



# Polyphonic Readings

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

**Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Abeneazer G. Urga, eds.**  
*Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives.* Library  
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Welile Mazamisa once asked, in the context of South African biblical hermeneutics during the 1980s, *What does it mean to read the Bible from this place?*<sup>1</sup> This deceptively simple question continues to resonate, not least because of its enduring challenge to interrogate how location, history, culture, and power shape both our interpretative questions and our theological conclusions. It provides a fitting point of entry into *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives*, a richly textured volume that offers a sustained and multi-vocal exploration of how these New Testament texts are received and reimagined in diverse contexts across the so-called ‘majority world’.

As a Zimbabwean-born South African scholar who now works in a European university, I find myself embodying the tensions and gifts that come with reading the scriptures with varieties of people from multiple “places.” I inhabit the inheritance of African interpretive traditions while also engaging daily with Euro-American critical scholarship. These hybrid positionalities generate both opportunities and responsibilities. This book spoke deeply into those complexities. It is an important scholarly contribution, one that I have already found myself recommending to students and colleagues alike.

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<sup>1</sup> Welile Mazamisa, “Reading from this place: From orality to literacy/textuality and back,” *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 9 (1991): 67–72, <https://doi.org/10.7833/9-0-1969>; see also my “Reading from this place? A personal reckoning with whiteness and Bible scholarship,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2025): Article 10702, 8 pages, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i2.10702>

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The editors position the volume against a background in which Hebrews and 1 Peter have received relatively little attention within ‘majority world’ scholarship. Whereas the Gospels, Acts, and Pauline epistles have attracted considerable contextual readings from such locations, these two letters have been somewhat less frequently engaged. Addressing this lacuna is a key achievement of this collection. It does so, however, in a way that also destabilises older assumptions about the geography and ownership of biblical scholarship itself.

The introductory chapter by **Grant LeMarquand** highlights a fundamental shift underway in global biblical studies. Simply stated, we cannot think of the Bible as a possession of Western scholarship or Western institutions. It is a series of texts of and for the whole church, and this is particularly true given the demographic transformation of global Christianity. The centre of gravity has shifted decisively towards the ‘majority world’, and with it has come a growing plurality of interpretive approaches. These essays testify to the vitality of that plurality. They set out not to reproduce Western readings within ‘majority world’ settings but rather to stage conversations that begin in, and are accountable to, particular cultural, historical, and religious contexts. In this respect, the volume gestures towards what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni has described as the difference between a “university in Africa” and an “African university.”<sup>2</sup> The distinction matters, for it reminds us that location is not incidental to knowledge production.

Majority World scholars often come to the biblical text with questions, emphases, and existential concerns that differ from those typically foregrounded in Euro-American critical frameworks. The essays here reflect that dynamic, whether through sustained attention to themes of suffering, migration, and hope, or by drawing upon ancient interpretative traditions that continue to shape ecclesial and cultural practices. In doing so, the volume affirms that contextuality is not an optional hermeneutical lens but an unavoidable reality for all interpreters, whether in Accra, Addis Ababa, Kuala Lumpur, Santiago, or Edinburgh (I would like to add, even Cape Town or Amsterdam!)

One can organise the essays into several typological clusters, which also helps to frame the contributions.

The first group centres on Ethiopia, reflecting both the backgrounds of two of the editors and the deep historical resources of Ethiopian Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> Busani Mpofu and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Changing Idea of the University in Africa,” chapter 1 in *The Dynamics of Changing Higher Education in the Global South*, edited by Busani Mpofu and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 14–30 (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 21.

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**Abeneazer Urga** explores the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church's longstanding affirmation of Pauline authorship of Hebrews (even though he holds a different view, he faithfully represents the tradition). This position stands in contrast to the almost unquestioned certainties of modern Western scholarship and invites us to revisit the interplay between ancient reading traditions and contemporary critical inquiry. **Nebeyou Terefe**, by contrast, interrogates the translation of ἐντυγχάνειν (*entugkhánein*) in Hebrews 7:25 in the Amharic Millennium Bible, where "intercede" has been translated as "judge." He shows clearly how doctrinal commitments can shape, and at times distort, translation choices. **Yimenu Adimass Belay** focuses on 1 Peter's theology of suffering and salvation, explicating how the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition emphasises the future dimension of salvation that remains contingent upon faithful perseverance.

A second set of contributions arises from other African contexts. **Axolile Qina** reads Hebrews as a Xhosa person doing his research in Edinburgh focussed on the tradition of animal sacrifice. He argues that the sacrificial logic of African religio-cultural practices prepares the ground for understanding Jesus' once-for-all offering — a generative and insightful approach. **Alice Nsiah** and **Gifty Dei Dawson** reimagine Rahab's story in Hebrews 11:31 in conversation with the experiences of female sex workers on Ghanaian university campuses. They draw provocative parallels between Rahab's agency in securing salvation for her family and the resilience of contemporary women negotiating marginalisation and stigma.

Several chapters emerge from Asia, each bringing distinctive cultural resources to bear upon the text. **Chakrita Saulina** interprets Jesus's victory over sin, death, and demonic forces in Hebrews through the Batak concept of *Sahala* (spiritual power), articulating a robust *Christus Victor* model that resonates with Batak cosmologies of spiritual warfare. **Jacob Chengwei Feng** explores Watchman Nee's theological anthropology, particularly his tripartite view of humanity grounded in Hebrews 4:12. He places Nee's (critically contested) insights within broader Chinese intellectual traditions. **Roji Thomas George** reflects on persecution in South Asia, reading 1 Peter alongside the lived realities of Christians navigating hostility and vulnerability. **Kar Yong Lim** turns to the challenges faced by Malaysian Christians as religious minorities, offering a constructive retrieval of 1 Peter's portrayal of believers as "aliens and exiles" and inviting fresh consideration of Christian witness in plural societies.

From Latin America, **Nelson Morales Fredes** offers a powerful meditation on migration and solidarity, drawing on Hebrews to affirm Jesus' identification with human suffering and displacement. His essay challenges churches in Chile and beyond to embody practical compassion towards immigrants and refugees.

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The volume concludes with an essay by **Marie-Josée Fortin** on Quebec, which, although not geographically part of the ‘majority world’, shares the experience of living as a minority Christian community within an aggressively secular environment. Fortin draws sensitive parallels between the original audience of Hebrews and contemporary believers in Quebec who struggle to maintain visible expressions of faith.

When taken together, these essays reveal the richness of interpretative diversity while also highlighting areas for further engagement and conversation. LeMarquand notes that future scholarship in this vein would benefit from deeper engagement across various ‘majority world’ contexts. There is a need for these diverse readings to enter into sustained dialogue, offering correctives and insights to one another rather than only responding to Western scholarly paradigms. At the same time, the volume invites ‘majority world’ scholars to maintain critical interaction with Western exegetical traditions, recognising both their limitations and their ongoing contributions. Finally, LeMarquand raises an important caution in his introduction to the project. Namely, that contextual readings must not lose sight of the text itself. While attending to the lived realities of readers is critical, one should be cautious of drifting towards forms of overt anthropocentrism or parochialism at the expense of engaging the theological claims of texts and their worlds.

To my mind, this volume achieves a rare balance. It honours the biblical text while allowing diverse contexts to shape the interpretative encounter. It gives voice to traditions and communities too often marginalised within the dominant historiographies of biblical studies. The essays are well-chosen, the scholarship is rigorous, and the theological insights are profound.

For those working on Hebrews or 1 Peter, this book is indispensable. Yet its significance reaches further. It models a kind of biblical scholarship that is globally accountable and contextually located, refusing both the hegemony of Western critical norms and the temptation towards insularity. I expect it will become a standard resource in postgraduate seminars, both in ‘majority world’ scholarly institutions and in Euro-American institutions seeking to broaden their horizons. It reminds us that to read Scripture faithfully today is to read it plurally, from many places, and to listen attentively to voices other than our own. For those committed to that task, this volume is a gift.