

Book Review: *Reading Jeremiah in Africa: Biblical Essays in Sociopolitical Imagination.*

Katho, Bungishabaku. 2021. *Reading Jeremiah in Africa: Biblical Essays in Sociopolitical Imagination*. Carlisle: HippoBooks. xiii, 217 pp. ISBN: 978-1-83973-213-3. Approx. 355 ZAR (15.99 GBP). Paperback.

Bungishabaku Katho has a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He is Professor of Old Testament Studies at the Université Shalom de Bunia, DRC, where he also serves as Director of Postgraduate Studies for the School of Theology. Additionally, he is a Senior Researcher at the Centre de Recherche Multidisciplinaire pour le Développement de Bunia (CRMD Bunia). Dr. Katho is the Founder and Executive Director of the Jeremiah Center for Faith and Society, and he has written and presented extensively on the book of Jeremiah, including a commentary in French in the *Commentaires Bibliques Contemporains* series.

Katho's *Reading Jeremiah in Africa* is an uninhibited study of the book of Jeremiah from the perspective of one who witnesses the struggles and suffering of his contemporaries. Katho's main concern in these essays is to show how the book of Jeremiah is relevant to the African people. To accomplish his goal, he advocates a reading of the text that takes into account the "experiences and struggles" (p. 2) of the African peoples.

Using ten selected passages from the book of Jeremiah, he draws parallels between the predicaments of the people of Judah and the complex political and economic situation of contemporary Africa. Thus, reading Jeremiah through the prism of African realities proves to be a constructive approach that not only sets this book apart from Western interpretations but also departs from a merely spiritual understanding of it. Katho succeeds in doing this without falling into the trap of theological *ghetoism*. His interpretive task is not only informed by the socio-political realities of Africa but it is based on an honest and robust analysis of the text. Although Katho does not clearly state this in the book, the discerning reader understands that his contextual approach is based on traditional evangelical exegesis, i.e., the historical-grammatical method. This shows his respect for the meaning intended by the biblical author, which he seeks to establish before drawing his own conclusions.

Each one of the ten chapters highlights specific issues faced by Africans, "including poverty, war, injustice, corruption, idolatry, abuse of power, and the crisis of refugees and exile [sic]" (p. 2). While chapters 1–7 paint a bleak picture of the situation in Africa, chapters 8–10 offer hope for an Africa that is rising from the ashes by God's mercy and sovereignty.

In the opening chapter, Katho reflects on Jeremiah's call as a prophet (Jer 1:1–19). The background of that call is the poor leadership of Judah and the imminent judgment of God on his rebellious people. It is under such circumstances that God raised Jeremiah. He warned his servant that his mission would be unpleasant and perilous. However, God reassures him that he will protect him. In light of the African situation, Katho hopes for a prophetic ministry based on the model of Jeremiah when he observes that "each nation needs its own Jeremiah, someone called by God to remain faithful despite all the hardships arising from living under bad leadership, someone who can shine in the darkness as a reminder to the establishment

that there is an ultimate judge of the universe” (p. 12). The questions he asks at the end of the chapter show that the rampant prophetic ministries in Africa today are set on another course. Unfortunately, Katho does not provide any answers to those questions. African cities are filled with entertainers, charlatans, and magicians who call themselves prophets. These false prophets are causing serious damage to the church in Africa (p. 17). They outnumber true prophets such as those mentioned by Katho (pp. 20–21). True prophets are not those who wield the title but those who demonstrate through their character, lifestyle, and message that they are true prophets of Yahweh. Africa needs more of those.

Chapter 2 deals with the apostasy of Judah (Jer 2:4–8). The people of Judah have failed to connect with their history. Their spiritual amnesia and the failure of their leaders (religious, political, and intellectual) to address the spiritual bankruptcy of the nation had caused them to abandon the Lord their God. As a result, disaster befell them. According to Katho, Africans must learn from the mistakes of the people of Judah. Our leaders too have the responsibility to diagnose and address the roots of Africa’s evils, some of which lie in our colonial past, and others in our current spiritual confusion. There is no gain in turning away from God. When Africans and their leaders get involved in occultism and other satanic practices, they end up bringing destruction to themselves.

The situation evoked in chapter 2 is further analyzed in chapter 3 (Jer 4:19–22). The people of Judah have turned away from God, and the result is chaos and anarchy. Jeremiah is appalled by the lack of concern of the people and their leaders. His warnings and efforts to draw attention to the looming disaster are to no avail. His heart is broken by this metastatic apathy. As a true prophet, he carries the burden of his compatriots and suffers in their place. In this respect, the prophet Jeremiah is a model for the church in Africa. Our continent is languishing and crumbling under the weight of,

inter alia, corruption, social injustice, and bad governance which lead to wars, poverty, and massive displacement of populations. Like him, “we must not keep silent in the face of injustice” (p. 63). Some had the courage of Jeremiah and paid for it with their lives, while others went into exile in order to save their lives. Africa needs more “groaning prophets” to stir the minds and hearts of her sons and daughters. For Katho, the detachment of many pastors and church leaders from political and social issues is antithetical to their call to serve God. There is no room for neutrality.

The people’s economic poverty is the subject of chapter 4 (Jer 5:1–6). The main argument developed by Katho in this chapter is that material poverty begets spiritual poverty. The main concern of the poor of Judah was survival, and that concern overshadowed their desire to please God. Just as Jeremiah had compassion for the poor of his time, the church in Africa must take action in favor of poor people. We must learn to develop empathy for the poor. Through first-hand testimonies, Katho encourages the reader to engage with people and know their stories. In reflecting on the connection between poverty, spirituality, and the knowledge of God, Katho seems to admit, at least at first, that what is going on in Judah is quite different from the situation in Africa. Whereas poverty is an obstacle to spiritual growth in Judah, he opines that in Africa poverty seems to be an opportunity for many to draw near to God. However, for Katho, the number of Christians does not necessarily indicate their quality. Despite the growing number of Christians in Africa, the impact of Christianity on the continent remains very minimal. The reason, Katho argues, is that the church has more often than not been content to preach the Word and has not been concerned with economic and social issues. Katho then concludes by stating that “poverty and severe suffering are indeed hindrances to faith and proper knowledge of Yahweh” (p. 79). Poverty and oppression do indeed have the potential of distorting people’s view of God and impeding true worship. Following

Jean-Marc Éla (2005, 134), Katho suggests a reform in the structure of the church in Africa to reflect the realities of African communities. In other words, the church must become a place for reflection, sharing experiences, productive debate, and solidarity.

Chapter 5 paints a picture of a disintegrated society (Jer 9:2–9). The ingredients of the collapsing Judean community are identified as disloyalty toward God and toward one another, hypocrisy, falsehood, wicked and violent rhetoric, and the oppression of the poor and weak by the rich and powerful. These same evils are found in most African countries as they are in other parts of the world. However, the tragedy is when we can no longer identify the difference between Christians and non-Christians. For Katho, the church in Africa has failed to instill godly virtues in its members and to prepare them to take up their responsibility within the communities they belong to.

Chapters 6 and 7 are a critique of Judah's leadership (Jer 9:23–24 and 22:13–19). In the two passages, the prophet Jeremiah criticizes the Judean leaders for their misuse and abuse of three divine blessings, namely, wisdom, power, and wealth. When leaders rely on these to govern, the result is bankruptcy. Good governance in Africa is not a matter of democracy, let alone the holding of regular elections. "Our problem," argues Katho, "is the wickedness of our leadership, a leadership that neither fears God nor understands its duty as that of leading citizens under a higher and greater authority" (p. 135).

Examples of abuse of power, manipulation, embezzlement, mismanagement, clientelism, and similar evils, abound in Africa. Those who engage in these practices end up miserable, as demonstrated by the recent history of our continent. Thankfully Africa has produced a few good leaders whose examples can inspire others. Katho proceeds to encourage leaders to use their influence and their God-given resources for the good

of their people. The joke that "in a political speech, only the grammar is right," must be disproved by the practice of justice, truth, and compassion. In other words, the search for the improvement of the living conditions of populations must be the main concern of our leaders.

The last three chapters of the book focus on the rebuilding of Judah after the crises. Chapter 8 marks the beginning of a new era after the political demise of Judah and its leaders (Jer 24:4–7). Yahweh's direct intervention makes it possible to activate a new life. This is a message of hope for Africa, for despite the multi-layered social, political, and economic crises, and the endemic corruption that our continent faces, there is hope beyond the present state of despair. It is the task of the church to articulate that message of hope.

In chapter 9, the prophet Jeremiah calls for a salutary change of attitude (Jer 29:4–9). The people in exile are called to thrive in Babylon, their place of servitude. In other words, they were to transform a land of oppression into a land of opportunity. For Katho, the implications of this for Africa are that new beginnings are always possible. We need to reconsider our history, make peace with our traumatic past, and refuse to listen to the merchants of illusion, be they religious or political. Thus, this passage speaks to the many Africans who are living as exiles in their own countries, prisoners of political and economic systems designed to exclude them from progress and prosperity. The key word for them is to seek the *shalom* of the place where God has placed them.

The last chapter of the book also speaks of God's unilateral decision to create a new community under a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34). The chapter speaks of the democratization of the knowledge of God and the inscription of the divine law in people's hearts. For Katho, the essential trait of this new community is forgiveness. The church must therefore model forgiveness as a way of life and thus illustrate the principles and

values laid out in the Bible. When the church in Africa lives according to the terms of God's word, she becomes an agent of transformation of society. On a continent where negative ethnicity and tribalism are exploited by unscrupulous politicians and religious leaders, the church is called to become a safe haven as she demonstrates that the restoration of our land stems from people's reconciliation with God and with one another. We long for the day when the words of the psalmist will reflect the experience of the peoples of Africa, a day where "love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Ps 85:10 NIV).

Turning to the evaluation now, it is hard not to agree with Katho's analysis of the social, political, and economic situation on the African continent. His criticisms of the clergy and the church, of the political establishment, and of the social *status quo* are well-founded, and the passages selected to support his arguments are used with accuracy and honesty. Despite this positive assessment, a few critical remarks are in order. First, the form, second, the methodology, and third, the content.

There are two observations that relate to the form and structure of the book. The first has to do with the introduction. In the introduction to the book, Katho provides summaries of each of the ten chapters. These summaries are very helpful as they give glimpses of what to expect in each chapter. Unfortunately, these summaries are merely copy and paste of parts of the conclusion of each chapter. It would have been more effective to present the summaries in such a way as to avoid such repetition. The second observation regarding the form and structure is the absence of a conclusion to the book. It is unfortunate that Katho did not provide the reader with the gist of his message nor encourage young scholars towards new research in the area of socio-political interpretation of the Scriptures.

In relation to the methodology, a few comments are needed. According to the subtitle, the author wants the essays contained in his book to be

understood from the perspective of "Socio-political Imagination." In his view, "biblical interpretation in Africa must embrace public political responsibility and seek justice and well-being for all in a continent that is facing challenges on many levels" (p. 1). Following this affirmation, Katho outlines his method which consists in using proverbs and considering the struggles of the African peoples. Consequently, according to the author's statement of purpose, one assumes that the book is meant to offer a critical evaluation of the realities of Africa in light of the book of Jeremiah, sustained by a pragmatic and liberationist perspective. Such a process would involve: 1) identifying and criticizing a behavior or practice, 2) examining a biblical text and highlighting biblical principles based on exegesis, and 3) calling for the application of the discovered principles.

Unfortunately, as one reads the chapters, it is difficult to follow the coherence of the approach advocated at the beginning of the book. While Katho follows these steps in some chapters, in others he does not. So, if one is expecting to find an identical structure running through the ten chapters, one would be disappointed. It would have been helpful if Katho clearly outlined his approach in the introduction and showed how to apply it. Katho's focus on the praxis is well taken. However, should Africans' worldview(s) and belief systems not constitute a major element in interpreting Jeremiah? In other words, would we not run the risk of treating only the symptoms without getting to the root of the problem?

While I agree with Katho's overall analysis of Jeremiah in connection with Africa, I beg to disagree with him on the issue of poverty and the knowledge of God. In his comments on the fifth chapter of Jeremiah (see chapter 4), Katho writes: "Poverty and severe suffering are indeed hindrances to faith and proper knowledge of Yahweh" (p. 79). Is this so? Does poverty necessarily lead to a deficient knowledge of God? Does suffering veil God's ways to humankind and obscure people's attempts to know God?

If these questions are answered in the affirmative, then, those who preach the health and wealth gospel are absolutely right, for they preach that poverty and suffering are not the portion of God's children; that is, believers in Christ. The underpinning of this prosperity theology is that financial and material blessings and physical well-being belong to those who have faith in God, and that it is God's will to prosper those who trust him. Thus, the link between faith (knowledge of God) and well-being and wealth is strongly emphasized by the champions of the prosperity gospel in such a way that those who suffer or lack resources are considered to be spiritually unfit or to be imperfect in their knowledge of God. As we ask ourselves if poverty and suffering are indeed "hindrances to faith and proper knowledge of Yahweh" (p. 79), we must also ask: Is financial, material, and physical wealth a driving force to a proper knowledge of God?

We learn from the prophetic literature, Jeremiah included, that the prosperity of Israel and Judah in most parts of the eighth-century BC did not draw them closer to Yahweh. The richer they grew, the greedier they became. They indulged themselves in evil practices, injustice, and corruption, and betrayed Yahweh, the source of their prosperity (Isa 1:10–23; 5:8–25; Amos 4:1; 5:7–15, 24; see Deut 8:1–20).

In the book of Psalms, we meet the faithful crying out to Yahweh for help. Their cries for help are recorded in prayers known as Psalms of Lament. In those psalms, the *hasidim* (faithful) and the *tsadiqim* (righteous) are portrayed as people who trust Yahweh, love and fear him, and keep his commandments (Pss 3–5, 10, 12–13, 17, 22, 25, 35, 44, 54–57, 60, 74, 79–80, 88–89, 109).

They struggled at the sight of the prosperity of the wicked and the ungodly (Pss 37, 73) but persisted in their faith often without the certainty that Yahweh would deliver them and change their conditions. Their prayers bear the marks of hardship, betrayal, sickness, lack of resources, humiliation,

and defeat. Nevertheless, their laments are the strongest testimony to their faith in a God who shattered their expectations but in whom they continued to trust.

Job was a man who experienced both sides of the issue at hand. He was a wealthy man and enjoyed personal well-being until the day everything was gone, and he became poor and sick (Job 1–3). His friends blamed his new situation on his sins and his misunderstanding of God's ways. Job fought back tooth and nail and appealed to the highest court. However, when God finally appeared and confronted him, Job acknowledged his foolishness: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted." When the Lord asked him: "Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?" Job replied: "Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:1–3 NIV). In his days of wealth and health, as well as during the ordeal of poverty and sickness that struck him, Job remained faithful to God. He denied the lies of Satan that Job only served God for his own benefit and therefore would deny him if his wealth and health were taken away from him. In light of the end of Job's story, it can be said with confidence that Job's knowledge of God grew deeper and stronger through his ordeal.

From a biblical theological perspective, I am compelled to disagree with Katho's statement that "poverty and severe suffering are indeed hindrances to faith and proper knowledge of Yahweh" (p. 79). As the cases of the psalmists and Job demonstrate, poverty or suffering can be ways to encounter God and know him in ways that would be otherwise improbable. On the other hand, success and wealth are not proof of a proper knowledge of God as the example of the Israelites of the eighth-century BC attests.

Overall, *Reading Jeremiah in Africa* is an innovation in African evangelical interpretation of the Bible. From that perspective, this book is a significant step away from the spiritual-only interpretation of Scriptures

we are accustomed to. In an environment that is often resistant to new ideas, the author has the merit of clearing a field that was previously left to scholars from other traditions. Africa is facing multiple challenges and the time for imposing a unidirectional reading of the Scriptures is over. New and different approaches to reading the Scriptures must be welcomed as we strive to uphold the authority of God's word. Katho has managed to remain faithful to the Scriptures and to preserve the authority of the biblical text so dear to Evangelicals. For that, he deserves my praise.

Works Cited

- Éla, Jean-Marc. 2005. *African Cry*. Translated by Robert J. Barr. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- . 2009. *My Faith as an African*. Translated by John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

Yacouba Sanon¹
Alliance Theological Seminary (FATEAC), Abidjan
yacouba.sanon@langham.org

1 Dr. Yacouba Sanon is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew at the Alliance Theological Seminary in Abidjan (FATEAC), at Université de l'Alliance Chrétienne d'Abidjan (UACA). He also serves as the Head of the Biblical Studies Department at the Seminary. He earned his Ph.D. in Theological Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, USA. He is the current Chairman of the Board and General Editor of the Africa Bible Commentary. He is also Regional Coordinator for the Langham Literature for Francophone Africa. His areas of specialization and interests include lament theology, suffering and faith, African spirituality, biblical anthropology, and African cultures.