

Book Reviews

African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies. Andrew M. Mbuvi. London: T&T Clark, 2022. Pp. 248.

In *African Biblical Studies*, Andrew M. Mbuvi, a distinguished professor of African and African American religions, delivers a compelling critique entwined with innovative solutions to confront deeply rooted social tensions in the field of Biblical Studies. Through a synthesis of his prior work and new ground-breaking advancements, Mbuvi's book emerges as an essential read for scholars and students alike who are navigating the intersections of Biblical Studies and African religions. Mbuvi skillfully employs a postcolonial lens to dismantle the racist and imperialist biases that have long shaped Biblical Studies. With a persuasive argument against the enduring legacy of racism that frames the discipline, he calls for a radical reimagining and dismantling of the “center-periphery” binary (13). This ambitious proposition aims to decentralize Western hegemony, advocating for a polycentric approach to biblical interpretation that elevates diverse perspectives.

Central to Mbuvi's thesis is the leveraging of African Biblical Studies, which he presents as a vital tool for challenging and exposing the colonial underpinnings of traditional biblical interpretations. His critique is meticulously structured into three parts, beginning with a historical analysis that traces the discipline's evolution from its Enlightenment roots. Mbuvi elucidates how the Bible's transformation during the eighteenth century – from a theological artifact to a tool of colonial expansion – underpinned a European mission that was as much about domination as it was about Enlighten-

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ment ideals. A particularly striking example that Mbuvi offers is the dual legacy of Albert Schweitzer, who was celebrated both for his contributions to biblical scholarship and his colonial missionary work in West Africa (33–34). This paradox encapsulates the complex web of imperialism entangled within the discipline and highlights the urgent need for the reconceptualization of the field that Mbuvi advocates.

In Part 2, Mbuvi critically examines the Bible's role as an instrument of colonialism, particularly in Africa. Here, for example, he challenges the lauded missionary efforts to translate the Bible into African languages, arguing that these endeavours, which indeed contributed to preserving African languages and facilitating the “translatability of Christianity,” were primarily aimed at indoctrinating the “uneducated masses” with European values through linguistic and cultural manipulation (65, 72). Interestingly, Mbuvi notes, this strategy backfired as African readers used their vernacular translations to resist colonial oppression, thus pioneering a form of vernacular hermeneutics that presaged post-colonial biblical interpretation.

In Part 3, Mbuvi lays out his vision to challenge the hegemony of Western interpretations of the Bible. He proposes two bold strategies: first, exposing and dismantling the Western biases ingrained in colonial-era Bible interpretations, and second, questioning the colonial ideologies embedded within the biblical texts. Central to Mbuvi's argument are the works of iconic African novelists Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose works skillfully reveal the complex cultural encounters between the Bible and African realities. Their insights lay the groundwork for a post-colonial critique by revealing the complex dynamics of complicity between colonialism, Christianity, and biblical interpretation.

Mbuvi further enriches this discourse by engaging with the contributions of biblical scholars of Africa such as Takatso

MafoKeng, Itumeleng Mosala, and Justin Ukpong, among others. These scholars work to challenge the Western monopoly on biblical interpretation, tackling themes like eschatology, Christology, gender, and sexuality. They reveal how these concepts, traditionally shaped by Western Christianity, have been imposed on African contexts, suggesting alternative, decolonized interpretations. However, a notable absence in this analysis is the work of Okot p' Bitek, whose focus on decolonizing African religions could have deepened the discussion, particularly his reflections on Christology (e.g., in the Gospel of John) and eschatology in *Mission Christianity in Africa*. P'Bitek reveals how these concepts, rooted in Hellenic conceptions, have inflicted violence on African religious thought since they are incongruent with African perspectives. Nevertheless, unlike conventional comparative studies, Mbuvi facilitates dialogue among African scholars, nurturing a nuanced discourse that challenges the established norms.

The book concludes with Mbuvi underscoring the imperative to decolonize Biblical Studies, proposing two pivotal strategies. First, he urges Western Biblical Studies to confront its racist past, cultivating healing and transformation within the discipline. Second, he emphasizes the need to reconstruct four areas in Biblical Studies, including the choice of labels used to describe the field. He argues that labels carry significant power dynamics, with the Western approach often falsely promoting a sense of universality and neutrality. Mbuvi insists on explicitly acknowledging the contextual nature of all interpretations, advocating for the use of modifiers (such as African, Asian, Black, White, etc.) to reflect the diversity perspectives and dismantle the dominance of a Western/Eurocentric worldview. This approach, he argues, is vital for pulling apart colonialist tendencies and promoting inclusivity and equity in the field (193–95).

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Mbuvi's proposal to use modifiers in Biblical Studies presents a nuanced challenge. That is, it risks perpetuating a form of self-orientalism among "minoritized groups" and reinforcing colonial assumptions. This begs the question: Can we validate diverse interpretations without using modifiers? After all, an interpreter from any socio-cultural context engaging in biblical interpretation is simply conducting Biblical Studies! Effective decolonization demands an approach that transcends the terms of colonialist discourse, rejecting cultural relativism.¹ Thus, there is a need to reconsider the necessity of terms like "African" in African Biblical Studies, especially given its semantic overload within colonial and Western discourse.

In addition to advocating for a change in labels, Mbuvi identifies other key areas for reform in Biblical Studies, such as; approaches and methodology, pedagogical structures, and power dynamics (192). He argues that every interpretive approach, shaped by the reader's cultural context, brings unique value, and deserves equal recognition. By advocating for pedagogical models that acknowledge diverse interpretive centers, Mbuvi challenges the notion of a "universal" interpretation of texts, fostering a more inclusive dialogue. His call to reform power dynamics goes beyond restructuring; it aims to tear down oppressive systems, paving the way for hope and justice. Mbuvi's critique exposes the shadow of unacknowledged universality in Western Biblical Studies, unveiling its colonial and racist roots. His impassioned plea for decolonization serves as a rallying cry to democratize Biblical Studies, embracing and celebrating cultural and contextual diversity (201).

Lastly, as readers engage with this book and contemplate its proposals for reforming Biblical Studies, a persistent question arises:

1. See, for instance, Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

Rather than demanding reforms from the dominant center to accommodate marginalized perspectives in Biblical Studies, how can we instead develop a decolonization approach that cultivates the emergence of vibrant multiple centers that operate independently of the current prevailing paradigm? The aim is not to uphold the colonial center but to diminish its influence on the new centers. Over time, these new centers will organically overshadow the current dominant one, eventually relegating it to the sidelines. This question holds particular significance for those striving to decolonize Biblical Studies beyond the limitations of colonialist discourse.

In conclusion, *African Biblical Studies* provides a thorough analysis of the historical development of Biblical Studies, tracing its evolution from a theological pursuit to a tool of colonialism. With clarity and insight, Mbuvi uncovers the intricate connections between Biblical Studies and colonial agendas, exposing the discipline's racially constructed methodologies. It, therefore, serves as a roadmap for those seeking to dismantle entrenched biases and substitute them with a more inclusive and equitable approach to biblical scholarship. The book is well-structured, with a clear delineation of themes in each part. The progression from historical context to post-colonial approaches is logical and easy to follow, allowing readers to grasp complex ideas with clarity. What makes it even more compelling is its accessibility, engaging narrative, and a rich array of well-documented sources, providing students and scholars alike with ample material for further exploration and research. The diverse perspectives presented add depth and credibility to Mbuvi's analysis, making it an indispensable contribution to the field!

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