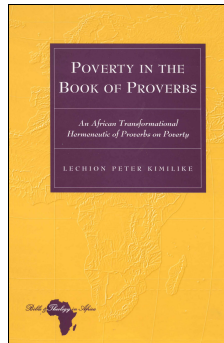


○ REVIEW OF LECHION PETER KIMILIKE, *POVERTY IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS: AN AFRICAN TRANSFORMATIONAL HERMENEUTIC OF PROVERBS ON POVERTY*

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Kimilike is an indigenous African, who grew up in a poor Tanzanian village, and he argues in this book that Africans are in a better contextual situation to interpret the biblical proverbs than middle-class Westerners. Rejecting the official camp's position (Whybray, Pleins, Fox, etc.), Kimilike assumes the popular position (Golka, Westermann, Naré, etc.) on the social location of biblical proverbs, which maintains that they derive from the common people, were in popular usage, and do not represent products of the elite (though he does acknowledge that they were collected by them). A constant driving force behind his interpretation is the liberation of Africans from poverty – obviously, a highly laudable goal – and he sees biblical proverbs as a basis for this project. Because of this, he focuses on biblical proverbs that address the issue of poverty, and he uses African proverbs on poverty to interpret the biblical ones in such a way as to counter the official camp's interpretation of them. He believes proverbs are ideal for this project since they often reflect the worldview of a culture better than do other genres.

The book contains five chapters: an introduction, a critique of Western interpretation of proverbs on poverty and of Western understanding and solutions to poverty, a case for an African solution to the problem of poverty and a study of African proverbs on poverty, interpretation of biblical proverbs on poverty via African ones, and a summary and conclusion. There is an appendix of African proverbs on poverty, a bibliography, and indices on authors, biblical references, and subjects.

We will look at two examples of Kimilike's contextual exegesis to flesh out his methodology. The first concerns Prov 14:20: 'The poor is disliked even by the neighbor, but the rich have many friends' (NRSV 1989 for all citations). He criticises David Pleins for characterising the proverb as elitist and teaching 'the friendless character of poverty' (1) (Pleins 1987: 67). Kimilike believes

Pleins' interpretation 'to be disempowering the poor' (3), a characterisation Kimilike makes regarding most Western interpretations of proverbs on poverty. Kimilike seems to assume that merely stating or identifying the ideology of text means one becomes complicit in it. His own interpretation of this proverb involves essentially deflecting the plain meaning of the first colon of the proverb and then embracing the second but interpreting it to mean that the friends of the rich are phony. He presents a few similar African proverbs: 'You perceive who your true friends are in a time of distress,' 'The capital resource of the weak is unity,' 'Unity is strength; division is weakness,' 'Sharing is wealth,' 'The poor ones know each other: when a lion is sick, the mosquito does the cupping' (71-72).

I think this proverb simply states a universal truth about society and that it is not elitist in itself. It is simply saying that poverty has inherent alienating effects, and, thus, should be avoided. I think Kimilike would agree to this principle, and that is why he is advocating the elimination of poverty in Africa. And this should have been Kimilike's focus, instead of trying to give the proverb a meaning it does not have. Of course, such a proverb was collected in *Proverbs* to encourage privileged boys to work hard, be successful, and avoid poverty. This is certainly elitist, to an extent, though even the poor might admonish their own children to do the same. This reveals the real weakness in Kimilike's methodology. He never intends to determine the meaning of the proverb in its own original cultural context but is wholly concerned to deflect any charges of elitism in the biblical proverbs via the sentiment of African proverbs. I do, however, believe he is right to criticise Westerners for thinking their task is done when they have determined the meaning a text had in its original context. We often hide behind our ivory towers of academia and fail to consider the hermeneutical implications of our exegesis, even if it is negative and bankrupt theologically. However, in spite of the Western 'bourgeois' interpretative attempt to separate exegesis from the exegete's social context, it does (though I know this is a politically incorrect thing to say) attempt to be more 'objective.' And this is preferable to Kimilike's blatantly subjective approach. Especially since it would mean the proverb, though it smacks of elitism as part of a collection designed to train upper class boys, could be co-opted for Kimilike's purposes.

The second example concerns 13:7 (170-80): 'Some pretend to be rich, yet have nothing; others pretend to be poor, yet have great wealth.' Again, he cites a host of African proverbs and uses them to interpret the proverb's phrase 'pretending to be rich' as self-glorification and 'pretending to be poor' as humility, a virtue that accords with the eradication of African poverty because it aids in uniting the people. However, the *hithpael/hithpolel* participles are better translated more literally as 'enriching himself' (BDB, 799) or 'impoverishing himself' (BDB, 930), and so the proverb would be, instead, condemning greed and praising charity. This proverb is similar in sentiment to Prov 11:24: 'Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.' It also represents the sages' delight in the paradoxes of life. But charity is not necessarily in the interests of the lower class, as even Kimilike admits (15, 64). If anything, charity assuages the consciences of the elite, deluding them into thinking they have done their part about poverty.

And this leads to the book's most fatal flaw: its assumption of the popular camp's position. Kimilike pretends that the popular camp is becoming more dominant and essentially assumes the position without any substantial proof. First of all, Kimilike is unfamiliar with sociologist Jacques Berlinerblau, who rightly questions the feasibility of excavating biblical texts written by elites for popular religion (Berlinerblau 1993: 3-26). Secondly, while the debate is not over

between the two, the burden of proof is on the popular camp. The reality is that the biblical proverbs are literary productions of high artistic quality *as they stand*. All we have are texts! They are more like epigrams than proverbs. To suggest they have folk origins is speculative and counterintuitive especially when true literacy was confined to a small percentage of the population. And there is archaeological evidence that proverb collections were used in ancient Mesopotamia to train young scribes to read and write and to inculcate in them societal values – an elitist function! (Alster 1997: 1. xviii, xxi, xxvi.) And I have demonstrated elsewhere that concern for the poor expressed in Proverbs is actually compatible with upper class interests, which includes the need to be perceived as generous (Sneed 1996: 296–308). Also, ironically, if the biblical proverbs are elite products, then middle-class Westerners might actually be better contextually situated for interpreting them than poorer Africans.

I think it would be more productive for Kimilike to just admit that the biblical proverbs on poverty are often elitist and, therefore, usually unworthy of his eradication of poverty project. But this does not mean that one should give up on any attempt at discerning the voice of the poor in Proverbs. The work of Foucault might help. He points out that power is not some abstract entity but consists in relationships and that it is not simply the domain of the upper class but can also be found among the poor; for example, the proverbial foot-dragging peasant. The rich and powerful can never really completely ignore the poor. That the composers of the biblical proverbs were forced to address the issue of poverty and could not ignore it, shows the poor were not totally without power. Though poverty was probably simply an intellectual problem (theodicy) for them, its existence meant that the sages who composed proverbs were forced to explain how a just God could allow it to exist. They sensed that poverty and justice did not add up. Kimilike might also consider deconstructive criticism, which should always have a political edge.

In spite of the flaws, the book is worthy reading for all seminarians and biblical scholars because of its concern for the treatment of social injustice in the Bible and in our own societies. This book should also be considered an important contribution to the emerging Africanisation of biblical studies.

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