



## ***Contemporary Christology in Africa: Evangelical Perspectives***

### BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Reed, Rodney L., and David K. Ngaruiya, eds. *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology in Africa*. ASET Series 6. Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021. Pp. xv + 678. £25.99 (paper); US \$25.99 (Kindle).

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The title of **Rodney Reed** and **David Ngaruiya**'s edited work, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, clearly recalls Jesus's question to Peter (Matt 16:15), reiterated in this text as "arguably the most important question in all of human history" (15). The subtitle, *Christology in Africa*, not only locates the context for this volume, but also reflects the fundamental conviction that Jesus's question is addressed to every individual in every age and every locale. Acknowledging the plurality of titles and names for Jesus in the Bible and throughout the history of Christianity, Reed articulates rationale for the present publication in the need for "appropriately contextualizing the response to Jesus's question" as an "absolutely indispensable prerequisite for evangelism, mission and discipleship" (15). Against the backdrop of common claims that the Western missionaries proclaimed Jesus as being "much too Western" (16), thereby accounting for the assumed shallowness of Christianity across Africa, this work highlights African Christians' attempts "to identify a Jesus who speaks their language and speaks into their contexts" (15). The overall purpose of the book is to contribute to the ongoing debates regarding contemporary Christology in Africa, and to do so from evangelical perspective. From the outset of the project, it is established that contextualization requires a careful balance between describing Jesus in the thought forms that are meaningful to African audiences, while also ensuring that any proposals for African Christology are theologically consistent with biblical teaching.

What strikes the reader initially is the sheer magnitude of this anthology of current essays on African Christology, demonstrating the ongoing significance of the subject. At double and triple the length of other volumes in the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET) series, this volume offers twenty-four chapters from selected papers presented at the 2020 ASET conference in Kenya.

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With only seven women authors featured, the proportion of gender representation does not align with the predominantly female demographics of African Christianity. Nonetheless, it is crucial that these women scholars' perspectives are disseminated, and it is hoped that their representation will continue to grow within ASET and its publications. The volume is further enriched by the range of authors from various church traditions and locations, including several African countries (e.g., Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria), the UK, and the US.

The volume is divided into four parts: Part 1, "Christ in the Bible"; Part 2, "Christ in Theology and Church History"; Part 3, "Christ in Praxis"; and Part 4, "Tributes to the Late Professor John S. Mbiti," who passed away in 2019, prior to the ASET Conference. Given the length and complexity of this work, this review will restrict itself to outlining selected chapters as illustrative of the wider content.

Unsurprisingly for an evangelical society, the greatest number of papers fall within Part 1, "Christ and the Bible." Eight authors examine specific passages or concepts from the New Testament (NT), including the Gospels and Epistles, in relation to cultural and contemporary sociopolitical realities in Africa. For example, **Timothy J. Monger** offers "**An East African Perspective on Jesus as Revealer of the Father through His Use of the Friend at Midnight Parable as a Means for Teaching Powerful Prayer (Luke 11:1–13).**" He argues that Swahili versions of the NT that translate the Greek term *anaideia* as "persistence" or "importunity" create "a misunderstanding of the parable and a denial of its potency" (48). Instead, from his analysis of the historical and literary context of the parable in Luke's Gospel, with its focus on hospitality, Monger states the term is better rendered "avoiding shame" (48). He then interprets the parable from the perspective of an African village with an honor-shame culture akin to that of Jesus's original audience, explaining that the ultimate reason the sleeper in the parable rises is to avoid shame, not only for the friend knocking at midnight but for the entire village. On this basis, he outlines East African cultures' contributions to interpreting this parable, with implications for understanding Jesus's revelation of the Father, for prayer, and for recovering hospitality as "a great strength of East Africans" and as central to the mission of God (67–68).

From the NT Epistles, **Elizabeth W. Mburu** focuses on "**Exploring the Multidimensional Nature of Christology in Galatians through the Lens of an African Hermeneutic.**" Noting that certain limitations in Western Christianity have "stunted the growth" of Christianity in Africa, Mburu draws upon recent gains in African theology to highlight the multidimensionality of the Christian faith (89). That is, it is both universal in nature and context-specific in

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expression, as is the theology developed globally across time. Mburu then examines the concept of multidimensionality in relation to the person of Christ, employing an African intercultural hermeneutical approach to elucidate aspects of Christology in Galatians. This African hermeneutic, which Mburu herself develops elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> entails a “four-legged stool” method of discerning parallels between “the biblical text and context and the Kenyan context” (90). She applies this method to outline several Christological emphases in Galatians which are resonant with African cultures and worldviews: first, Christ as the liberator of humankind in the spiritual and physical realms. Mburu asserts,

The African worldview, in which many live in fear of demonic forces, witchcraft, evil spirits, curses, and so forth, has been confronted and overturned by Christ. We no longer need to perform protective rituals, consult witchdoctors, healers and spirits, buy “anointed” items at exorbitant prices or revert to those aspects of our culture that contradict Christianity. (100)

Second, Christ is the unifier of the church, overcoming human hostilities based on ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and political persuasion. Third, he is the victor over sin, with all its ramifications, and fourth, Christ is the truth, vying against any false teaching such as the prosperity gospel. Finally, Christ is the curse-bearer, which carries deep relevance for African contexts in which belief remains strong in the power of curses and in traditional means of addressing them. From this intercultural dialogue between Galatians and African contexts, Mburu draws implications for African Christians in terms of their identity as African believers and their understanding and practice of faith.

Part 2, “Christ in Theology and Church History,” offers seven chapters ranging from Christological developments in the early church, with implications for African Christianity today, to contemporary contextualized images of Jesus. This section in particular demonstrates the “tensions” in Africa, both in Christological method and content, “among Christian traditions with respect to how each conceives the person of Christ” (277). Some advocate a return to the expressions of classical Christology formulated in the apostolic church and in the patristic era. For example, **Henry Marcus Garba** sets forth “**The Unitive Understanding of the Person of Christ in Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology and Its Relevance for Contemporary African Christianity.**” He highlights the significant contribution made by Cyril of Alexandria in maintaining the union of Christ’s divine and human natures, “which are inseparably united, yet without mixture, loss of separate identity, or transfer of properties or attributes” (271). Garba identifies Cyril’s unitive understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Publishing, 2019).

of the person of Christ as “the peak of the process of Christological reflection” (260), with relevance for Christianity today in the call to reaffirm this mainstream tradition of orthodoxy and to guard against any language or thought deemed to diverge from this tradition. He cautions that many modern African theologians who have sought to reinterpret Christology by proposing images from African tradition “have gone beyond the norm of using biblical images to define Christology” (277). He concludes with the imperative to appropriate an historical approach to understanding Christ’s identity for a renewed appreciation of longstanding orthodoxy that will enhance unity in Christ.

Similarly, **John Michael Kiboi** focuses on Christological method in his chapter, “**Who Are You for Us, Yesu Kristo? Christological Confessions of the Early Church in Contemporary Africa.**” The crux of the debate lies in the relevance of ontological Christology (dealing with the person of Christ) in relation to functional Christology (dealing with the work of Christ). Acknowledging that all theology is contextual, **Kiboi** traces the Christological controversies in the early church and the patristic era, noting the influence of Greco-Roman philosophies in the confessions of the first four ecumenical councils: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). Within these cultural contexts, theologians developed philosophical, speculative, and ontological approaches to Christology that addressed the critical needs of their time in relevant ways. The problem, as Kiboi points out, is that contemporary African theologians commonly critique these classical, ontological approaches to Christology as producing “an intellectual, abstract Christology that is irrelevant to functional realities” in Africa (287–288). In turn, Kiboi critiques functional approaches as “producing a functional Christology that is not orthodox – that is, it does not uphold the apostolic Christology . . . articulated by the church councils” (288). He therefore argues for a “a revelation from above—a top-down ontological approach” (305), “whose end product upholds both the ontological and functional Christologies in balance” (288) so that it will remain orthodox but also relevant to African realities.

However, other authors in this volume demonstrate greater openness to functional Christologies for the sake of communicating the identity and significance of Christ meaningfully within African contexts. **E. Okelloh Ogera** presents “**Jesus Christ as Ker: Toward an African High Priest Christology.**” Drawing upon the rationale for inculturation Christologies from scholars like Justin Ukpong, Ogera states that “the theological task consists of rethinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an Africa cultural milieu” (316). On this basis he proposes the concept of *Ker* (high priest) among the Luo people of Western Kenya as a Christological motif that is suitable for introducing Jesus in this context. He develops a functional analogy between this Luo high priest

figure and Jesus as high priest in the Bible, explaining those parallels that elucidate Christ while also stressing how Christ supersedes the human figure. He analyses both the potential benefits and the liabilities of this Christological image, noting that “*Ker* Christology, being a functional Christology, also emphasizes the humanity of Jesus over his divinity, creating a Christology that is too immanent at the expense of the transcendent Christ” (326). Despite such limitations, Ogera nonetheless insists that *Ker* is an effective Christological image within the Luo community.

**Thandi Soko-de Jong** not only affirms “**African Images of Christ**,” but examines the image of Christ as healer which is prevalent in African theology and experience. Specifically, she conducted field research in Blantyre, Malawi, on faith narratives of evangelical African Christians who suffer illnesses that are treatable but not yet curable (e.g., diabetes, HIV). Aside from the content of her findings, which challenge assumptions from the global church about Pentecostals in Africa necessarily adhering to the prosperity gospel, Jong’s study is noteworthy for its methodological stance of deep inquiry into African believers’ experience of Christ. So, from the primarily philosophical, ontological approaches of classical Christology to the more functional approaches of recent inculturation and liberation christologies, to the empirical methods employed to explore and analyze the “lived christologies”<sup>2</sup> of African believers, the field of African Christology continues to flourish with rich content expressed through a range of methodologies.

Part 3 of this volume, “Christ in Praxis,” is considerably briefer with only four chapters: one on visual Christology, one on the lordship of Christ in relation to mission, and, notably, two on Jesus in relation to Islam. **Billy Chilongo Sichone** writes the final chapter on “**Jesus in Islam: Meaning and Theological Implications for Christian-Muslim Engagement**.” Intending his inquiry for lay Christians who are often unaware of the high place accorded to Jesus (*Isa*) in the Qur’an, **Sichone** examines Muslim perceptions of *Isa* and draws out implications for Christian theology and ministry. A central argument challenges Muslims’ common assumption that the prophet *Isa* in the Qur’an is the same person as Jesus in the Bible, outlining fundamental Christian doctrines about Jesus that are rejected within Islam. **Sichone** therefore urges believers to study Islam carefully, to engage constructively with Muslims about Christian

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<sup>2</sup> The term “lived christologies” has gained currency since African theologians such as John Mbiti distinguished between “oral theology (in contrast to written theology), from the living experiences of African Christians. It is theology . . . from the pulpit, in the market place, in the home as people pray or read and discuss the scriptures.” John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 229.

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faith.

Finally, Part 4 provides five “Tributes to the Late Professor John S. Mbiti” from senior theologians. While **Reed** comments that “these may be largely unrelated to the theme of the book” (17), in fact their very presence and content are deeply significant. For among the pioneering African theologians, it was Mbiti who proclaimed in 1968 that “African concepts of Christology do not exist.”<sup>3</sup> Lamenting this lacuna, he urged his fellow African theologians to develop theological reflection on four “pillars”: (1) the Bible, as the final authority in religious discourse, (2) the theology of the older churches, especially Christian tradition in Europe, (3) the traditional African world, encompassing indigenous thought-forms and religious concerns, and (4) the living experience of the church in Africa, including the African Independent Churches (AICs).

It is noteworthy that over fifty years later, this volume presents a new generation of theologians who continue to fill that gap in Christological reflection in Africa. Moreover, they do so along the lines that Mbiti recommended, to varying degrees. Altogether, these essays certainly demonstrate the first pillar regarding the fundamental authority of Scripture in Christological reflection, with a key strength being the serious attention given to the biblical revelation of Christ in relation to contemporary realities in Africa. The second pillar of Christian tradition features to a lesser extent, with some authors examining Christological developments in the patristic, Reformation, or modern missionary eras and their implications for African Christianity today.

With respect to the third pillar, most of the essays identify and reflect Christologically on issues related to the traditional and contemporary African world, including socio-cultural and religious thought-forms and practices. For example, in addition to various issues mentioned previously in this review, **Telesia K. Musili**, in “**Marital Infidelity through an African Women’s Christological Heremeneutic: A Dramatized Rereading of the Narrative of the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11)**,” highlights the notorious injustices African women commonly face. She draws upon Mercy Oduyoye’s attempts, together with those of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, to “challenge the oppression of women through sexism, racism, colonialism, neocolonialism and androcentric tendencies” in Africa (32–33). Musili therefore affirms “the relational, experiential and liberating traits of Jesus” that African women’s Christologies have advanced in their attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> John S. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, edited by Georg F. Vicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 51.

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foster “hope and transformation” (33). In contrast to this in-depth focus on African realities in relation to the biblical text, **Gift Mtukwa**, in “**Paul’s Use of Μιμηταί and Its Relationship to His Christology**,” offers sound biblical scholarship, yet without citing a single African source and only minimally addressing the implications of his argument for African Christianity today. Similarly with the fourth pillar, there are varying degrees of engagement with the life of the African church, with particular strengths including the qualitative study mentioned above, regarding African believers’ experiences of Jesus as healer, as well as those addressing African women’s christologies. It is not that every Christological reflection is obliged to evidence all four of Mbiti’s recommended pillars; rather, the observation is intended to note the sources and methods these evangelical theologians employ in their individual and communal scholarship.

Given the breadth and richness of this anthology of essays on Christology, there are further aspects to commend. Fundamentally, throughout the volume and even within those proposals for contextualized African Christologies, there is a recurring affirmation of the humanity and divinity of Christ as the two non-negotiables of any valid expression of Christology (318). Moreover, these authors together present compelling evidence for how African perspectives enhance our reading of Scripture and our understanding of the identity and significance of Christ. While discerning and eschewing negative aspects of African cultures, the authors encourage consideration of positive aspects that shape African Christian identities, such as “a respect for the elderly, family values, hospitality, a sense of community, and appreciation of the arts, or nuanced spiritism” (111).

Another commendable feature is the attention given to the “lived” nature of African Christologies. While noted briefly above, it is worth citing **Lydia Chemei**, who points out this feature of African women’s Christologies. In “**Embracing Hybridity in Imaging Christ for Egalitarian Church Leadership through a Rereading of John 4:1–42**,” Chemei notes how the Samaritan woman encountered Jesus in the ordinary, everyday task of drawing water from the well. She relates this to African women who also “experience Christ in the common daily endeavors that characterize their lives” (81), citing Douglas Waruta that for these women, “faith is not expressed through creedal formulations or theological statements but in a day-to-day encounter with the challenges of life.”<sup>4</sup> An additional contribution from these African women theologians, including **Chemei** and **Mburu**, lies in the distinct hermeneutical frameworks

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas W. Waruta, “Who Is Jesus Christ for Africans Today? Prophet, Priest, Potentate,” in *Jesus in African Christianity*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and L. Magesa (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 45.

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proposed for African Christology.

A final commendation regards the missional dimension of African Christology, made explicit in **Alistair I. Wilson's** chapter, "**Missionaries Did Not Bring Christ to Africa – Christ Brought Them' (Bediako/Mbiti): Christ's Lordship in Mission in African Theology.**" Where this vital theme has been overlooked or underrepresented in African Christologies to date, Wilson draws valid attention to it in a stimulating chapter. In so doing, he demonstrates, along with his fellow authors, the ongoing nature of Christological discourse represented in this volume.

Since the process of interpreting Christ in Africa continues, there are aspects of the present volume that could be enhanced. For example, relatively little attention is devoted to oral and vernacular expressions of Christology, so fundamental to African Christianity. Moreover, certain expressions of methodology could be further clarified, such as a survey being undertaken among East African people and qualitative answers cited, yet without sufficient delineation of the survey method employed (53). In addition, some statements could be further nuanced, such as the assertion that "even though affirmations such as the Nicene Creed originated in an African context, they may not be immediately viewed as relevant in twenty-first-century Africa" (89).<sup>5</sup> It is also contestable that "reconstructive Christologies, in twenty-first-century Africa, have become the dominant motif" (93). And not all interpreters of African Christianity may agree with the decidedly negative depictions given in places, for example that "much of Kenyan Christianity is an apostate Christianity in which 'the true sense of values is so corrupted that sin has become an ally of sorts — sanitized, cleansed, absolved,' normalized, 'and accommodated'" (103–104).

Yet these very questions and divergent perspectives manifest the ongoing nature of Christological discourse in Africa and invite further participation in it. This text provides indispensable reading for theologians, pastors, and educated lay people who seek to deepen their knowledge of and love for Christ, not only those in Africa but around the world. With the tremendous contribution of Christological reflections in this volume, no doubt John Mbiti would be pleased.

*Watafutao elimu wako njiani kwa mungu.*  
(Swahili proverb: The seekers of knowledge are on the path of God.)

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<sup>5</sup> Alternate views are expressed within this volume, as well as in a more recent publication by Langham Literature: Isuwa Y. Atsen, *A Tapestry of Global Christology: Weaving a Three-Stranded Theological Cord* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Academic, 2022).