

Episode 174 Reading Scripture in Africa

with Liz Mburu

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Liz Mburu

Hi, my name is Liz Mburu. I work with Langham Literature as the Regional Coordinator for Africa. I also teach at Africa International University. My field is New Testament.

David Capes

Dr. Liz Mburu. Good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Liz Mburu

Thank you, David. It's great to be here.

David Capes

We're so glad you've been resident with us for a few weeks now.

Liz Mburu

Yes, yes, it's been great. I've had a really good, good time. The staff are amazing. The resources are just amazing, as well. So, it's been wonderful. Thank you.

David Capes

We're going to be talking about African reading of scriptures, and what's called hermeneutics, which is the science of interpretation. But before we do that, I want to know who is Liz Mburu?

Liz Mburu

Oh, that's an interesting question. Who am I? Well, I am a Kenyan, born and brought up in Nairobi. I spent most of my years there and I currently live in Nairobi, Kenya. I'm just here for this short time. I spent a few years in the United States, ten years in seminary. So in 2003, I came and did my M.Th at what is now Gordon Conwell University. And then I did my PhD at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. That was in 2008. I taught a little bit at Montreat. College and then I went back home.

That's who I am. I'm currently living and residing in Nairobi, and I have three adult children.

David Capes

You work with the Committee on Biblical Translation as well. Your first visit here was for work with that committee a few years ago. That was during COVID. But the Committee on Biblical Translation is responsible for the moving forward of the New International Version. Right?

Liz Mburu

Exactly. Yes.

David Capes

All right. We're going to be talking today about African hermeneutics. That's a big word which is the science of interpretation. You know, people think that the Bible means what it means, and they don't realize that we actually derive meaning to some degree from the cultures that we come from. That we come to the texts with some preexisting ideas. *Rudolf Bultmann* called that pre-understanding. You have a pre-understanding about things and as we read sometimes it seems to affirm what we believe or challenge what we believe. But if we are coming from Africa, which is a different continent, a different way of thinking about the world than the Western view, it does change interpretation doesn't it?

Liz Mburu

It does though we don't think that we are different in Africa. But I know what you mean.

David Capes

When we get together with African sisters and brothers and we read Scripture, we realize we're seeing things differently.

Liz Mburu

A little bit differently. Can I tell you a story just to show how different our thinking might be? This is a story about the tortoise and the hare. I loved this story growing up. And I think there is a similar story in the West, maybe one of Aesop's Fables. But this might be a little bit of a different twist. So tortoise challenges hare to a race. And of course, we all know that tortoise is not going to win because hare is fast, and tortoise is slow. And it's obvious, but tortoise has a plan. Tortoise decides to call all his relatives. They're the same size, same color, the ones that look like him. He calls them for a meeting and ask them on the day of the race to hide at strategic points along the course of the race. And then at the moment, when hare would round a corner, the tortoise relative would jump out. And they would keep jumping out so that all he could see is that tortoise is always ahead of him. At the end of the day, tortoise wins. I like to ask people, what do you think about this story? Do you think tortoise was deceptive? Just based on your worldview. David, can you tell me?

David Capes

Yes, I will say that's deceptive.

Liz Mburu

Yes, but as an African, I read this from an honor-shame context. And so for me, this is not about deception. And for many Africans, this is not about deception. This is about honor, preserving the honor of your family. Because you cannot allow your family to experience shame in the community. And so, all tortoise is doing is preserving the honor of his family. What some might call trickery, we call it being shrewd. And it's also about unity, because it shows how a family can be united against a common enemy or a common force that's coming against it. And so, from an African worldview, reading that story, has a very different meaning than reading it from your, western perspective.

David Capes

Right, because we would say that was deceptive and here was fooled or tricked.

Liz Mburu

Yes, exactly. And so, I think that what you said is really right. We do read from our different assumptions or different pre-understandings. And that allows us to see the text from different dimensions. You're not necessarily wrong. And I'm not necessarily wrong, particularly if we've applied the right principles to draw the meaning of the text. It's just that we are seeing different sides of the same story or trying to fill in a jigsaw puzzle. You have some of the pieces, I have some of the pieces, and together we make the full picture.

David Capes

Now you've written on this. Tell us about your book on African readings of Scripture.

Liz Mburu

Alright, my book is called *African Hermeneutics*, which was not my first choice for a title. But the marketing people said it's good for a Google search. And what my book is all about is this. How do we read from a contextual perspective, with the recognition that we are all reading from a contextual perspective. And that means we need some humility, as we engage with the text. So, my method has five steps. And it's based on the assumption that our worldview influences the way we see scripture. It's also, as we just saw from the story, based on the assumption of moving from the known to the unknown.

And I try to use categories from our own African context that help people engage with the text. I originally wrote this book for my students. Because my students were struggling to understand Western models of hermeneutics. And it begins with understanding our worldviews, as well as recognizing that we're moving from the known into the unknown.

I also try to emphasize that we have to understand "the world behind the text." So that's the historical context of the Bible. As a New Testament scholar, I'm generally dealing with the New Testament. We also have to understand "the world of the text." And so, we are dealing with the way that the stories of the Bible are unfolding. Or the text is unfolding, the grammar, the syntax, the vocabulary. What do they mean? We have to understand "the world of the text." And we also have to understand "the world in front of the text," which for me as an African standing in front of the text are what are the concerns and the issues that I'm facing that make me ask the kinds of questions.

People don't all ask the same questions of the text when we're doing hermeneutics. And so, it is based on that kind of theoretical framework. But in practice, we begin with looking at the parallels to the African context.

That's what I call the first leg. My method is called the four-legged hermeneutical stool method. It's an African stool with four legs, and the seat. And I chose it because the stool is stable. You sit on it, it gives you good support, and it's steady. And so, if you use this hermeneutical stool method, it hopefully gives you a steady interpretation that you need. And it gives you the support that you need.

And so the first leg is just parallels to the African context. I always begin with the African context. Because as you pointed out at the beginning, we all have assumptions, or pre-understandings that we bring to the text. We are all coming at the text from a context, just like the story of the tortoise and hare showed.

For instance, let's look at Hannah's story [1 Samuel 1]. I like Hannah's story, because it has a lot of connections with the African way of looking at life. Hannah is barren. And then she's got this opportunity now to have a child. And as she sings her song, we hear the sadness. A Westerner reading it would probably not hear more than just the sadness of a woman unable to have a child. But an African will look at it as not just the sadness, but within the honor-shame framework of life that we just talked about. That being unable to bear a child is a shame. It's bringing dishonor to your husband. It's bringing dishonor to your family. So it's deep. It is a really heavy burden. And it's so heavy that this kind of dishonor can cause your husband to discard you and get another woman. Within the context of Africa that does happen. Even in modern Africa, not just traditional Africa.

And also, there's the other aspect. Africans have a worldview where we see the spiritual realm and the physical realm as co-existing, and the spiritual is almost as real as the physical if not more real. And so, this becomes a case of what's happening in the spiritual realm, that Hannah cannot have a baby. Has she been cursed? Is there witchcraft somewhere in the picture? And when we read a text, we bring all those issues into the text. As we are reading, some of them are useful, like the idea of the honor-shame paradigm. Because obviously in Hannah's context, in that society, in that day, the honor-shame dynamic was a construct. But maybe also the idea that Hannah has been cursed, or there's witchcraft, Well, that's something that would have to hold off a little bit, rather than read it into the text, but we would be tempted to read it into the text. Because that's our worldview.

David Capes

And she's going to Shiloh. She's pleading her heart out with God. For the privilege of having a child, bringing honor to her family.

Liz Mburu

And bring honor to her family. And so, for me, that first step helps me to interrogate those assumptions that I bring to the text. And just hold them loosely, recognizing some will help me understand the text better, and some will not. Some will be totally negative. And then the next step after recognizing those parallels with the text, because the parallels also helped me dig deeper into what was going on in that context, in terms of barrenness. What would be the cultural and the social issues that would feed into that.

The second leg then, after the parallels, which raises awareness about what the text could be talking about, is theological context. You look at the theological context, because the Bible is a spiritual document. There is theology communicated through the Bible. And for many Africans, we read the Bible to draw out those theological implications, so that we apply them to our lives. Our hermeneutic tends to be what we call very functional. The Bible is a living word. It affects our reality; it's not just an abstract document. It's not just an abstract document, every word of it will affect our everyday lives. And if you're reading a text that has to do with oppression, and you are in an oppressive situation, then

you believe that God is able to do for you what he did when he delivered, for instance, the Israelites from bondage. But the problem is that many Africans stop there. They read the text, they read into the text, what their pre-understandings of the assumptions are. And then they draw out the theological meaning and how that applies. And then they stop there. What happens is, then there is a disconnect. Is that really what the text was saying? Or are we just making it say what we wanted it to say, for our situation?

Then I did a third leg, which would be the literary context. The literary context is where you dig deep into the world of the text? You understand the type of literature it is. Is it a story, a song, a proverb? Try and understand the genre, or the kind of literature that it is, because you don't read a story, like a poem, or a poem, like a story. I like to tell my students, you're playing cricket with the rules of baseball, baseball with the rules of cricket, or soccer with the games of American football. And so, you dig deep into that, and this is where that framework of moving from the known to the unknown comes in. Because we in Africa have an oral tradition, a very rich oral tradition. Africans, we know how to tell stories, we know how to hear the stories, we know how to understand the stories. We already have a hermeneutical framework, even if we didn't call it that. And I use the principles that we use to understand African literature to also understand biblical literature. The worldview of Africans is similar to the worldview that we find in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

David Capes

The Bible is closer to the African worldview than it is to a Western view.

Liz Mburu

Exactly, exactly. And because our resources have come from the West, we've tried to understand the Bible through a Western lens. And so, that's been problematic, because we have to understand the western context and the Western worldview, in order to understand how westerners are reading the Bible. Suddenly, it's like a double hermeneutical gap. You're going the long way. So instead of going the long way, let's cut out trying to understand the Western worldview and the Western way of looking at the text, and just go directly into the text with the methods that we already know. And if you compare the way stories are told in the Bible, and the way their stories have now been written down from our African oral tradition, we see there's a similar way of telling the stories. The stories are not linear. It's not from point A to point Z and at the end you hear the moral of the story. It can be very cyclical. For instance, we'll look at the Gospel of John going round and round the same point in different ways to emphasize it. And the moral of the story is not found at the end. The moral is found in the entire telling of the story. There are cycles. And all those cycles, that's where you get the moral of the story.

David Capes

That's really clever. We see that in the book of Revelation, for example. We'll have to talk about that another time. So what's that last leg?

Liz Mburu

The last leg then is the historical context of the text that you're looking at. I draw a lot on Western methods. But I tried to reconceptualize them from an African framework. And so, bringing in the importance of understanding history, which is easy for us, because all our songs and our events are

told. They arise from a particular historical context. And you hear it in the songs, and you see it in the stories. So going back to the world behind the text then helps to cement your earlier impressions of what the text was talking about, by the end of the fourth leg. So, you have the parallels to the African context, and you have the theological context, the literary context, and then the historical context. Then you know what the text meant in the original context. There's a difference between what the text meant to the original readers. For instance, if you look at the Gospel of John, it was being written to a particular audience. How would they have understood what John was saying? And then you have to take another step now into the future to us. What is the significance for us? once we understand what it meant.

David Capes

And those two can't be disconnected. You can't say well, what the text meant to them. what the text means to us is something completely different. Those two things are right together,

Liz Mburu

They go together. Exactly. And I think that in understanding what the text meant, gives you directions for how you're meant to apply it in today's time. Because like you said, you cannot disconnect it and take a situation that's completely different from the situation that's being experienced in the 21st century, and then say, okay, we can make that application. For instance, if a text is talking about false teaching, and within your context, in the African church, we're really struggling with that. We're struggling with false teaching. We can take those texts that talk about false teaching and how false teaching was addressed then, and bring them into the present where we are, and apply those there. But apply it, reshape it. I say, you re-culturalize it in the sense that you understand what it meant to the people then and how it was communicated to them. And then you reshape it in a way that communicates the same thing in an African context, using 21st century language. And so, in that way, you have that close connection, and you can be reasonably sure that you are hearing what God is saying, and you are applying God's word rightly. Because at the end of the day, whatever we do is for the growth of the church, and we want people to apply what God is saying, in the right way. And I think I began by saying for us, it's the Living Word because it impacts our lives. But when we apply it wrongly, then it becomes a word that kills. Because then we haven't understood it well, and we haven't applied it well.

David Capes

Your book is *African Hermeneutics*. You can find it here at the Lanier Theological Library, and we are so glad that you joined us today on the Stone Chapel Podcast. Thanks.

Liz Mburu

Thank you, David.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Liz Mburu

The nugget of wisdom I would have is learn to listen. Learn to listen to each other. Never come into a situation or a context assuming that you have the whole truth because you might not and it's good to just listen.