

Author's Response: Reading Jeremiah in Africa: Biblical Essays in Sociopolitical Imagination.

The best way to begin my response to Yacouba Sanon's review of my book, *Reading Jeremiah in Africa: Biblical Essays in Sociopolitical Imagination*, is to thank him for his careful critique. He pointed out the need to address certain issues with greater care, particularly the importance of the African worldview and belief systems in biblical interpretation. The review also affords me an opportunity to clarify the hermeneutical logic behind my reading of the Bible, and in this way, to respond to Michael Blythe's (2022, 98–100) review published in *Transform Journal*, which says that I fell short of providing a uniquely African hermeneutic.

In 2002, I was finishing my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Natal, (now KwaZulu-Natal), after having studied for almost five years at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), now Africa International University (AIU). At one point during my studies in South Africa, NEGST invited me to spend time with the faculty, to explain how my years of study at NEGST were helping me now in my Ph.D. program, and the differences that I perceived between the two schools. I explained that at NEGST I learned to do sound exegesis but with very little consideration for the African context, despite the motto of the school: "A school in the heart of Africa with Africa on its heart." However, in the School of Theology at the University of Natal, I was facing the challenge of too much context and

too little exegesis in biblical interpretation. I was trying to draw from these two very different academic experiences to create my own hermeneutic. My aim was to address these two contrasting weaknesses by setting up an ongoing conversation between the sacred text and my African context. The keywords here are *ongoing conversation*, which I aim to be a part of throughout my reading of the Bible. This is what I tried to do in my book. How to interpret the Bible better, for the sake of the academy, the church, and the larger audience, is a constant challenge, not only for me but for all those who see the need for a fresh alternative to the dominant Western hermeneutic, which we have embraced as the only way to read the Bible.

Generally, most Western biblical studies pay scant attention to the socioeconomic, ethical, and spiritual challenges of the reader. For the Book of Jeremiah, for example, most scholarly attention during the last fifty years has been on the composition of the book, the relation of the Masoretic Text to the Septuagint, the Deuteronomistic edition, the feminist imagery, and similar matters. The primary audience of such scholars is their colleagues and students in the academy, who are comfortable with this complex language and highly academic focus. Given these priorities, their interpretations fail to confront the crises of their age and ignore the voices from the church, other parts of the world, and ordinary readers.

The first time I experienced this challenge was in November 2014, during my first participation in a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), in San Diego, California. I found myself in a very interesting group with three well-known North American scholars, Walter Brueggemann, Ellen Davis, and Luke Timothy Johnson. As the date for the meeting drew near, I realized that some of the friends who had invited me grew increasingly apprehensive about how my paper would be received by the audience. One of them kept warning me that SBL scholars are not friendly and that I must therefore take great care when preparing and

presenting my paper. At first, I did not understand exactly what that meant, since I had already presented more than ten papers at international conferences and published several articles on the Book of Jeremiah. I finally concluded that she meant it as a warning that a presenter from Africa might not meet the high standards of an American audience with its Jeremiah specialists. The fear was probably that I might present a paper that would be unacceptable to those who had come to listen to some of the most accomplished scholars in the field. Like the draw for the football teams going to the final tournament, I had unfortunately been consigned to a tough group. Yet, my paper was trying to demonstrate that many of those Western scholars, who were going to listen to me in that conference, do sometimes miss the mark in what I call the first-world reading of the Bible, which has unfortunately become a universal way of reading the Bible.

My paper was very well received, and a friend who was on the conference organizing committee told me later that evening that my presentation was beyond his expectation. That kind of appreciation was another proof to me that most of my friends were not very comfortable with what I was going to present. This is what encouraged me to continue with this reflection, and the revised version of that paper became the fourth chapter of this book. Two of the three scholars in my team that day were happy to provide positive recommendations for my book.

In a forthcoming book, I also hope to continue developing this hermeneutic. The guiding principle of my reading of the Bible remains the fact that the consequence of God's incarnation is that his Word, the Bible, is connected to its environment at all levels. When God reveals himself, he speaks and acts in a way that he makes himself understood; that is, in the language of those to whom he reveals himself. The hermeneutical task, therefore, consists in hearing this Word of Scripture and making it heard in these different contexts, despite its historical distance. As the living Word

of God, the biblical text must challenge the believing interpreter and the community to which they belong, in their daily life and in their own reality. From my African perspective, it is clear that the book of Jeremiah is written in the context of the struggle for the liberation of the suffering people, a liberation that is both spiritual and physical, individual and collective. Therefore, I read Jeremiah in the contexts of disempowerment, failed leadership, war, famine, displacement, injustice, and poverty, to name a few. Said differently, I read Jeremiah from below, from the perspective of a continent in need of liberation. As I put it in a recent essay (2021, 566–578), I read Jeremiah in *subaltern* context. I agree with Sanon that in that conversation, there is a need to take into account the contribution of the African worldview and belief systems to point the way to the liberation of the continent through a sound biblical interpretation.

Works Cited

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