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Knut Holter

Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa

Acton Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya, 2008. pb, pp. 134.

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Reviewed by John Worgul

Knut Holter (Dr. theol.) is Prorector for Research and Professor of Old Testament Studies at MHS – School of Mission and Theology in Stravanger, Norway and Extraordinary Professor at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Amongst other academic involvements he is the editor of the paper form of the *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* (1996-2006) and its electronic form *BOTSA Electronic Forum* from 2006 to date.

Holter's *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* opens a window into the world of African Old Testament scholarship for typical westerners such as myself who have had little to no exposure to such work. He invites us to view Africa through two texts, a pair of glasses as it were. One lens is the story of Moses marrying the Cushite (Numbers 12) and the other lens is Jeremiah's question, "Can a Cushite change his skin ..." (Jeremiah 13:23). Historically in the West, the prevailing attitude, either consciously or unconsciously, was that Moses "married down" and Jeremiah's rhetorical question assumes a "no" with an implicit rejection of black skin. Holter emphatically shows that within the context of the Old Testament itself, Moses' Cushite was beautiful in comparison to Miriam's snow-white leprosy, and that there is no reason at all why a Cushite should change his skin. With this set of lenses, Holter opens up to us African Old Testament scholarship in its own context, addressing its own concerns.

But what is the context of African Old Testament scholarship? Certainly it is an ecclesial context, a context that the West has largely abandoned since the Enlightenment (p. 12). For Africa, her ecclesial context has both positive and negative aspects. Positively, Old Testament scholarship has expanded with the dramatic growth of the church in the 20th Century. Negatively, the missionary movement injected colonialism into the culture, a colonialism that African scholars have been trying to extricate themselves from. Holter's book chronicles this distinctly African endeavor.

First of all, Holter describes how the Old Testament had been used in Africa to "interpret" Africa (Chapter 2). Originally, this was a negative enterprise in that the Old Testament became a "tool," so to speak, of the

colonists who sought vindication for their presence in Africa; they considered themselves the Israelites, and the indigenous population the Canaanites. However, Holter provides examples of contemporary African exegetes who utilize the Old Testament in their quest to understand post-colonial Africa. He categorizes these scholars under four heads: Inculturation, Liberation, Reconstruction, and Translation.

Inculturation is a term that is used to explore the mutual interaction between a certain culture and the Old Testament. Examples include scholars who compare Levitical and Nigerian (Ibibio) sacrifice, Old Testament prophetism and certain Bantu prophetic movements, Old Testament cosmology and the contemporary Kenyan ecological crisis, and Old Testament burial practices with Malagasy rites such as *famadihana* (turning of the dead). The hypothesis is that there is a fundamental mutuality between the Old Testament and African cultures so as to show how the Old Testament naturally speaks into and illuminates African culture. But Inculturation, it seems, can degenerate into a romantic longing for pre-colonial village “ideal” that no longer exists, at least not in the pristine form of the past.

Liberation refers to the use of the Old Testament texts for the purpose of undermining oppressive social and economic structures in play today in Africa. Holter cites South African scholar Itumeleng Mosala who has come to the conclusion that most of what we have in the Old Testament comes from the perspective of the ancient Israelite ruling class, and must be viewed with suspicion. Positively, he sees parallels with the struggles of the oppressed in biblical times with the contemporary African scene that work to expose oppressive systems.

The third category is “Reconstruction,” a term “used to describe a theology or hermeneutics ... that aims to contribute to the social reconstruction of post-colonial, post-apartheid and post-cold war Africa” (p. 26). The leading proponent of this perspective is the Kenyan Jesse N. K. Mugambi, who encourages Africa to go beyond “inculturation” and “liberation” in search of a new paradigm for the future. He proposes Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls to Moses and liberation, for it is now time for Africans to mobilize their resources and take into their own hands the reconstruction of their fallen infrastructures. Holter’s last category is that of Translation. Much work is being done in translating the Old Testament into tribal languages and into critical analysis of this process so as to produce translations that are true to the Hebrew text but also sensitive to African cultures.

Musing over the above categories of text speaking into context, Holter concludes chapter two with three questions. First is the ethical question of whether this process is even “good”? So much of what has happened since the Europeans came with their Bibles is bad, and this raises the question of whether the texts are good for Africa. What are the ethical implications of one’s hermeneutic? Second, to what academic discipline does this process

text and context belong, African studies or Old Testament studies? Finally, there is the question of whether it is possible to discern a chronological development of Old Testament scholarship in the African context. Holter agrees with Justin Ukpong (Nigeria) who outlines this development in three stages: 1) early reactive phase (1930s-1970s) which legitimized African religion through comparative studies, 2) reactive-proactive phase (1970s-1990s) “which more clearly made use of the African context as a resource for biblical interpretation,” and 3) proactive phase (1990s) “which makes the African context the explicit subject of biblical interpretation” (p. 33). This outline requires the further question of whether Old Testament studies can be done apart from context at all, whether it is the higher critical western context or the African context.

In chapter three Holter reverses the perspective of chapter two by placing the Old Testament as the object of investigation by Africans (seeing the text through African eyes), rather than placing Africa as the object of investigation by the text (seeing Africa through the lens of the text, p. 39). This perspective is relatively new, for it has only been recently that the academic community would even considered that Africa had something to contribute to biblical studies, with exceptions of W. R. Smith and J. G. Frazer (p. 36f.). Contemporary examples include Aloo O. Mojola who makes use of a Chagga (Tanzania) purification ritual to shed light on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), and Johnson M. Kimuhu who demonstrates how Kikuyu dietary laws can help us understand Leviticus 11. Various scholars have examined Hebrew Wisdom literature in light of African proverbs (Laurent Naré, Madipoane Masenya, and Lechion Peter Kimilike). Anastasia Boniface-Malle demonstrates how Tanzanian lament songs and prayers illuminate the laments of the Psalter. Holter concludes the chapter by stating that this perspective of seeing the text through African eyes “...seems less exposed to ideologically and politically biased interpretations...” (p. 50) from the colonial era, but is susceptible to questionable methodology “...based on [the scholar’s] own memory or on rather unsystematic claims” (p. 51).

The most interesting part of the book is chapter four where Holter traces “Africa” in the Old Testament. (Of course the term “Africa” is problematic in that it is a modern cartographic and political idea that was foreign to ancient times.) Statistically, Egypt is referred to 680 times, and Cush (located between first and sixth cataracts of the Nile) 56 times, dominating biblical geographical references, but Put (Libya? Somalia?), Lubim (Libya?) and Pathros (Upper Egypt?) are most probably located in Africa. In a nutshell, the western world tends to be fascinated with Egypt, associating it more with the Middle East, and to marginalize Cush and with it all of black Africa. David Tuesday Adamo and Philip Lokel argue that if these biblical references are studied in their ancient contexts, we find that Africa naturally fits into the ancient biblical history from the very beginning. The truth about Egypt is that it was a “...

bridge - of people, goods, and cultural influence - between her southern and eastern neighbors in Old Testament times” (p. 80).

The last chapter concludes with a re-visit of the three stages of the development of the three stages of African Old Testament scholarship discussed above in chapter 2 with an emphasis on the “breakthrough” of the 1980s and 90s. This breakthrough is characterized by growth in educational institutions, dissertations, and publishing. There are many challenges, but Holter claims that “the general attitude among African scholars is not to reject traditional (that is western) Old Testament scholarship, but rather to enter this ‘global’ guild and participate in its scholarly discourse, conscious though, about its traditionally non-African contextuality” (p. 109).

It is obvious that Holter is intimate with Africa, its history, and its scholarship in the field of Old Testament. He incorporates a vast amount of material ranging across the whole spectrum of ecclesial affiliation throughout the countries and cultures of Africa. The book therefore is not written from a specifically evangelical point of view. Though short, the book is dense and not an easy read. However, he performs an invaluable, and perhaps a unique, service in bringing Africa to the attention of the traditionally western discipline of Old Testament scholarship.

If theological colleges, universities and specialists in the Old Testament can find a copy of this book (it is out of print and not yet among the publisher's digital publications) it would be a useful addition to their library.