



Situating “African Biblical Studies” within “Biblical Studies”

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Mbuvi, Andrew M. *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*. London: T&T Clark, 2022. Pp. xiv + 234. £85.00 (hardback), £28.99 (paperback).

Gerald O. WEST

ORCID: 0000-0001-6897-028X

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
west@ukzn.ac.za

What a pleasure to read a book in which I as an African biblical scholar could revel so completely! Andrew Mbuvi has written a book about us and for us, within which we are invited to participate as conversation partners. Others, I would hope, would read this book as well, carefully, and completely. Indeed, it would make a superb textbook in a Biblical Studies classroom anywhere in the world, both introducing and analysing African Biblical Studies but also requiring scholars and students elsewhere to interrogate the version of Biblical Studies to which they have been subjected.

I have followed Mbuvi by capitalising ‘biblical studies’ in the term ‘African Biblical Studies’. Mbuvi’s tensive social location as an African biblical scholar from Kenya living and working in the United States of America is evident in his book and in his project: “My classification of ‘African Biblical Studies’ aims at solidifying the relationship that I seek to emphasize, the historical connection that inextricably binds African interpretive endeavors, for better or worse, to the larger discipline of Biblical Studies” (103). Mbuvi does remarkable work in doing precisely this, situating African Biblical Studies both within African continental terms that resonate with African biblical scholarship on the African continent and within the larger Euro-Anglo-American discipline of Biblical Studies.

The book begins by acknowledging African biblical scholar-and-theologian ancestors, dedicating the book to **John S. Mbiti** (1931–2019), Charles Nyamiti (1931–2020), **John S. Pobee** (1937–2020), and **David T. Adamo** (1949–2022). Mbuvi does more than mention them, he invokes their presence, much as an African praise singer might, honouring their work as ancestors who have gone

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before us yet who remain among us. While these particular ancestors receive the dedication, many others surround us as we read through Mbuvi’s book. Wälättä Petros, Kimpa Vita, Isaiah Shembe, Simon Kimbangu, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Christian Baëta, Chinua Achebe, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, Canaan Banana, Lamin Sanneh, Justin Ukpong, and many more accompany us and shape our understanding of African Biblical Studies. Alongside the living-dead, Mbuvi gives special attention to many of the elders among us whose work has constituted African Biblical Studies, including Takatso Mofokeng, Itumeleng Mosala, Mercy Amber Oduyoye, Teresa Okure, Musa W. Dube, Madipoane Masenya (ng’wana Mphahlele), Allan Boesak, and many, many others. Reading this book is a thoroughly ‘African’ experience, an extended conversation among ourselves, the living and the living-dead.

I invoke these names in order to remind the reader of my review of just how different a book on Biblical Studies this is. In which other Biblical Studies book would one find these names assembled together?

Mbuvi is not only deeply versed in the African roots of African Biblical Studies, he is also well-read in a wide range of contemporary African biblical and theological scholarship. Indeed, I know of no other single-authored book in the field of African biblical scholarship which is so comprehensively situated within the interdisciplinary scholarship that constitutes our discipline. The extensive Bibliography (203-219) and the useful Name and Subject Index (220-225) are a substantive resource. Yet Mbuvi is not offering a totalising model of African Biblical Studies, instead, he tells a particular story, the story of how African Biblical Studies emerges from within European colonialism and racism to become a vibrant African decolonial discipline.

His narrative structure is persuasive, beginning with the kind of Bible which is constructed by the European Enlightenment, which forms the foundation of both the formation of the discipline of Biblical Studies and the formation of the missionary-colonial project, both of which are inherently racist (chapters 1-4). Mbuvi never loses sight of these beginnings of the Bible in Africa, but his emphasis in the remaining chapters is on African agency, African identity, and African appropriation of the missionary-colonial (initially) translated Bible.

Forms of decolonial appropriation of the Bible are an African reality from the beginning, through the very process of translation into African vernaculars, through African theoretical and political movements such as *Négritude* and Black Consciousness, through the multitude of African Indigenous / Independent / Instituted / Initiated Churches (AICs), and through early forms of African Biblical Studies (chapters 5-6). The narrative gives careful attention to the contours of a postcolonial African Biblical Studies, focussing on biblical studies method (chapter 7), before going on to enlarge the scope and extend the dialogue partners of African Biblical Studies by including African literature’s use of the Bible (chapter 8).

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The remaining chapters take up particularly troubling areas for African Bible Studies, including the Bible as itself, inherently, a site of oppression (chapter 9), the question of an appropriate biblical-theological African eschatology (chapter 10), the reality of the presence of ordinary African readers and hearers of the Bible as constitutive of African Biblical Studies (chapter 11), the pervasive problem of gender and sexuality within African culture and/as religion and so within African Theology and African Biblical Studies (chapter 12), and the question of an appropriate African biblical-theological Christology (chapter 13).

Mbuvi concludes his book by weaving the various strands of his narrative together as he offers us a proposal for how we might take our decolonial work forward, forging a “hermeneutic of hope” (198).

As my overview of Mbuvi’s chapters indicates, Mbuvi is thoroughly African in the way he ignores the Biblical Studies boundary between biblical studies and theology, and between the Hebrew Bible (and Septuagint) and New Testament. He moves comfortably and confidently across these boundaries. Each chapter is full of significant detail. I have learned a great deal in reading this book, and there is much I will return to in order to delve more deeply into terrain that I am not familiar with. The footnotes too are a treasure, full of pertinent detail.

Mbuvi’s book is characterised by analytical, insightful, nuanced, and respectful discourse. When he engages the work of other African scholars, he does so in a generous, inclusive, and critical manner. What impresses me in particular is the way in which Mbuvi moves from theorising to exemplifying, from an actual example to reflection on that example, etc. African reality and African theorising are united in a praxiological movement: reality, theorising, reality, theorising, etc. The book is full of wonderful examples, whether of an African reading of a particular biblical text, or of the contribution of a particular African novelist or biblical scholar, or of a particular historical moment. These ground the book in African soil.

Mbuvi is also attentive to the body of interdisciplinary scholarship that is associated with the wider discipline of Biblical Studies, being particularly attentive to African American, feminist/womanist, and postcolonial scholarship. Mbuvi does much of his biblical scholarship in the USA, so he is attentive to how his book engages with that reality and how it might make a contribution there. I have no doubt it will, but my primary delight is that the book will make a significant contribution here at home, on the African continent. Mbuvi has been remarkably inclusive of the diversity that is the African continent, so I am sure the book will be well received throughout Africa.