



Aethiopia 20 (2017)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

MAIJA PRIESS, Universität Hamburg

Review

KEON-SANG AN, *An Ethiopian Reading of the Bible. Biblical Interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church*

Aethiopia 20 (2017), 313–314

ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

Reviews

used as an important reference for historical research on various themes in the period under discussion.

Solomon Gebreyes, Universität Hamburg

KEON-SANG AN, *An Ethiopian Reading of the Bible. Biblical Interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church*, Foreword by William A. Dyrness, Preface by Joel B. Green (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2016). 258 pp. Price: £16.50. ISBN: 978-0-227-17591-0. American Society of Missiology Monograph Series, 25 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015). 240 pp. Price: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1-4982-2069-9.

Keon-Sang An is Assistant Professor of Bible and Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary and pastor of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Korea. He previously served as a missionary in Eritrea and Ethiopia, working with Serving In Mission and the Global Mission Society. He taught theology and missiology at Kale Heywet Ministry Training Centre in Asmara, and later at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa.

The aim of this book is given as follows: 'The thesis of this monograph is that tradition and context significantly influence biblical interpretation and that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) provides a compelling historical example of contextual reading of the Bible' (p. 1). The book is divided into five chapters: (1) 'Contextual Theology'; (2) 'Contextual Reading of the Bible'; (3) 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church: Tradition and Contextualization'; (4) 'Interpretive Tradition of the EOTC: The *Andemta* Commentary'; (5) 'Biblical Interpretation in the Preaching of the EOTC'. This is followed by a Conclusion and a Bibliography of eight pages (some of the names of the authors are not quoted correctly or are missing).

In the introductory part, An states that the interpretation of the biblical texts is always both contextual and theological, influenced by the historical background of the churches and their members. He himself is an example of this fact: a Korean theology teacher delivering Western theology to Ethiopian students. It was, of course, difficult for his students to apply unknown concepts in their religious life. Therefore, An encouraged them to construct their own theology based on Ethiopian orthodox commentary called *andamta*.

Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 9–84) are an extensive study of the history and development of international theology and of different interpretative traditions concerning the Bible. An claims that it is impossible to read any text

outside of one's particular context and that no one can approach a religious text without his/her own theological presuppositions coming into play. Even the claim that historical criticism objectively treats the biblical texts as just historical documents is not context-free.

In Chapter 3 the book examines the interplay between tradition and context in biblical interpretation and contributes to current biblical scholarship worldwide. On the one hand, statements about the fact that the EOTC has developed and maintained its own ecclesiastic tradition from earliest years of the Christian Church and that it has its own distinctive way of reading and interpreting the Bible appear several times. On the other hand, An underlines the crucial influence on Ethiopian Bible studies of the biblical interpretations of both the Antiochian school (with its emphasis on historical context) and the Alexandrian school (with its mainly allegorical approach). Despite these contradictory statements, An's work offers a historical approach and a biblical framework for the theological methods of the twenty-first century.

In Chapter 4 he demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretive tradition of *andəmta* commentary influenced as it is by the creative incorporation of distinctive interpretive traditions. Although it is difficult to identify the exact history of its formation, An states that 'solid historical evidence indicates that the *andəmta* commentary started in the Axumite Kingdom' (p. 122), but no literary source is given to support this statement.

The most interesting part of the book is Chapter 5 where An analyses the hermeneutics of several examples of biblical interpretation with the help of eight recent sermons (selected out of the eighty he had collected) giving an insight into how the EOTC both follows its tradition and distinguishes itself from other Christian traditions present in Ethiopia. With an emphasis on the contemporary relevance and interpretative strategies that find significance in the present rather than in the original setting, the preachers are orientated towards narration and seek out interpretative symbols or particular characters.

During the preparations of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative for its major consultation in Addis Abäba in October 2016, this book was recommended by the organizers to be studied beforehand by all participants. Furthermore, this book is useful to all those interested in Ethiopian contextual theology and in biblical interpretation in both the past and the present. The book contributes to worldwide biblical scholarship with its new openness by giving and receiving new approaches for biblical research.

Maija Priess, Universität Hamburg