects of name giving (Gichaara, 119–23), and the close relationship between the Eastern African Kamba culture’s understanding of covenant and the Old Testament concept of *berit* (Muutuki, 126–29). To my mind, a few questions arise. These African presentations should be taken seriously, but do not all biblical scholars read aspects of their own cultural and socioreligious heritage into biblical texts? Are there not social and religious conventions that overlap all (or most) global cultures? What makes one textual reading a better biblical understanding than another? Biblical scholars, African included, should make sure that they are aware of their own presuppositions, prejudices, and ideologies in biblical interpretation. For this awareness, global dialogue in Old Testament studies is of utmost importance.

Several essays in the fourth subdivision, mostly very short, discuss how the Old Testament could be utilized to interpret Africa. The relevance of the Old Testament for contemporary African readers comes strongly to the fore, whether one is convinced by the academic profile and arguments of a presentation or not. Themes discussed include perspectives on wisdom sayings (Masenya, 133–46), the role and value of women (Shisanja, 147–51; Wasike, 175–80), the use and abuse of political power (Katho, 153–58), the relevance of Psalms for church and liturgy (Otieno, 159–63; Mwaura, 165–69), the ethics of work (Aringo, 171–74), the role of the Bible in African theology (Getui, 181–88), and the meaning of “testament” (Kisirinya, 189–92).

Stock-taking of the above-mentioned themes alone reveals which issues are socioreligiously important to people in Africa. They exemplify the existential problems in African communities, which these African scholars wish to address. Non-African theologians should take cognizance of these in order to keep the global biblical discussion alive and relevant.

Different aspects on the translation of the Old Testament in Africa are addressed in the fifth subdivision of the book, which is more technical and informative. It covers the strategies of the translation programs of the United Bible Societies (Renju, 195–203) as well as central issues, such as textual problems, cultural problems, names, syntactic structures, and figures of speech (Kalugila, 205–15). Zinkuratire (217–26) draws morphological and syntactical correspondences between Hebrew and some African languages in the last chapter of the book. This is particularly significant for the teaching of Hebrew and the translation of Hebrew into African languages.

*Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* represents several voices of African Old Testament scholars. On the one hand, the protest against Western and so-called Eurocentric imperialism in biblical understanding resounds clearly, but, on the other hand, there is also a call for support. In their reaction against missionaries and imperialism from outside, African scholars should be careful not to develop an African ghetto hermeneutic, which functions in isolation from the global reality. There are enough African voices in the book that challenge Africa to exercise self-critique, self-development, and reconstruction. Therefore, this book underscores the need for global dialogue in Old Testament studies. To understand the African way(s) of theologizing, non-African theologians and scholars should make time to read this book.