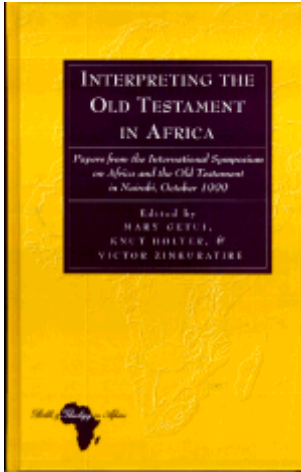


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Getui, Mary, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkuratire, eds.

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

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A compilation of essays such as this one is necessarily diverse in quality, depth, and approach. The editors made a deliberate choice to include all of the papers that were presented at the 1999 symposium (3). Because a major goal of the volume is to provide a portrait of African Old Testament scholarship at the end of the millennium, this choice to be inclusive would seem to be essential to their purpose. The structure of the book is carefully conceived and important. Two introductory essays form part 1, "Mapping the Context of Old Testament Studies in Africa." Three essays in part 2 develop the idea of "Finding Africa in the Old Testament." In part 3, "Using Africa to Interpret the Old Testament," aspects of African culture are used as interpretive tools in six essays. In part 4, "Using the Old Testament to Interpret Africa," nine essays apply biblical texts to contemporary issues in Africa. Finally, part 5, "Translating the Bible in Africa," contains three essays which address the ongoing project of translating the Bible into African languages. Space does not permit discussion of each of the twenty-three essays, so I will attempt to address some highlights and the overall movement of the volume.

The introductory essay by Jesse Mugambi is essential reading for those uninitiated in the emerging field of African Old Testament studies. Not only does Mugambi carefully review and analyze the ground-breaking work of Kwesi Dickson, but he also blends in a summary of his own larger work, *From Liberation*

to Reconstruction, which sets the agenda for the future of African biblical theology. Mugambi could have included a discussion of the generative work in this field by Modupe Oduyoye, to whom he makes only passing reference in one footnote.

Knut Holter's "The Current State of Old Testament Scholarship in Africa" extends Mugambi's work in an essay that is as interested in the logistical and hermeneutical issues of future scholarship as in its current state. Holter is correct that the production of textbooks written from an African perspective is the most urgent need. To this end, the editors and Peter Lang Publishing are to be commended for working with Acton Publishing in Kenya to produce an alternative publication of this book for the African market, which will sell for about \$10 U.S. Holter has identified the double challenge of African biblical scholarship, and it is not unlike the challenge faced elsewhere in the world. It must find a way to be in dialogue with the real concerns of life in its own context and with the "global guild" of biblical scholarship at the same time. Producing authentically contextualized, or incultured, interpretation without becoming insular is a tension that must be vigorously and continuously addressed.

In "The Social Sciences and the Study of the Old Testament in Africa: Some Methodological Considerations," Aloo Osotsi Mojola argues effectively for the engagement of African scholars in social-scientific criticism of the Bible. Because of the greater cultural proximity of some African societies to the societies that produced the biblical writings, African biblical scholars are in a unique position to offer a helpful perspective on the biblical social world. Hendrik Bosman offers a concrete example of this possibility in "All Pat but Little Future? African and Old Testament Concepts of Time and History." Bosman grounds his discussion in the pioneering work of John Mbiti on African and biblical perceptions of time. Most significantly, both perceptions of time seem more oriented toward the past, rather than the future, as in Western perceptions. Sammy Githuku, in "Taboos on Counting," develops such possibilities further by interpreting a specific biblical text in light of an observation of a particular social practice in Africa. In many African societies there is a reluctance to count and number livestock and children. Such an action demonstrates a lack of humility and puts the counted individuals at risk. This practice sheds light on the story of David's census in 2 Sam 24.

Some of the articles seem frustratingly incomplete. Jonathan Gichaara, in "What's in a Name? African Versus Old Testament Nomenclature," offers an interesting description of naming practices among the Meru people but ends his paper with only half of one page of discussion comparing this practice to name-giving texts in the Old Testament. Likewise, most of the articles in the fourth

section, "Using the Old Testament to Interpret Africa," are rather brief and underdeveloped. Some of them, particularly Constance Shissanya's "A Reflection on the Hagar Narratives in Genesis through the Eyes of a Kenyan Woman" and Bungishabaku Katho's "Jeremiah 22: Implications for the Exercise of Political Power in Africa" show significant promise. One hopes these are works in progress and that we will see them more fully developed in the future.

The three papers on translation form an important end to the book for several reasons. These papers are of excellent quality and provide a helpful survey of Bible translation in Africa. Peter Renju's "United Bible Societies' Strategies for Old Testament Translation in Africa" provides a quick but helpful review of the history of Bible translation in Africa and its present status. It serves as a good reminder of how Bible translation has come full circle on this continent, which is the home of the first Bible translation, the Septuagint, and other important early translations, such as Coptic and Ethiopic, and which is also on the cutting edge of contemporary Bible translation projects. Leonidas Kalugila provides a discussion of the actual process of Bible translation and some of the common difficulties in "Central Issues of Old Testament Translation in Africa." Victor Zinkuratire offers a technical presentation of linguistic features common to Biblical Hebrew and the Bantu language group in "Morphological and Syntactical Correspondences between Hebrew and Bantu Languages." This paper provides the beginning of what could be a very helpful reference work for Bible translators across much of Africa. Bible translation, especially when it is understood as an interpretive process, is a key interface between African Old Testament scholarship and the broader community of Bible readers in Africa. The last two sections of this volume, therefore, do not provide it with a sense of closure. Rather, they open outward to the larger world. In the end this fulfills the important proposal of Louis Jonker earlier in the book, that African Old Testament scholarship take on a deliberately communal approach (83–84). Such an approach both fits the African cultural context and can be its best gift to the rest of the world.

Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa fits well alongside the massive compendium, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, edited by Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube. The latter is perhaps a once-in-a-generation effort. Hopefully, this smaller volume provides a model for publications that can appear more often. African Old Testament Scholarship is an exciting and rapidly growing endeavor. Frequent portraits, such as this one, will be both desirable and necessary.