

# **Book Review: *Kony as Moses: Old Testament Texts and Motifs in the Early Years of the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda.***

Nkabala, Helen Nambalirwa. 2021. *Kony as Moses: Old Testament Texts and Motifs in the Early Years of the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda*. New York: Peter Lang. x, 203 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4331-8429-1. Approx. 915 ZAR (49.95 USD). Hardback.

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P. Eichstaedt (2009, 5) characterizes Northern Uganda as a “world without control, where right is wrong and wrong is right, where carnage and chaos are the normal state of affairs,” (p. 2) and Nkabala acknowledges the complexity of causes that lead to the existence and activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). She proposes to explore their religious basis. In particular, she aims to investigate “how the LRA uses the biblical texts in

their rhetoric” in order to get a “fuller understanding of this armed group and their ways of thinking and acting” (p. 22).

Through an interdisciplinary approach, she sets out to examine the texts Kony uses to see whether they support his application. Specifically, she aims to use exegetical and hermeneutical methods of analysis from biblical studies and rhetorical and narrative approaches to interpret the biblical texts. She also uses qualitative methods of social science research, particularly participatory action research.

Questions guiding her analysis include: How does the LRA use Old Testament texts and motifs to support their actions? How does their interpretation of the Old Testament compare to standard biblical hermeneutics/interpretation? What are the implications for LRA members who have reintegrated into society? What does this mean for Old Testament studies in Africa? The essence of her thesis is presented below.

She notes (p. 22), citing Mugambi (2001, 14), that several persons in Africa, including politicians and movements, have made use of Moses and the Exodus narratives to motivate their agendas. This mirrors such use of these narratives elsewhere in the world, including in Liberation Theologies.<sup>1</sup>

She notes that this “creates a theology that seems to have no control over the way it is used” (p. 78). She adds that Spohn (1995, 58–59) “rightly observes, when a particular perspective controls the reading of the biblical text, it mostly does not allow scripture to challenge its own presuppositions, and most of the time the Bible is simply reduced to providing rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup> Spohn (1995), quoted on p. 77, correctly notes that there is no singly unified theology of liberation. Rather, different versions emerge from specific social and economic contexts. They “integrate theology with the sociopolitical concerns emerging from a historical context of injustice, oppression and massive human suffering” (p. 288). They “begin from a contemporary historical context ... and move to the biblical text to discover the attitudes that will inspire and sustain solidarity with the oppressed” (p. 56).

support for political agendas that have been derived on purely secular grounds.”

After inspecting the LRA’s use of Old Testament texts, she concludes that “understanding the Decalogue cannot be done in isolation. The Ten Commandments should be read alongside the other commandments as they appear in the Pentateuch” (p. 124). She also concludes (p. 139), citing Bryan (1975, xvi), that “prophetic movements in Africa are fond of using Christianity as a repertoire of magical devices. They tend to pick up themes from the Old Testament scriptures that seem parallel to their own contemporary circumstances and rework them as legitimations for their own society.”

At their insurgence in 1987, and into the early 1990s, the LRA presented the restoration of the Ten Commandments in society as its expressed desire. The origin of the insurgency against the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government was rooted in the perceived loss of political power by the Acholi. However, with Alice Lakwena’s claim that God had sent her to rescue the people of Acholi-land, it soon took on spiritual connotations (p. 17). The religious foil was a powerful glue for the community and provided the rationale for all her activities and practices. Kony took over where Lakwena left off and inherited her spiritual credentials as well (p. 16).

The Acholi are a microcosm of several African communities today. They are highly religious and spiritual; in the missionary sense but without distancing themselves from their traditional ritual beliefs and practices (p. 16). In these communities, the role of engaging the spiritual authorities is typically the task of mediums. A human being is typically chosen and possessed by spirits and functions as a charismatic leader. They will offer spiritual direction to the community and differing from them on their

interpretation of scripture or other claims they make is met with severe resistance.

The parallels between Kony and Moses that Dona<sup>2</sup> sees, for example, are remote associations with no historical-critical basis. They include beliefs and practices from Kony’s Christian background (his father was Roman Catholic and his mother Anglican), the powers of a witch doctor (he apparently inherited his witch doctor brother’s powers), and the Old Testament. There is no historical-critical reading of the biblical texts cited to inform the practice of the LRA. There are only loose associations with texts leading to arbitrary applications. For instance, because God killed (e.g., the Great Flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah), Kony too, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, killed as God’s work. There were rituals preceding and following battles. Losing a battle was attributed to sin (perhaps somebody secretly slept with his wife before going to war) and special ritual sacrifices were offered for the survivors, to cleanse themselves. Fasting was part of these rituals. The link between Moses and Kony is as tenuous as the idea of both liberating their respective communities from suffering.

According to Nkabala, those who emphasize Kony’s twisted interpretations of the Old Testament and use them to discredit his ideology and practices fail to understand what is going on in the LRA. A movement grounded in religious ideology can only be counteracted by a more powerful religious ideology, not by dismissing the movement’s religious ideology out of hand.

Her contribution to biblical hermeneutics in *Africa* purports to emphasize contextual reading (as the LRA does) but also to set “indicators for preventing possible and potential negative consequences which are likely

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<sup>2</sup> A former follower of Kony whom Nkabala interviewed.

to emerge as a result of such readings and interpretations” (p. 156). Her point of departure (p. 159), following Taylor (1998), is to ignore authorial intent and pay attention to the text instead. Next, she draws attention to the interpretative community as important players in biblical hermeneutics. Citing Schüssler Fiorenza (1988, 115), she advocates for the “elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary sociopolitical contexts” (p. 159). With Schüssler Fiorenza, she argues that “in the light of reader-response approaches ... the question about a ‘correct’ interpretation of the Bible is insignificant” (p. 159). Rather, what one should promote is “an accountable good and responsible reading of the Bible” that promotes “well-being for all” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988, 17, on p. 160). Nkabala agrees (p. 160) with Schüssler Fiorenza (1988, 15; 1999, 67,) that the yardstick for any interpretation of the Bible is “its effects on society.” Under that measure, the interpretations of the LRA are unacceptable as they have negatively impacted the lives of the people in Northern Uganda.

She notes that “African readers of the Old Testament are facing the same difficulties as everyone who reads the Old Testament.” She adds, “Africa also faces the problem of a rampant increase of new religious movements where members normally claim that they get their knowledge of the Bible and interpretation directly from God” (p. 161). Finally, she notes, citing Masenya (2004), that “Africans make up a society of people who attach much of their respect to the scriptures and the Bible is treated as a sacred book which cannot be questioned, and when scripture is quoted, many tend not to question the texts they are reading and quoting” (p. 161). There is evidence from elsewhere that this characterization of African readers extends even to those who have studied in Western theological institutions (see Nyirenda 2021).

Appropriations of the Old Testament, like Kony’s, are dangerous if it does not submit itself to the contextual, historical, and theological restrictions inherent in the texts. That is what Fee and Douglas (2003, 21) call “historical particularity.” This is likely the reason Nkabala considers some texts dangerous (pp. 23–24). Any text read out of context is likely to lead to misinterpretations. This claim extends to the so-called *texts of terror* highlighted by Tribble (1984, 1) (p. 24). The theological integrity of the Scriptures as God’s Word is inseparably linked to interpreting them within their context.

Nkabala has correctly put her finger on the challenge of actual contextual interpretations of the Bible in Africa, many of which are harmful. I agree that “many Africans now produce contextual interpretations of the Bible—in ways which have proved to be detrimental to African society” and that “it is because of this practice that there are many self-proclaimed prophets in Africa” (p. 162). I also agree that “interaction between today’s readers and the biblical text is inevitable” (p. 162).

On the one hand, one would argue that this plethora of reading positions bears witness to the successful deconstruction of the *objective* exegesis of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment-inspired scholarship. Several readers and reading contexts have since emerged. These include Dube’s work *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (2000); Masenya’s (2004) *Bosadi Perspective; Storytelling Methods*, promoted by Masenya, Dube, and Teteki; Kanyoro’s *Cultural Hermeneutics* (2001); Kahilwe’s *Post-apartheid Black Feminist Reading*; and Dube’s use of *The Divination Method of Interpretation*, which are mentioned in this book (p. 166).

It is at the level of *how* one ought to mitigate against harmful readings that I differ from Nkabala. She aligns herself with those who do not accept

“divine violence” in the texts and who look for “diverse ways of dealing with the violent Old Testament texts” (p. 162).

She agrees with Barr (1993, 218) that “biblical scholars must admit that texts with a violent tone are in all aspects morally offensive and must be faced as such” (p. 166). She adds that her “book is a contribution in this respect. It pays attention not merely to the historical, rhetorical and narrative meanings of the biblical texts, but also considers how these texts are used today” (p. 166).

However, in her attempts at exegesis, she affirms only rhetorical and narrative meanings as part of her methodology and leans on these when engaging the texts. The historical dimension, which is the one that provides the other critical data to the exegesis of any text, is hardly engaged.

Her contextual, *ethic of life* hermeneutic is meant to promote “an ethical non-violent reading and interpretation of the Bible with an ethically conscious mind and in a non-violent manner” (pp. 166–167). It is *contextual* in that it is meant to address “the challenges of a particular context and requires an interpretative community which provides checks and balances” (p. 167). Presumably, this is the way you make any context the basis for engagement “by the Bible scholars who should be asking questions about the role of the text in the contemporary society rather than concentrate on its historical basis alone” (p. 167).

I argue, however, that questions about contemporary society must engage with the historical meanings of biblical texts for the dialogue between the two to be a legitimate dialogue. Even the ethical dimension she advocates for must be drawn from the texts, not that which is found in the contemporary community. Privileging context and contemporary meanings over historical contexts and meanings is not a dialogue but a *de facto* monologue, with the texts as a mere springboard for such a monologue.

I would argue that a faithful historical-critical reading of the biblical texts, with all its challenges, complexities, and knowledge gaps, will show that the Scriptures are inherently bringers of *shalom* to mankind at all sorts of levels. They promote the life, well-being, and human dignity that she aspires to, but on their own terms, not those imposed from outside. An example is Isaiah 53:5 “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (ESV). The texts are transformative already. Contextual readings become dangerous when they ignore historical-critical and linguistic data. They replace God’s שְׁלוֹם (*well-being*) with human חֲמָץ (*violence*).

I disagree with the claim that “even though the biblical text itself has remained fundamentally the same for many years, our approaches and perspectives have to expand and change,” (p. 168) if by *expand* and *change* she means violate their inherent meanings. She accuses Dona of not having a “critical biblical culture” (p. 171). However, it is difficult to find any evidence of such a culture in her own prescriptions to Dona.

How can one use Exodus 1–3 to “emphasize that Yahweh is God of all the Israelites and the Egyptians” (p. 173) when the text distinguishes between the two and identifies Yahweh as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Israel’s ancestors? To interpret Exodus 2:12 as characterizing Moses as a killer (p. 87) is to ignore the way prior texts have built up this character and his mission up to that point. It was, ill-advised though it was, the emancipatory killing of the oppressor, by someone who identified with the oppressed. Moses is not chosen as the deliverer of the Hebrews in that text; it is already implied by his birth and preservation narratives. The so-called parallel between Moses shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law and God presenting himself to Moses as “God of your father” is rather tenuous. Only by interpreting the text from an epistemologically pedantic

and cultural bias perspective can one see a distinction between God saying he will liberate the Israelites and God sending Moses (p. 92).

The parallels drawn between Moses and Kony (Exod 3:1–22) are fleeting and do not hold up to critical scrutiny. For instance, aside from Kony’s claims, there is no evidence of divine preparation, commissioning, and direction in his story.

Nkabala also made some errors in analysing the Hebrew text. She mistakenly claims that Exodus 20:13 has “five consonants,” while the Masoretic text clearly has six consonants. According to the biblical texts (Deut 34:1–12), Moses was not barred from entering the promised land “because of his mistrust in God” like she argues (p. 127), but because he did not sanctify God’s name in the presence of the people. In her chiasmic analysis of Deuteronomy 34:1–12 (p. 128), her perceived linkage of A and A’ (Moses sees the whole land with his eyes [vv. 1–4]/ Moses did great wonders in the eyes of Israel [vv. 11–12]) is very tenuous. Further, to seemingly dismiss, with Von Rad, the prophetic stature of Moses as “simply Deuteronomistic” (p. 132) highlights the danger of making form-criticism a key tool in interpreting the Scriptures, the very issue that the shift to emphasize rhetorical criticism sought to address. To reread Exodus 3:19 and “emphasize the need to co-exist by forgiving those perceived oppressors” (p. 174) is a blatant misrepresentation of the text. All this is in aid of her agenda of “sanitizing” so-called *violent* texts:

Finally, the present book reveals that the new task ahead for African biblical hermeneutics is to begin rereading Old Testament texts (regardless of an inherent violent message or not) in a non-violent way and with an ethical consciousness, using the model I have proposed. (p. 183)

In the end, her *ethical* reading of the texts is nothing more than the exchanging of the historical-critical meanings of texts, including their ethics, to communicate what the reader wants them to say. Such a reading of the Old Testament texts is even more unrestrained than the allegorical method of Alexandria, which at least had the grace of God in Christ as its interpretative framework. For example, Origen (AD 185–254) could happily reread Abraham’s ascent to the mountain in Genesis 22 as the spiritual journey of the soul in “abandoning earthly things and human affections in order to obtain things above” (Song 2015, 89).

Nkabala is denying herself the witnesses of the author/redactor and original readers/hearers when she says she is “not interested in uncovering the author’s intention as a basis of [her] interpretation, nor [is she] interested in reconstructing the original readers” (p. 35). If rhetorical criticism is intended, as she has noted, to reveal the composition and persuasion elements of the Scriptures, it begs the question, “who are they trying to persuade?” For, although the text can be studied as an independent entity yielding all kinds of meanings, including those “beyond what the author intended” (quoting Tribble 1994, 96–97, on p. 35), texts are not independent entities as they originate from concrete historical, socio-political, and ideological contexts that must be considered when they are interpreted if faithful hermeneutics is the goal.

This is the essence of considering the Old Testament texts as sacred, God-breathed entities. It is helpful, in this vein, to remember that when the apostle Paul was characterizing the Scripture in this manner (2 Tim 3:16), it was the Old Testament he had in mind. Therefore, although I agree that the intention of rhetorical criticism is “to understand the effect of the text” (see Thurén 1990, quoted on p. 35), this should not be different from that understood by the first audience of the texts. This work delves deep into the contextual circumstances and experiences of the LRA in order to

understand their use of the Old Testament and other beliefs. However, it ironically denies the same level of qualitative analysis to the audiences in the texts themselves, replacing them with the contextual, *ethic of life* hermeneutic of the author.

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