

Book Review: *Who Do You Say I Am? Christology in Africa*

Reed, Rodney L., and David K. Ngaruiya, eds. 2021. *Who Do You Say I Am? Christology in Africa*. Carlisle: Langham Global Library. xv + 459 pp. ISBN: 978-1-83973-532-5. Approx. 630 ZAR (\$34.19 USD). Paperback.

This volume complements previous editions of the annual conferences of the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET). The editors, Rodney L. Reed and David K. Ngaruiya, compiled the best papers at the 2020 ASET conference and grouped them into three parts, also adding a collection of five papers (part 4) paying tribute to the late Prof. John S. Mbiti, whose contribution to and influence upon ASET was thought to deserve special recognition.

Part 1, “Christ in the Bible,” comprises eight papers investigating New Testament passages on how they portray Jesus. But how should one read the Jesus stories? How should one relate to Jesus, a first-century Jew, from a contemporary African perspective?

Telesia K. Musili argues for a rereading of John 7:53–8:11 in the sense that Jesus extends an invitation that “brings out transformation, not only for the [adulterous] woman but also for all men and demeaning social structures” (p. 20). In an exegetical study of Luke 11:1–13, **Timothy J. Monger** evokes the honor-shame template of the parable that strikes a chord with East African cultures. Arguing that *anaideia* means “shamelessness” rather than “persistence,” the sleeper will extend

hospitality to avoid his shamelessness in denying the friend’s request to go public. Jesus then purposely applies this to God, the “Father to reveal his nature: he will always act to preserve the honor of his name” (p. 38). **Lydia Chemei**, appraising John 4:1–42, purports “Eurocentric approaches in the analysis of the Christology of John’s gospel” lack “practical replication” of Jesus’s “inclusivity within the church leadership in Africa” (p. 43). In the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus emerges “as the inclusive one, the nonjudgmental one, the teacher and the nurturer” (p. 43). She then deploys the concept of hybridity to relay these qualities “in imaging Christ as the egalitarian leader to formulate an African Christology that addresses the need for egalitarian leaders who model authentic servanthood as Christ did” (p. 44). **Elizabeth W. Mburu** avers that Western Christianity has “presented Christology in a particular way” which “has stunted the growth of a robust Christianity in Africa” (p. 57). Exploring Galatians “through the lens of an African Hermeneutic,” she advocates for a “multidimensional nature of Christology” (p. 57), one which portrays Christ as a liberator, unifier (of the church), victor, truth, and curse-bearer.

Elkanah K. Cheboi reads Galatians 3:1–14, where Christ is presented as the “curse-remover,” as an attempt by Paul to establish “his Christology of the cursed and crucified Christ as the remover of curses against this backdrop of the ancient understanding and practice of curses” (p. 77). The pervasive presence of curses and binding spells in antiquity is also a widespread phenomenon in contemporary African contexts. Although Africans, like the ancients, know many remedies to prevent or reverse curses, they also only manage the situation and cannot offer the ultimate solution (p. 88). Thus, imaging “the crucified Christ not only as a curse-bearer but also as the ultimate curse-breaker” (p. 88)—ergo the ultimate solution for sin and death—within local African audiences is an appropriate pastoral response. **Enoch O. Okode** offers a detailed exegetical analysis of Romans 5:6–8,

bemoaning the fact that verse 7 is largely circumvented in the literature. Okode propounds to read and understand this passage within the cultural setting of the “Greco-Roman benefaction system,” whereby Jesus, the Messiah, is portrayed as the Supreme King “whose benefaction is superior and surprising because it overturns key aspects of the Greco-Roman ethic of reciprocity” (p. 95). Okode’s passionate—and well-argued—appeal for Romans 5:7 draws “upon the rare but not inconceivable Greco-Roman practice whereby the beneficiary of a gift would be willing to die on behalf of his benefactor” (p. 111). Christ, however, subverts this practice since his sacrificial death is not a payment “for the sake of ‘the good’ (ὁ ἀγαθός) ... but for the unworthy to demonstrate God’s love (5:8)” (p. 112).

Gift Mtukwa “seeks to examine what exactly Paul expected his followers to imitate in Christ and his representatives (apostles).” Tracing the use of “μιμηταί [imitation]” in the “Pauline corpus” (p. 117) and its use in ancient literature, he then highlights some implications for the contemporary church in Africa, namely, to imitate Christ (being cruciform, humbling oneself, and acting on behalf of others) and, as a recommendation to church leaders, to also imitate Paul who worked “with his own hands so as not to be a burden to anyone” (p. 132). Lastly, **Moses I. Ogidis** advocates for a christological reading of Ephesians 5:21–33, steering away from popular interpretations which thrive on “the hierarchical relationship between husbands and wives” (p. 137) by solely emphasizing (misusing) the submission clause. The focal point is Christ who serves as “the ideal model—being human and God—for husbands to emulate his sacrificial love,” which in turn serves “as a model for married men in Africa” (p. 137).

Part 2, entitled “Christ in Theology and Church History” comprising seven chapters, shifts to a historical inquiry, seeking to address “issues of constructive theology regarding the doctrine of Christ” (p. xiv). **Daniel Mwilu** signposts the bumpy journey of Christology in Africa now well

placed at the center of “contemporary theologizing” (p. 158). Of paramount importance is to evoke emic concepts and ideas in “producing a Christology that is authentically biblical, culturally African, and which lasts” (p. 161), though care and in-depth study of “authentic concepts that leave no room for nominal Christianity nor an open doorway for syncretism” (p. 172) are required. **Juliana Nzuki** and **Elkanah K. Cheboi** employ the intertestamental period which projected “a political and military messiah who would deliver Israel from its enemies” to caution against constructing a Christ derived from “prevailing socioeconomic and political circumstances” (p. 182). Such pitfalls should be avoided in the African endeavor of formulating a Christology (i.e., the ancestor motif). **Henry M. Garba** presents Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology as an important historical perspective for contemporary African Christianity because it embraces a “unitive understanding”—the divine and human nature—of Christ so crucial for providing “an appropriate and authentic christological interpretation of the Christ event” (p. 214). Likewise, **John M. Kiboi** delves into the christological confessions of the early church to highlight the need to appropriately balance ontological (person) and functional (work) Christologies. The methodology to achieve this is the “top-down ontological approach that begins from the Being before it reflects on human experiences and (pastoral) reflections” (p. 238).

E. Okelloh Ogera develops “a christological motif from the concept of *Ker* (high priest) among the Luo community of Western Kenya,” juxtaposing it with the biblical concept of the high priest in an attempt to contextualize Jesus Christ so that he “does not remain a stranger among African Christians” (p. 239). **Stephanie A. Lowery**, following Célestin Musekura’s view on the necessity of communal forgiveness, explores African wisdom “related to giving and forgiving” for a “more profound, contextualized understanding of forgiveness” (p. 257). **Thandi Soko-de Jong** researches

faith communities in Blantyre (Malawi) and their response to the question: “How do you understand ‘Jesus as Healer’ in situations of living with treatable but not yet curable illness?” (p. 275). The findings attest to “more diverse, positive approaches to health and healing in African (evangelical) images of Jesus as Healer than those often focused upon in the prosperity gospel” (p. 286).

Part 3 contains four chapters under the headline, “Christ in Praxis.” **Rowland D. Van Es Jr.** offers a visual approach to African Christology by investigating how African Christians “view images of Jesus portrayed in African drawings in order to understand him” (p. 292). Conversing with J. Mbiti and K. Bediako, **Alistair I. Wilson** opines that both scholars have failed to sufficiently emphasize “the role of Jesus Christ as Lord of mission” (p. 320), thus they did not develop a constructive “mission Christology,” which posits Jesus “as the authorizer and initiator of mission both before and after his death and resurrection” (p. 336). **L. Oseje** and **B. C. Sichone** focus on Jesus in Islam, making a plea for a better grasp of how Muslims perceive and interpret Jesus. Oseje opts for contrasting Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament with *AKI* in the Qur’an. Sichone’s interest is with the lay Christians who “need to know what or how Muslims think about God in relation to Jesus” (p. 363).

Part 4 presents **David K. Ngaruiya**, **Esther Mombo**, **James Nkansah-Obrempong**, **Jesse N. K. Mugambi**, and **Samuel Ngewa** paying their tribute to the late John S. Mbiti by reflecting on some of his major achievements, his personal qualities, and some anecdotal material of personal encounters of the authors with the “father of contemporary African theology” (p. 394). The volume is supplemented by a list of contributors as well as the requisite Subject, Author, and Scripture indices.

The present volume is a welcome contribution to the pivotal question of how one should relate to Jesus, a first-century Jew, from a contemporary

African perspective. Two directions were outlined: focusing on the Scripture texts—advocating for re-reading of texts in the New Testament to situate the African contexts within reach of their messages—and listening to the experiences and struggles of Christian communities in the past who were faced with the same question. There is much freshness, passion, and expertise presented within the wide range of articles and topics. Current African christologizing, as demonstrated with this volume, generates a new thrust by analyzing the past, both in terms of Africa’s own missionary experience as well as delving into ancient missionary practices of early Christian communities elsewhere. This volume additionally stresses the point that the Church in Africa ought not to forget its task to bring Christian Christology into conversation with the arts and other religious traditions in the neighborhood.

There is also a slight though noticeable jab directed towards Western theology and missional practice that have insufficiently (harmfully?) contextualized the Gospel message, which left the African Church wanting, bereft of the necessary skills—and maturity—to stem contemporaneous ills which have befallen it. Undoubtedly, there is no escaping from the fact that a simple (Eurocentric) transfer of theology and missional practice left behind a bewildering array of outcomes which requires now “producing a Christology that is authentically biblical, culturally African, and which lasts” (p. 161). This view seems to align with ASET’s Theological Series statement in the introductory part:

We often hear these days that the center of Christianity is moving toward the Global South and Africa is a key player in that movement. This makes the study of African Christianity and African realities important—even more so when it is being done by Africans themselves and in their own context.

Granted! But, supposing this view that Africa is a key player in shifting the center of Christianity to the Global South achieves its maturation to its fullest extent and capacity, will Africa then be able to bequeath to the rest of the world not only African Christianity fully immersed in African realities, but a Christianity that transcends geography and cultural expression to supersede the Western Christian enterprise to Africa with its apparent Eurocentric flaws and ignorance? In other words, should African Christology not also be attentive to the greater horizon of God's mission? Should it not also instill in its pursuit to properly engage with the African realities the notion that to frame that from which you cannot free yourself (to represent and embody a gospel in a culturally conditioned form, as Lesslie Newbigin once put it) is a reality since a certain *foreignness* always accompanies all cross-cultural Gospel bearers, whether the transfer happens from North to South or from South to North?

I appreciate the diversity of topics but also the critical tone—noticeable, though sporadic—warning the reader not to yield to the temptation to forge all sorts of christological responses out of massively rich African contexts just for the sake of christologizing, only to bring some form of African authenticity to the table.

Who Do You Say I Am? Christology in Africa makes for compelling reading and offers a wide range of approaches for contextual christological concepts in Africa. It is a must-read for students in theological institutions, the pastoral staff overseeing churches, congregations, or parishes, but equally important, it ought to reach the ordinary Christian to foster the growth of a robust Christianity in Africa.

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