

## BOOK REVIEW

John, Helen C., *Biblical Interpretation and African Traditional Religion: Cross-Cultural and Community Readings in Owamboland, Namibia* (BibInt, 176; Leiden: Brill, 2019). Hbk. xii + 274 pp. \$119.00.

In this book, Helen C. John sets out to contribute to the efforts of the African Biblical Studies (hereafter ABS) group, specifically ‘to move beyond the parameters, foci, and methodologies of Euro-American biblical studies’ (p. 1). Her thesis is based on Gerald West’s Contextual Biblical Study (hereafter CBS) method (Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* [Dorpspruit, South Africa: Cluster, 1993], p. 12; *idem*, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* [Dorpspruit, South Africa: Cluster, 2003], p. 96) of involving ‘others’ (ordinary readers) in biblical interpretation. John concedes that no biblical interpretation is devoid of contextual bias. She begins with the assumption that there are ‘aspects of commonality’ between African worldviews and the worldviews of the authors of the New Testament, such that Africans have an ‘epistemological privilege’ to identify ‘seamlessly’ (p. 8) with the worldview expressed in many New Testament passages. From an etic location and perspective, John advocates for a broader acknowledgment and appreciation of the African commonality advantage. She argues that the proximity of African interpreters’ ‘epistemological privilege’ (p. 8) warrants the integration of African biblical scholarship into the development, standardization and accreditation process of the discipline as a critical and necessary voice. Incidentally, Western scholarship, with its science-oriented and rationalist epistemology, currently dominates the field of biblical interpretation.

In the introductory chapter, John presents an overview of the two parts of the book. In Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2), she interacts with an anthology of relevant literature as she traces the interactions between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (hereafter ATR) in Owamboland in Northern Namibia. John thus sets in perspective the resultant interpretative tension in post-colonial Namibia, citing a couple of examples. She concludes Part 1 by presenting her research methodology, Cross-Cultural (Grassroot) Biblical Interpretation

Groups (hereafter, CCBIGs). In Part 2 (Chapters 3 to 7), she applies her methodology to selected Scriptural passages and themes from the worldview and experiences of ‘ordinary readers’ drawn from the Iihongo community. Incidentally, John subjectively determined these ‘ordinary readers’. This single step not only throws up some challenges, which John acknowledges but also indicates that there are limitations to the notion of having a cross-cultural thought process, as culture is a fluid and malleable concept.

John, in Chapter 1, situates the CCBIGs methodology by explaining the ‘benefits of cultural shock’ as advocated by the practitioners of Contextual Biblical Studies. She explains her tripartite method to include: (a) generating interpretations from the CCBIGs; (b) collaborating such interpretations with relevant literature on the Owamboland worldview; and (c) juxtaposing the indigenous interpretations with some Western interpretations of selected texts and themes, with the aim of ensuring a ‘productive conversation’ (p. 233). John insists on the democratization of opinions across cultural divides as a veritable tool for accessing the voice of each ‘other’ in biblical interpretation. Even when John seeks to *work with* the Iihongo CCBIGs, her influence and monopoly of authority in organizing the CCBIG was domineering and probably unattractive to a cross-section of the adult population, as becomes obvious in the next chapter.

In Chapter 2, John elaborates, in practical terms, the ‘tripartite structure’ of CCBIGs, which she discussed in the first chapter. Using Gerald West’s advocacy for a ‘bottom-up approach in foregrounding grassroots voices’ (p. 50), John presents an analysis of the constitution, demographic spread and limitations of her categorized Bible study. She stresses that her cross-cultural approach looks for both areas of commonality and ‘the exotic’ insights from worldviews other than those from (Western) academia. John concludes this chapter with a test-run of her methodology with the story Gerasene Demeoniac (Lk. 8.26-39). She explores themes like landscapes, spirits and bodies using the bottom-up approach. The tripartite structure adopted in the methodology brings clarity to her presentations and conclusions. As observed earlier, her decision to organize the people in the group was only helpful to an extent. Her having the sole prerogative in constituting the CCBIGs, selecting the texts or themes for discussion and stirring the conversation had its merits and demerits. On the upside, her posturing enabled her to get almost all that she wanted from the research therein. The downside of her approach, however, is that she single-handedly determined the texts or themes and she exercised

overbearing control of the discussion. This approach contradicts the democratization process she advocates and limits the reach of her research.

What is more, her etic location negatively impacted the voluntary participation of some critical minds in the community and most certainly affected the results of her research. Among the reported limitations of her model from the data presented was the abysmally low participation of the adult population, especially the male category, which had only two participants. Had she made the effort to engage some notable male adults, who are considered opinion leaders in the Iihongo community, in private interviews, her findings would have been weightier and would more authentically have represented the worldview of the people. It may not be out of place to note that these male adults felt insulted by her 'church announcement' invitation, especially when she was the one seeking information from them. Worse still, she was both a foreigner and a female in a patriarchal environment. They likely thought she was 'commandeering' men on their African soil and so responded by ignoring her invitation. Moreover, she would have had the privilege of assessing some Scriptures that pose challenges to the natives if she had selected those texts or themes in consultation with them. Such an approach would have further heightened the effects of her cultural shock and perhaps rendered the interpretations less predictable and more valuable.

Part 2 explores several themes highlighted by the researcher from her chosen texts for each of the chapters. Discussion in Chapter 3 is based on the Parable of the Wedding feast (Mt. 22.1-14; Lk. 14.7-11). John observes that CCBIGs in the Iihongo community 'largely focused the interpretation on material provisions and the potential wastage of resources' (p. 58). She further notes that 'what appears to be solely a materialist reading may' turn out to 'be connected to cosmological concerns, as well' (p. 66) from a closer (ethnographic) analysis. She also points out that while Western scholars have produced labels for some New Testament landscapes, for instance, 'meals' or 'meals as ceremonies' (p. 85), the inclusive commonality expressed by the 'ordinary readers' challenges such labels as Western impositions. The giving and slaughtering of the wedding ox are not enough to warrant such imposition.

In Chapter 4, John probes into the notion of the 'mystical extension' of the body by exploring the stories of Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman in Mk 5.21-43. Her study groups consider blood, clothing and shadows as extensions of the person. Ethnographical literature confirms that blood has both negative and positive connotations in the Ndonga worldview. John notes that

the idea of extensions of the person suggests that blood and other bodily fluids, imprints, the shadow and possessions make up the local conceptual reality of a person in the Ndonga cosmology. This way of conceptualizing reality indicates, to a reasonable extent, a commonality of worldview with what is expressed in the biblical text. The hemorrhaging woman had considered the hem of Jesus' garment to not only be part of him but also to be potent enough to transmit his healing power to cure her disease. Fortunately, she was right! It turns out to be one of the cultural shocks for John that CCBIGs consider the woman's bleeding as rendering her impure, as the Jews of the New Testament would have done. John also observes that the people showed restraint in discussing hemorrhage as pollution. Also, the fact that the woman could make her way through the crowd makes it likely that she was not religiously declared unclean after all—if she was a Jewess. John should have pressed in further to know why participants showed such reluctance to discuss hemorrhage as pollution. Perhaps the concept of 'sex talk' (in the absence of formal sex education) as a taboo that cannot be part of any decent conversation in many African cultures would have surfaced. For instance, until I was about 22 years old, I did not know that women menstruate, because no 'decent' person in my community (male or female) discussed such matters in plain language, but always in coded language.

In Chapter 5, John remarks that while modern Westerners may see the land as a blank 'space' or 'stage', the Aandonga conceive of any landscape as a 'place'—'alive' and having an inspiring or scary character. She submits that the Iihongo people consider interactions between human beings and spirits to be lived realities. She rhetorically asks why instances of possessions, such as that of Legion, cannot be interpreted as lived realities in other worldviews. This question is compelling, given the sustained proclivity in Western scholarship to doubt or vilify the potential realities of demons in the biblical worldview. John rejects the respective submissions by Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988], p. 186) and Richard A. Horsley (*Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], pp. 146-47), who interpret spirit-possession as either a metaphor for political violations against the Jews by their Roman colonialists, or a psychological response to the horror inflicted by colonial oppression. This line of interpretation is a clear reflection of a science- and rationality-oriented worldview that can explain such a human/spirit interface only from a metaphorical or magical perspective. Even when John acknowledges the possibilities of 'chthonic'

realities (p. 160) of living landscapes, one wonders why she could neither press further for nor offer any plausible explanation to what happens to the immediate potency of such ‘chthonic’ realities. What happens to the spirits’ presence and agency on the land they occupy should such landscape become a homestead because of modern development? Do the spirits relocate their habitat under any circumstance? If yes, to where? Here, it is debatable if the Western position that considers the landscape as a ‘space’ or ‘stage’ seems close to reality than the chthonic fact which the Iihongo people discover in the text. It seems to me that Jesus treated the landscape both as a ‘stage’ and as ‘a place’ where his preeminent power overruled any other living presence. So Jesus treated every territory he went to as a ‘stage’ on which he demonstrated his authority, and a ‘place’ where he addressed or ordered seen and unseen realities, who all obeyed him (see Mk 4 and Lk. 8).

John further explores, in Chapter 6, the autochthonous beliefs about weather and water in the natural environment of. She points out that ‘attempts to establish what is “real” and the standards against which one might judge “reality” are grounded in worldview’ (p. 181). She wonders why the Eurocentric worldview of many scholars, after acknowledging the reality of human–spirits interface in the ‘primordial tradition’, will go ahead and treat such physical phenomena as ‘symbolic elements’ (p. 183). Although John acknowledges the merits of Bruce J. Malina’s (‘Assessing the Historicity of Jesus’ Walking on the Sea: Insights from Cross-Cultural Social Psychology’, in Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans [eds.], *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], pp. 351-71 [354-55]) alternate states of consciousness (ASC) and the usefulness of the Shamanic model in interpreting the human interactions with the spirits in the New Testament, she cautions that we treat these categories as ‘etic designations’. This call for caution raises the challenge as to what ought to be the most credible framework for rightly interpreting such biblical passages for which the worldviews of the original audience and the modern West are in tension. Is it the lived realities of the original audience? Or should it be the science-oriented disputations by the Western scholars that chide autochthonous worldview as superstitious? The possibility of seeing ghosts on waterscapes was regarded as a lived reality for Jesus’s disciples, and perhaps for Namibians too. The claim by a twenty-first-century Canadian that a virus has attacked her computer may compare favorably also as a lived reality. In their respective worldviews, both the ghost and the virus are supposedly invisible to the natural eyes. Yet both experiences portend no magic or superstition, although they can be mistaken as such by

the ‘uninitiated’. So John’s call for caution is apt, and should be heeded in such cases of disputed or conflicting worldviews.

In Chapter 7, John juxtaposes the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus against the experiences of post-mortem appearances, restless spirits and activities of ancestors among the Iihongo people. She notes that encountering and interacting with the spirits of the dead is a lived reality. John submits that the notion of Jesus as an ancestor (*aathithi*), as advocated by some reputable African scholars, did not readily gain acceptance among the participants. The views expressed by the CCBIGs participants confirm the submissions of other scholars like D.B. Stinton (*Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* [Faith and Cultures; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004], pp. 118-23) and Timothy Palmer (‘Jesus Christ: Our Ancestor’, *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 27 [2008], pp. 65-75 [73]). John concurs with Palmer that there is evidence of ‘significant resistance’ (p. 217) to such theologies amongst grassroots interpreters because ‘Jesus does not fit’ perfectly into the African understanding of an ancestor (p. 224), even though the theologies of Jesus as an ancestor by some African scholars may be impressive in academia

Despite the gaps noted above, John provides us with a fascinating study, one which should inform the future of biblical interpretation. She aptly restates the basic fact that lived realities and contextual worldviews impact biblical interpretation more than scholars (across cultural divides) are willing to admit. Incidentally, African interpreters whose socio-cultural worldview enjoys a close commonality with that of the New Testament are often branded as subjective by those whose worldviews are more distant.

It may not be out of place to extract from this book a clarion call for the reassessment of what passes as standard biblical interpretation both in academia and the local church, given the Eurocentric atheist background of John and her well-researched study. The domination of Euro-American biblical scholars as having the final say in what is accredited as standardized biblical interpretation is a far cry from fairness and may no longer be tenable. The time to take ‘other’ voices and views beyond Western academia seriously is long overdue, as John makes clear. I therefore recommend this book as an instructional text for students and as food-for-thought for scholars of biblical interpretation in general.

Solomon Umazi  
McMaster Divinity College  
Hamilton, ON