

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

To a large extent, Nyirenda understood my work, and identified the challenges I raise and respond to in my book. However, we diverge on the kind of solution suggested. Like many in the past, I am very uncomfortable with his emphasis on the need to dwell on the historical-critical approach, especially because the community I present in my book is not that of trained biblical scholars or theologians but of the laity at the grassroots level, who interpret the biblical text literally.

The reviewer acknowledges that,

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-imposed prophets in Africa.' I also agree that 'interaction between today's readers and the biblical text is inevitable' (p. 162).

He faults my book, stating that "she affirms only rhetorical and narrative meanings as part of her methodology and leans on these when engaging the texts." Upon this basis, Nyirenda argues 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.... Privileging context and contemporary meanings over historical contexts and meanings is not dialogue but a *de facto* monologue, with the texts as a mere springboard for such a monologue." The reviewer believes 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."

From the review and evaluation, the reviewer seems to agree with but again also misses the very point that this book seeks to address—the challenge of biblical interpretation in Africa. While the reviewer argues that the Scriptures are inherently "bringers of *shalom* to mankind at all sorts of levels," experience and practice have shown the contrary. It must be understood that the author in this book does not in any way intend to "violate their inherent meanings," neither does the book accuse "Dona of not having a 'critical biblical culture.'" Instead, I agree with Fetalsana-Apura (2019, 12–13) when she argues, "A reading of a text uses the symbols and thought categories that are familiar and meaningful to a person. These are products of one's culture and personal experiences.... To make the Bible relevant to a different context, translation must take the language and worldview of the receptor community."

In this book, I acknowledge the importance of historical analysis, but I am also aware that in interpretation, concrete reality must be given as much attention as the text. The interpreter's social location, ideological commitments, and religious assumptions also influence reading (Fetalsana-Apura 2019, 14–15). In this case, Dona's life experiences and those of other

Lord's Resistance Army members shaped their reading of the Bible, and to use the words of Paul Tillich (1951, 14), this is my "Ultimate Concern" in this book. It is upon that basis that I seek to echo the clarion call by Schüssler Fiorenza (1988, 16) that "academic biblical studies should move beyond the limits of educational or pastoral training towards opening up to the public/society so as to foster the opportunity of a critical biblical culture and a pluralistic historical consciousness." In my book, I prefer to lay more emphasis on the critical challenge that faces biblical use today and, in agreement with Schüssler Fiorenza (1988, 17), make suggestions for an accountable good, and responsible reading of the Bible—which is to promote well-being for all.

I differ from the reviewer when he presents Scriptures as bringers of *shalom*. This is because texts can only make meaning within a specific context. Scholars have argued, and I agree with them, that it is only an assumption for one to think that the meaning of a text can be established in an objective manner and the meaning of an author can only be reconstructed tentatively so a text may take new meaning in changing circumstances (Collins 2005, 4). In the same line, Fetalsana-Apura (2019, 7) explains that "the context of the text, the text, and contextual interpretation are frameworks that cannot be disregarded in the hermeneutics of resistance." Therefore, presenting a text as a bringer of *shalom* as done by the reviewer is akin to finding simplistic answers in a way that only endorses the Bible as authoritative and infallible in all matters related to truth (Frampton 2006, 4). Moreover, it is again my considered opinion that to approach a text as something static would also be incorrect.

To argue that an interpretation would only have meaning if understood from its historical context is, in my view, simply an amplification of what Collins (2005, 4) calls the construction of a hierarchy of meanings. It is also such views that promote a colonial mentality and influence that advantages

Western interpretation as the more objective and more reliable basis in constructing biblical meaning and the reason why contextual hermeneutics has not flourished (Fetalsana-Apura 2019, 7). Musa Dube (2012, 5) has figuratively likened the continued reliance on "theories of interpretation of the Bible ... generated by the former colonial 'mother countries' [that] formerly colonized Christian countries [to] children, [who] continue to eat from their mother's hand."

Misheck Nyirenda argues 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." Nyirenda's argument is a reflection of a historical challenge to biblical scholarship. For many years, biblical scholars preferred to preserve the historical meaning of the text. This in the long run separated the biblical meaning of the text from contemporary challenges (Scholz 2005, 53). The changes we have today leave the Bible in the hands of many untrained interpreters who are trusted by many followers because of the respect they hold. To ask such a community to base their contemporary understanding on the historical meaning is to ask for the impossible.

So with the current changes, biblical scholars should try to understand communities as they face them rather than ask them to base their understanding on historical meanings when they do not have the tools to retrieve these meanings. Scholz (2005, 67) argues, and I agree, that "Biblical Scholars cannot remain disconnected from the changes in the world." Like other scholars, I hold the view that keeping the historical meaning of the text as the yardstick for meaningful dialogue concerning questions in contemporary society rather than laying emphasis on the impact of the text and interpretation in society today denies the very problems for which this book was written. Such an approach leaves exclusive historical critics/interpreters in a position of dominance and power (Jonker 2010,

55). This makes it difficult for one to expose the challenge of literalistic biblical interpretation in Africa today. In turn, it creates a bigger problem for biblical scholars. I would rather argue that biblical scholars must adopt the “multidimensional approach to biblical interpretation [that] can help us escape the looming dangers of exclusivity in our global exegetical endeavors ... advocating the adoption of another attitude in biblical interpretation, [one] of communality” (Jonker 2010, 54).

It should be understood that this book does not break but transcends the conventional methods of doing biblical studies and I do not claim that the book answers the whole paradox of the literalistic use of the Bible in contemporary Africa. However, in the book, I bring the readers to the scene of the LRA members who, without any biblical training, find and use the text in ways that enable them to commit violence. I have noted that while their interpretation makes sense, it is detrimental to society. It should be noted that these, like many other literalistic readers, are not bothered by the historical meaning of the text. Yet the way they read and interpret the text has consequences for the communities within which they do this. To echo the words of Musa Dube (2012, 25), biblical studies should also utilize social science-based fieldwork methods, given that it is a text that is read in the social contexts and informs the attitudes and practices of individuals and communities. Therefore, “when contextual authenticity is the norm, it is inevitable that interpretive contextuality (i.e., who I am) and didactic contextuality (i.e., for whom I am interpreting) should coincide” (Jonker 2010, 54; see also Mugambi 2003, 9–12).

Therefore, the ethical model presented in the book (pp. 166–170), puts into consideration contextual authenticity as a critical aspect of biblical interpretation in Africa. It should be understood as one that springs from field studies as just one of the many other proposed solutions to several hermeneutical quandaries apposite to theology (Frampton 2006, 4).

As a student of the Bible, I do acknowledge the place and need for the historical-critical approach; however, I also remain concerned when one decides to present it as the only yardstick for authentic biblical interpretation. We are faced with many literalistic interpretations on the continent of Africa by mostly laity. These interpretations have the potential to cause violence, such as is seen with the Lord’s Resistance Army, presented in the book. It is my considered opinion that there is a need to offer alternative accessible tools by which any interpreter can measure the viability of their interpretation. It is on this basis and belief that I propose the gender-sensitive ethical model for biblical interpretation.

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